

aM

POSITIVE FEEDBACK ONLINE - ISSUE 2

REVIEWS
hardware

audion

Silver Night 300B integrated

as reviewed by Mark Katz and Dave Clark



one

The Audion Silver Night is a small 300B-based integrated amp. It weighs about 20 pounds and has an attractive appearance, with a mix of black paint and gold plate, two small input/driver tubes, and a pair of apparently high quality Chinese 300B tubes sitting in front of a pair of output transformers. The binding posts, along with two pairs of covered-up holes (possibly the chassis is used for another product) and the on/off switch are on the back. Power is through an IEC connector and detachable power cord. Five pairs of inputs and a set of tape monitor jacks are on the left side. The volume control, along with buttons allowing one to choose inputs, are on the front. The thick soft feet provide good vibration dampening, but raise the height of the unit so it won't fit in my rack, which has eight inches between shelves but would need ten. The clever remote control was a surprise, since one doesn't associated high tech with a 300B amp. It allows one to choose inputs, adjust volume (with a motorized pot) and balance, and use the recording jacks. The Audion puts out about seven watts into an 8-ohm load.

300B single-ended amps are notoriously finicky about what speakers they can drive, needing fairly high (at least 6 ohm, but 8 or more is better) impedance with no impedance dips, and relatively high efficiency, usually about 90dB/watt/m or higher. My first test was with a pair of Tannoy Saturn 8 floor-standing speakers. Their impedance is 6 ohms, efficiency 91 dB/watt/m with a dual-concentric 8-inch mid/tweeter combo and an 8-inch woofer. A Pioneer Laser Disk 701 in CD mode was used as the source. Connections to the Tannoys were with eight-foot Luminous ladder type speaker cable. The first thing I noticed was that the amp was very

MARK KATZ'S SYSTEM: quiet—no noise, no hum—and the time from turn-on to sound was less than 20 seconds. The amp settles down in a couple of minutes, then performs consistently.

LOUDSPEAKERS
Soundlab A-1s

I use the "Polonaise Op. 40, No. 1" on the Naum Starkman *Chopin* CD on Pope for checking out an amplifier's clipping behavior. Mr. Starkman vigorously pounds the keyboard, and the recording is very clattery. The Silver Night drove the Tannoys better than I expected, with only minor softening of the extreme transients and no loss of composure or gross distortion. The Eagles' "Hotel California" on their *Hell Freezes Over* CD has an exaggerated kick drum that gives a nice test of midbass impact. Compared to my Kora Triode preamp (with reduced gain) combined with the 30-watt Music Reference RM 10 amplifier, the impact was solid, though noticeably diminished. The midrange with the Audion was more detailed, with more transparent vocals, and guitar passages sounded sweeter and more "liquid." The amp also worked in the unlikely role of an AV amp for providing signal amplification for videotapes, laserdiscs, and cable TV. Dialogue was quite articulate and the remote was very handy. I doubt that the amp was designed for this in mind, but it worked.

ELECTRONICS
Melos 402 Gold Triode monoblocks with MAT 1000 circuit boards. Kora Triode preamplifier.

SOURCES
CEC TL-1, Marigo Reference 3 Digital Inteconnect, and Museatex Bidat DAC. Day Sequerra FM Reference tuner.

CABLES
Goertz AG2 or FMS Black speaker cables. Goertz Triode Quartz and Clarity Custom Connections interconnects.

I didn't intend to use the amp with these speakers as a primary listening test. In my bedroom I have a pair of homebrew Tannoy Monitor Gold 12" dual-concentric speakers mounted in Lockwood Studio cabinets made for these drivers in the '70s. They have about 92dB/watt/m sensitivity with pretty flat 8-ohm impedance, making them a good match for single-ended amps. I am currently using them with a pair of Angela 91 300B monoblock amps, modified by Cy Brenneman to make them a bit more full range and much quieter than the original design. The preamp is a custom-made line stage using 6DJ8s with dual Genrad power supplies, made by John Wiesner from an Arthur Loesch design. A Cal Audio Lab Icon Power Boss is the digital source; a Luxman T117 provides FM reception. I substituted the Audion for the Loesch/Wiesner preamp/Angela 91 amp combination. I kept the same sources, AHT speaker cables, and Wireworld Eclipse II interconnects.

How did it sound? On the *Chopin*, again no gross clipping, with some improvement in dynamics compared to the other, slightly-harder-to-drive Tannoys. Flaws weren't smoothed over, either. The clattering of the piano came through, along with the power. Bass impact was decent, good for a single-ended amp. It seemed to be relatively extended in the treble, too. After it passed this test, I tried the system with had decent, but not exceptional impact. Overall tone was on the dark side. Imaging wasn't as spacious as with the monoblocks, but was more solid and focused. The beautifully-recorded CD of J.S. Bach's *Secular Cantatas* on Dorian has been a long time favorite, with the *Coffee Cantata* sung by a tenor introducing the piece, then a baritone singing the role of the distraught father and a soprano portraying the coffee-addicted daughter. A period orchestra and a harpsichord accompany them. I found the voices well defined in tone and space, though somewhat less round and smooth than with the preamp/amp combination. Dynamics were preserved, with the harpsichord having good energy and a nice balance between the orchestra and the soloists. The Sony CD *The Guitarist John Williams* has the Satie "Gymnopedie #3" for guitar and small orchestra. The guitar's tone and its transients came through clearly, with excellent presence, and a sense of the body of the guitar resonating and projecting the sound.

The very best tube amps seem to give a sense of the music almost breathing from within, giving naturalness and realism and helping one forget that one is listening to a recording. A few do this at the expense of "thickening" the sound, adding too much warmth, others just let you hear the music with the instruments and vocalists portrayed in a lifelike fashion. It's been called the "goosebump" factor. The amps that have this seem not only to have good power supplies but high quality output transformers, like the better Audio Notes, Tangos, and Electraprints. The quality of the output transformer can be the limiting factor in the quality of the sound. Some reviewers have referred to this effect as "euphonic distortion." Perhaps, but if this distortion allows recordings to sound closer to an actual performance, I'll take it. With this amp, there is a hint of this. I'd characterize the sound as more liquid than a low-power push-pull tube amp like the Music Reference RM 10, but with less bass impact.

What did I like about the amp? It's easy to set up, has a useful remote (though a manual on/off switch), is relatively compact, and has an attractive appearance. It's

also quiet, clips gracefully with fast recovery, has good extension from bass to treble, good detail, and a very nice midrange. It drives a 6-ohm speaker better than one would expect. What do I think could be better? I'd prefer a more open and airy soundstage. I'd also like a slightly smoother treble, but not at the expense of detail. Overall, I found the Audion Silver Night to be a painless introduction to single-ended sound. **Mark Katz**

two

DAVE CLARK'S SYSTEM:

LOUDSPEAKERS

Reimer Wind Rivers.

ELECTRONICS

Clayton Audio M70 monoblock amplifiers. HRS unit and Taddeo Digital Antidote Two. E.A.R. 834P phono stage. Blue Circle BC3 preamp w/Amperex BB tubes, and BCG3.1 power supply.

SOURCES

EAD T1000 transport and 1000 Series II DAC with Audient Technologies' Tactic and Audi, Nordost Moonglo digital cable. Linn Axiss turntable with K9 cartridge and Basik Plus arm.

CABLES

Nordost Blue Heaven and SPM interconnects, and SPM bi-wired speaker cables.

ACCESSORIES

API 116 Power Wedge and Coherent Systems Electraclear EAU-1 parallel conditioner. Dedicated 20 amp ac circuit. BDR cones and board, DH cones, Vibrapods, various hard woods, etc.

I have limited experience in my system with low wattage, single-ended amplifiers. Yes, a while back I had the opportunity to review the Acoustic Masterpiece M-101, but this beauty used two KT-88 output tubes to produce a very seductive and musically powerful eight to twelve watts (depending on how the amp is configured). Now along comes the dimensionally whole and harmonically rich Audion 300B integrated amp. The English-born Audion features multiple inputs and a nifty remote, but instead of KT-88s, we have the venerable Western Electric 300B output bottles producing a whopping seven watts! Two different approaches, but very similar results. Yet, while both are very musically involving, each has an individuality that sets it apart. I am not going to dwell on the M-101 other than to say that the review was based on its pairing with our Chario Hyper Reference 2000 loudspeakers, smallish two-ways with a load of six ohms and an efficiency of 89dB. Not the best match for a single-ended amplifier, but when mated with the M-101, I was in musical nirvana.

On the other hand, the Audions came along when I had the Loth-X Ion 4 speakers (eight ohms and 94dB) and the Reimer Acoustics Wind Rivers (eight ohms and 92dB) here for review. The Loth-Xs came as both a match for the Audion and as separate review subjects. As things went, I was only able to hold on to the Loth-Xs for a week or so before they were whisked off to another aM reviewer. As such, my experience in pairing them with the Audion was limited. So, while the pairing of the Audion with a speaker of the Loth-X variety is what it's all about, I am going to focus my review on its mating with the Wind Rivers. Actually, we ended up purchasing these speakers, making them our reference speakers, so in pairing the Wind Rivers with the Audion I followed standard aM policy—use what you know best.

I already spilled the beans by saying that the Audion is a delight, but it was an unexpected one—hey, seven watts into speakers with such significant driverage! While the Wind Rivers have a friendly load, they feature four 6.25" woofers (in two isobaric chambers), two 4" midrange drivers, and one 1" tweeter per speaker! That's a lot of cones to move, but the Audion did it with much ease and finesse. Okay, it did run out of steam when pushed to room-rattling levels, but we are talking about seven watts here. What you get before the Audion clips is dynamic music full of life and bloom. (Before I go on, let me say that this clipping is rather polite and matter-of-fact, very British and all! Nothing objectionable, just a compression of bass and dynamics, done in way that lets you know to back off the volume a bit and leave the neighbors to their sitcom.)

The Audion is all music and beauty—rich and warm, with an ever so slightly euphonic midrange. The Audion allows the listener to relax and be enveloped with their choice of musical drug. It will not reveal every last detail hidden deep in your discs, but that's okay if you'd rather listen to music than to the bits and pieces. Sure, you give up a touch of clarity and transparency, along with some treble energy, and no, the Audion will never really plum the depths of the bass region with the tightness, speed, and clarity of our Clayton M70s, but let me tell you, the Audion never failed to amaze me with what it could do musically or sonically. Compared to the Claytons, the Audion did obscure the finer details and subtle nuances that can make music seem more exciting and tactile, like being able to see the threads woven into a fine rug. But this is a result of the Audion presenting the music with more warmth and "liquidity" than our Claytons. With the Audion you get less "perceptible" detail, but it's all still there. You just have to listen a bit harder. The Audion speaks to the fun and love of music, and isn't that what's all about? **Dave Clark**

Audion Silver Night

Retail \$3195

Audion

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