



Silver service

Chris Ward looks for the hallmarks of quality in a Special Edition of a classic single-ended valve amplifier

Valve amplifiers appear to be enjoying something of a renaissance of late. While some may be drawn to their wonderful retro looks, for many it's the sonic qualities that cannot be achieved from modern solid-state electronics. And if you're ever going to be impressed by a valve amplifier, chances are that single-ended implementation of 300B output triode tubes with zero feedback will be the one that turns your head. Audion has a reputation for making fine-sounding valve amplifiers since 1987, with the Silver Night a long-established favourite. This Special Edition not only boasts extensively improved internals, but the amp's bodywork has been

completely revamped. Gone is the slightly utilitarian and austere styling to be replaced by a chic and shiny look. Many key components have been upgraded for sonic benefit as well as long-term reliability, from the silky Alps Blue Velvet volume potentiometer and HT power supplies to the over-specification of humble power resistors. Importantly, the already high-quality output transformer of the standard Silver Night has been upgraded to compliment the qualities (and perceived weaknesses) of 300B valves. Heavily gold-plated, high amperage binding posts ensure quality speaker connections and much internal point-to-point wiring has been upgraded to solid silver with massive

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Audion Silver Night Special Edition

ORIGIN
France

TYPE
Integrated valve amplifier with single input

WEIGHT
14kg

DIMENSIONS (WxHxD)
235 x 280 x 430mm

FEATURES

- Quoted power: 2x 8W into 8ohm
- 2x 6H23N; 2x JJ 300B valves
- 1x RCA input

DISTRIBUTOR
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attention to detail around keeping the wiring perfectly flowing for low noise and the cleanest possible signal path, or "air wiring" as Audion likes to describe it. And that signal path is now claimed to be pure silver all the way through the amplifier. Any more of this precious metal and the amp will need to have a hallmark.

Its claimed power output of just 8W may sound puny to the uninitiated, but rest assured that eight quality triode watts with plenty of current delivery through suitably sensitive speakers will not leave you wanting more volume. Going further, a few seriously transparent, single-ended valve watts could well reveal qualities in your music that no other power source can. Yet, for this virtue there is always a price to pay, and limited triode watts generally struggle to create convincingly deep, tight bass or deal with the large soundstages and huge dynamic swings required for orchestral works. I opt to put the Audion through its paces driving my Cadence Arca hybrid electrostatic speakers, which are particularly sensitive at 91dB and 8ohm impedance, so a good sonic match.

Setup is simple. As with all 300B valves, care is needed with orientation so that the two larger pins locate with the larger holes. The smaller 6H23N driver tubes have coloured stickers, ensuring each valve is fitted correctly.

Running in takes quite a while, however. But patience pays off with the sound filling out more and more as the soundstage expands and deepens.

Sound quality

I start with Passenger's stripped-out version of *Romeo & Juliet* on CD and am instantly greeted with the transparent midband clarity for which the 300B valve is renowned. Michael Rosenberg's voice has a natural tone that is beautifully portrayed, creating a really solid and realistic presence, with a clear sonic image focused between and in front of the speakers. Well-recorded vocals in stripped-back acoustic tracks are food and drink for valve amplifiers and here the Audion sets the bar much higher than I would have expected. Sometimes single-ended 300B amplifiers err on the side of a slightly warm and creamy quality that sounds lovely, but can mask vital micro-dynamic details. Here any

The Silver Night Special Edition has attractive designer lines

warmth somehow feels more natural and is accompanied with masses of airy detail that is highly extended yet very sweet and free from grain, all placed in a wonderfully inky black and silent backdrop.

Playing Lorde's *Royals* on vinyl via my Timestep T-01 MC phono stage (*HFC* 371) is surprising. This track has really deep bass and I'm expecting the Special Edition Silver Night to stumble, but I'm actually the one that's wrong-footed. Bass is deep and far faster than this single-ended 300B amplifier should, by rights struggle here, but this performance has weight, rasp and plenty of taut bass detail that doesn't slouch behind the higher octaves. Of course, bass quantity and particularly grip would be surpassed by lots of solid-state amps and some alternative valve designs, but this performance is genuinely strong. Lower frequencies are supposed to be this kind of amp's lesser strengths, but here it's like a sweet voiced soprano has just stood up and performed a rather good version of the baritone and bass parts, leaving the conductor scratching his head.

This amplifier's transformer is obviously rather special and it has clearly been superbly optimised to maximise the 300B's potential. Furthermore, this bass ability in turn seems to reduce the need for the amp to resort to an overly creamy sound created by less thorough designs. The stronger bass and lack of excess creaminess has also been partly achieved through Audion's extensive and generous use of silver in the signal path. People sometimes stereotypically associate silver wiring with a leaner sound, but in my experience any thinness to a silver sound is simply due

to mean-spiritedness and is overcome by using better and thicker silver wiring – as I suspect is the case here.

My appetite is whetted so I play the *Bass With Chorus Aria – Eilt, Ihr Angefochtenen Seelen* from JS Bach's *St John Passion* conducted by Karl Richter on HDCD.

I am now better prepared for my expectations to be exceeded. Large flowing introductory sweeps of the orchestra have excellent breadth and tone and the bass vocal rises majestically with real authority and luscious body and weight. The orchestra doesn't have massive front-to-back depth, but this criticism seems churlish, as this rendition is way

This is an artisan product that feels like a life-long investment in quality

beyond most single-ended triode designs. The vocal chorus is handled with real delicacy and a silky lightness of touch that only valves can deliver. Both lead and support vocals sound utterly convincing and the scale and dynamism of the orchestra is conveyed with real verve. If I were listening blind I would assume this was either a far larger, more expensive and meatier valve power amplifier, or a bizarre hi-fi experiment using triode valves for all vocals supported by a solid-state amplifier powering the orchestra.

Conclusion

If you love hearing greater transparency and more emotional content from your music you should experience what a single-ended triode ►

CONNECTIONS



Q&A

Graeme Holland
Owner, Audion



CW: Why is the quality of the components so important?

GH: We believe in over rating key components so they'll last a lifetime without problems or fluctuations, so they sound as good as they can. Where some would use a 0.6W resistor we might use a 3W-rated to run at over 500V. We listen to and test many components and don't skimp where it matters and prefer the quality of UK, US and European sourced components.

What's 'air wiring'?

It is a methodology of how we hard wire our amps. We keep AC wires close to the aluminium chassis and keep ground wires and HT wires away from sensitive noise pick-up areas. When wires cross we try and cross at 90° to avoid noise pick-up. In this amp the entire audio path is quality silver.

How has the transformer been improved with this amplifier?

In this amp we've raised already very high standards. We do all transformer winding inhouse in a continuous form with no joints. We use very high-quality British steel laminations and British winding wire, double insulated. We also use a rigorous testing procedure that puts every transformer through its paces to ensure the highest standards, including testing our transformers to 5,000V, even though our amps will only deliver 1/10th of that voltage to them. But it's not all about specifications. We've learnt that a test setup can measure perfectly, but can sound dull and lifeless. Subtle tweaks to a transformer gives 'heart' or 'soul' to an amplifier.

What can single-ended, zero feedback triodes do that other designs can't?

Supreme clarity, purity and simplicity. Use reasonably efficient speakers (over 89dB) on this design and you will hear things from your record collection you have never heard before. Power isn't everything, but dynamics are! All our amps offer superb dynamics, very low noise and good headroom, which are essential for music enjoyment.

The traditional weakness of triodes has been avoided



The Ming Da Dynasty Duet MC300 and Unison Research's Preludio (using KT88 valves) appear similar on paper for less money, but the Special Edition is more refined. Unison Research's Sinfonia Anniversary uses a very different design to achieve a good balance of power and finesse, but arguably trades some transparency against the SE. AudioNote's Meishu is a quality single-ended 300B amplifier worthy of an audition at a slightly higher cost, but the strongest comparison is surely Audion's Silver Night 'Anniversary', which offers lots for a chunk less money, but with less bass magic and without the new designer lines.

amplifier is really capable of. And if you're considering investing in a quality valve amplifier with 21st century looks and reliability, and can pair it with reasonably sensitive speakers, the Audion Silver Night Special Edition deserves to be placed pretty high up on your audition list.

Triode qualities of a luscious, transparent midband combined with a sweet treble have been enhanced by excellent use of choice components, solid silver point-to-point wiring, ultra clean power supplies and superb matching of a high-quality transformer, wound inhouse. The traditional weakness of triodes has been transformed, and in particular, strong bass abilities are genuinely very impressive. You'll certainly require reasonably sensitive speakers (89dB+) ideally with friendly impedance to get the most from this amplifier, but I'm impressed just how tolerant and potent it is. Experimenting with less sensitive speakers, the sound quality is still excellent and the Silver Night Special Edition is punching way beyond its 8W 'flyweight' category.

Features may look rather limited on paper, but here the money is spent

on skilled design, quality engineering, high expense components and materials, and highly skilled hand-crafted manufacturing. This is an artisan product that feels like a life-long investment in quality.

Audion's basic Silver Night 300B mk1 amp is around £2,600, and the well-regarded 'Anniversary' version with many upgrades is around £3,150, so you need to pay a significant premium over these models for this Special Edition. And that is exactly what I suggest you should do. Thoroughly recommended ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Luscious midband; high transparency; surprising bass ability

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: Cost difference from Silver Night Anniversary

BUILD QUALITY



WE SAY: All the qualities of single-ended triodes, with few of the downsides

FEATURES



OVERALL

