

Heart of Glass

Being a fully specified 300B integrated amplifier for just £1,700, Adam Smith thinks the Icon Audio Stereo 300 has got a lot of bottle...

The big problem with precision valve amplifiers is that they require careful design and intricate manufacture of the kind that results in somewhat wallet-busting price tags. Fortunately, companies like Icon Audio are taking the increasingly popular and eminently sensible method of designing the unit in the UK and making use of the low costs and excellent engineering abilities of a Chinese manufacturer. In the December 2006 issue, we were impressed by the build quality and value for money offered by their Stereo 40i Classic KT88 model, but we have now decided to spoil ourselves with a listen to Icon's top of the range integrated, the £1,700 Stereo 300.

On first acquaintance, the Stereo 300 more than announces itself as heavyweight, literally and metaphorically, as it weighs no less than 37kg. This makes unpacking a two person job to achieve safely and is also more than enough to have the average hi-fi rack quivering at the mere thought of having to support it. As found with the Stereo 40i Classic, build quality is excellent and the whole unit is covered with a glitter-effect, glossy black paint finish which ticks all the style boxes for me. I even like the four blue LEDs fitted under the base which give a gentle illumination to the underside of the amplifier, despite them being uncomfortably reminiscent of the under-chassis neons found on boy racers' Citroen Saxos in Halfords car parks up and down the country!

The amplifier has four line level inputs and a true tape monitor loop, and Icon manufacture the PSI phono stage if you wish to use a turntable with the Stereo 300. The unit is

even supplied with a remote control handset with which volume can be adjusted, or the unit muted, and this is no cheap and plasticky afterthought, but a weighty and stylish metal unit. As the name suggests, the Stereo 300 uses 300B output valves in push/pull to generate its 32W per channel and our review unit also had the optional HT delay circuit fitted.

SOUND QUALITY

The sublime tones of Rebecca Pidgeon's version of 'Spanish Harlem' through the Stereo 300 instantly transported me to a land of lush valve wonderfulness and served to remind me that this really is a superb way to listen to music of this nature, as the song flowed beautifully.

300B valves are well known for their smooth and warm sound and the Stereo 300 made superb use of this property to add real emotion to the performance. The midrange was lush and detailed without ever becoming overblown and the Stereo 300 maintained this sense of composure with a variety of different vocal styles. Runrig's 'An Ubhal as Airde' from their 1987 album 'The Cutter and the Clan' has Donnie Munro's delicate and intimate singing of the song's verses interspersed with an impressive choral crescendos in between and the Icon made a superb job of switching between these with no sense of discomfort.

I was also struck by how big the soundstage was - the Stereo 300 gave these pieces of music an almost vinyl-

like scale and sense of perspective and, comparing it to a couple of other amplifiers we had sat around the listening room, they sounded small and almost shut-in by comparison.

Changing the mood of the listening session by spinning some Michelle Shocked, 'Quality of Mercy' again served up a treat of a vocal performance but the underlying beat of the track become more of a 'plod' than I was used to. The Icon seemed to have depth in its bass here but subdued impact, which meant that the punch of the main beat was largely lost.

Shifting up a gear or three courtesy of the Propellerheads' 'Take California' revealed that the Stereo 300 is most definitely not an amplifier for headbangers or dance fanatics - the thunderous beat was presented with reasonable weight and the amplifier just about kept up with the pace, but the low frequency end of the track ended up as something of a muddle.

Switching to the title track of Steve Earle's 'Copperhead Road' gave the same result with the quite explosive couple of drum beats in the lead-in of the song almost falling out of the speakers, rather than being punched out as they should. The





other aspect of this track that struck me was the strummed guitar at the beginning - this is very detailed but is quite sharp as measurement shows that the CD contains genuine output up to 20kHz, and an unforgiving transistor amplifier can make it quite a painful experience. The Stereo 300 took the edge off the sting very well but in the process also seemed to remove the leading edges of the notes, leaving the guitar almost acting as a backing instrument rather than being the mainstay of the underlying rhythm.

In an attempt to delve further into the treble situation I loaded up the track 'Tiden Bara Gar' from an unnamed test CD that found its way into my collection some years ago! This track starts off with some intricate double bass playing, developing further with subtle percussive backing effects including a very delicately tapped triangle and this time they were all there, loud and clear. It soon became apparent that the Stereo 300 is more than

capable of digging the subtle high frequency details from a song, but at the same time it has a strange tendency to wash over some of the more obvious effects present in the mix, which can leave some music with a rather unusual balance. Furthermore, the double bass at the start of the song was very detailed but had a pronounced 'bloom'.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately I found that the Icon Audio Stereo 300 left me rather perplexed, particularly when taking into consideration the Stereo 40i that was reviewed in December 2006's amplifier group test, and which was still available in our listening room for me to refer back to. The Stereo 300 does offer an increase in warmth and

soundstage from its 300B output valves over the KT88's of the Stereo 40i but it ultimately exhibits the same overall character of sound as its little brother, and I consequently can't help wondering if it is worth the extra £800 over its smaller stablemate. On the positive side of things, the Stereo 300 has a superb sense of scale and a large, warm soundstage that adds



real atmosphere to vocal, orchestral and live recordings. Midrange detail presentation is very good and the overall character of the unit is the almost textbook definition of a warm and cuddly valve amplifier that will undoubtedly appeal to a traditional 'valves and horns' enthusiast, of which I know there are many out there!

Unfortunately the Stereo 300 also exhibits those other traditional valve amplifier traits of inconsistent, if sweet, treble and poorly defined bass - a disappointment for me. As today's bass units are 4-6 Ohm units, the 8 Ohm output is likely one reason for this. A large, well acoustically damped 8 Ohm loudspeaker is needed but such designs are rare nowadays. Ultimately, the Stereo 300 is a device that never goes so far as to make any offensive noises and is ultimately relaxing and pleasant to listen to.

I can see its archetypal valve sound finding favour with many listeners and if you like your music presented this way and have plenty of classical or vocal material in your

record or CD library, then you should certainly put the Stereo 300 high on your audition list. If, like me, your musical tastes veer from one

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end of the spectrum to the other and include dance and rock music as well as the aforementioned classical and female vocalists, you may find that the Icon really doesn't quite cut it as a jack-of-all-trades. My advice would be to audition carefully to see if its particular areas of strength are ones that are important to you. If its presentation suits your tastes and - importantly

- loudspeakers, then you'll have a beautifully made, superb value 300B amplifier.



VERDICT

A pleasant sounding and competent amplifier, but one that is inconsistent at frequency extremes and only really shines with certain types of music.

ICON AUDIO

STEREO 300

£1,700

Icon Audio

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FOR

- exquisite midrange
- large, open soundstage
- superlative build quality

AGAINST

- poor bass control
- inconsistent HF performance

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

The Icon uses 'fixed bias' operation to get 32W from a pair of 300Bs working in push-pull. Fixed bias gives more power than the more common Auto Bias method, but bias must be re-adjusted on occasion, and when new valves are fitted. There is no 40hm tap, just one 8ohm winding. A single winding gives more efficient coupling, but this one did not work especially well with a 4ohm load; distortion levels rose and power dropped to 25W. It is possible to design for 6ohms nominal and get better matched results into 4ohms, which is important nowadays.

The 300B is a directly heated triode; it has no cathode, so it hums. I guessed from the very low measured hum output of this amplifier (0.8mV) and the absence of hum buckers that it uses d.c. heaters to avoid hum, but this shortens valve life. Removing the bottom cover revealed multiple heater rectifiers - interesting.

Distortion levels were low, especially at 40Hz, being primarily third harmonic in nature as our analysis shows; the transformers swing full bass output adeptly and are of good quality. A low damping factor of 6 means loudspeakers that are in themselves

well damped are most suitable.

Bandwidth was wide, measuring 11Hz to 40kHz within 1dB limits, with no random hf peaking. And sensitivity was a high 370mV.

Icon's Stereo 300B measures well. It isn't quite as optimised as is possible nowadays, but it works well all the same. NK

Power 32watts

CD/tuner/aux.

Frequency response 11Hz-40kHz

Separation 67dB

Noise (IEC A wtd) -90dB

Distortion 0.05%

Sensitivity 370mV

