

audition

equipment review

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Leben CS300 Integrated Valve Amplifier



The thermionic fairy must be working overtime, waving her magic wand all around the 2-channel world lately. The last three pieces of electronic equipment I have had for review, two from China, one from Britain, incorporated valves into their designs and I really do not mind at all.

Here we have the small Leben CS300; a 12 watt per channel retro-styled integrated amplifier by the Japanese valve master Mr. Taku Hyodo, imported here to Australia by Soundlabs Group Pty Ltd

Mr. Hyodo started his career as an engineer working for Luxman, who at the time made some of the most desirable valve equipment on the planet. Luxman was subsequently taken over by Alpine and the valve engineering boffins filtered out of the company to other ventures. Mr. Hyodo started an electronic component manufacturing business but the valve bug inside him, became restless and so Leben (German for 'life') was born. He now manufactures power, pre, phono and integrated all-valve amplifiers in the traditional hand crafted way and style, exporting worldwide to eagerly awaiting enthusiasts. Taku san is also a bit of a

**A retro-styled
valve amp from
the master
designer
himself**

By Robert Smith

collector, amassing a cache of rare high quality valves to allow his passion to continue and without limit to the designs he can express. He has a cult following around the world and a group of people have even set up a Leben Audio Lovers Club which goes to show how much this man is revered and his products coveted. So with that sort of background we should expect something special and indeed that's exactly what we received.

Out of the box the CS300 presented itself as a traditionally-styled, fully enclosed integrated of modest proportions, harking back to the golden era of valves. Pieces of it reminiscent of a little bit of Pioneer, Trio, Marantz and Leak with the layout, gold anodized fascia and knobs, the little green stripes and wooden side cheeks, very tidily put together indeed. The front panel controls consist a rotary input selector switch (4 line-inputs plus CD), an Alps 'blue' detented volume control, a centre detented Alps 'blue' balance control (curiously named Balancer), a 3-way bass boost switch (0dB, 3dB, 5dB), a tape monitor toggle switch, headphone socket, speaker toggle switch, power rocker switch and red LED indicator. On the rear, the layout is just as tidy with gold-plated input socketry, tape output sockets, speaker impedance switch covering 4, 6 and 8 ohms, earth binding post, speaker terminals, detachable IEC mains lead and fuseholder. The unit is well ventilated, with a slotted top and bottom cover allowing an unimpeded airflow around components and the six valves inside, thus ensuring longevity and reliability of the amplifier.

Vital Statistics

Dimensions:

360 x 270 x 140mm

Weight:

10kg

Price:

\$2,795

Distributor:

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The two valves used for the input and driver stages are American GE 5751, virtually a ruggedised mil-spec 12AX7, while the output valves are four Russian Sovetec EL84M / 6BQ5 pentodes, known for their ease of drive and reliability, these are operated in a self or cathode biased mode. Elna Cerafine electrolytic capacitors are used in critical areas of the circuit together with metalised polyester 'orange drop' coupling capacitors and all the wiring point to point minimising the length of the signal path. I believe the transformers are made in-house and

Techno talk

Product Type:

Integrated stereo valve amplifier

Number of Inputs:

5 x stereo RCA, line-level, plus tape monitor

Power Output:

2 x 12 watts RMS

Total Harmonic Distortion:

0.7% (10 watts)

Power Valves:

4 x Sovtek EL84 (matched)

Driver Valves:

2 x GE 5751 (matched)

Frequency Response:

15Hz - 100kHz (-2dB)

Output Impedance:

4, 6, 8 ohms (switchable)

Input Sensitivity:

600mV (line level)

Bass Boost:

0dB, +3dB, +5dB, <100Hz (switchable)

Technotalk specifications and recommended retail prices are supplied by the manufacturer

that is where the secret lies in valve amplification, being paramount to how successful the end result will be. I thought initially for the price and keeping it in character that he might have included a phono preamp, but no and on further investigation into the Leben product line-up, revealed that there is one available from the company; self contained with its own outboard power supply for \$6,500! That's right, two and a half times the price of this CS300. Obviously Taku san takes his phono stages, very, very seriously and no wonder he does not include one, not wanting to compromise this integrated with an inferior inclusion and thus defeating his philosophy.

Considering the output power of the CS300 I chose to hook up a pair of Acoustic Research M1 speakers, being the most efficient speaker I had available and also the style (small 2-way standmounts, 8 ohm load) of speaker most likely to be used with this unit. Seeing that we already have valves entered into the equation I chose to plug my Perpetual Technologies P-3a DAC into the digital output of the Cayin CDT-17A CD player then on to the Leben's CD input, I switched it on and let it warm up. Almost immediately that warm smell of heating valves and

transformer varnish waft up from the ventilation slots, I just love that smell, so many good memories and generated a sense of expectation of what is to come.

Straight away you knew you were listening to a valve amp, smooth, lovely bass presentation, delicate treble, deep, wide soundstage, but there was something more. It was immediately apparent and hard to describe, it was a quality that I will start off describing it as 'goodness' because it encompassed so many areas and at this stage I had not nailed it down. The music selection I started off with, knowing that it would suit this piece of equipment was jazz, male and female vocal, orchestral and instrumental of high recording quality. I have heard these recordings many times on many different pieces of equipment but listening through the Leben made them sound like they have been slightly remastered, same tune but different instruments, better quality instruments. Wooden cased instruments had more resonance, more body, 'more wood', vocalists male and female had a better voice, percussive instruments had a sharper attack and longer decay, the room acoustics at the recording venue had more reverberation, everything was more harmonically correct and harmonious. During listening sessions I tended to focus on instruments, that I had not really focused on before, but at the same time, have not been disappointed with in the past, it was really weird.

Just before you think I have reached Audio Nirvana or lost the plot altogether, I can say there is a small downside. The CS300 is warm, this follows a normal valve amp characteristic, they all err on the warm side of neutral, some more than others, a resultant of the interaction of the speaker and the inductance of the output transformer. The CS300 also dials in a small amount of compression which you might think as being not really a good thing, but to the ear, actually sounds better, as it allows you to get closer to the sound, more dynamics in a slightly compressed overall envelope, this is probably due to the low output power of the CS300. There is also a slight drop-off at the frequency extremes especially when you start to turn up the volume too far and the circuit runs out of feedback correction, but that's to be expected, it's only 12 watts compared to the normal, 350 watts that normally grace my

speaker cables. But, what a lovely result and it does sound bigger than its output power suggests. 'Mrs. hi-fi reviewer' whilst going down the stairs into the listening room, with music playing that normally does not really appeal to her, commented, "that's beautiful," - I was stunned and took on board the fact that it was not just me that recognised the characteristic. At this stage I was intrigued as to what factor was responsible for this characteristic. Was it Chi, Zen, holy intervention, magic, or just good old thorough understanding by Taku san on how to do it?

The music that I played through it so far sailed through superbly but what would it do when faced with a more complex mix? So some good old rock and roll was slid into the Cayin's tray. I was not expecting great things to happen here, and I was right, but I was also wrong. Sure the diminutive Leben did not have the bottom-end control; the grip or the gravitas needed to exploit this genre of music but what it did do was to give you an insight to the vocal quality of the performers and timbre of the instruments. Lou Reed's voice never sounded better, the same with Nick Cave, Chis Rea, Iggy Pop and the AR M1s rocked along quite nicely provided you kept the volume down, which does not mean that it did not play loud but it merely means you had to be a little bit more economical with the volume control and keep it in the enjoyment region.

Still captivated by the Leben sound I decided to try a little experiment and use the CS300 as a preamp by connecting 8 ohm non inductive dummy load resistors across its output terminals then on into a passive volume control feeding the ME 1400 power amp. This allows the Leben's total circuit including output transformers to be amplified up to a 350 watt level and really rock. It worked! The magic was still there! It lost the speaker / output transformer interaction mentioned before, the presentation was still on the warm side of neutral but not as warm as before and it allowed the Leben's charm to be enjoyed at a louder level. Oh for a 200 watt CS300. Maybe he has one lurking in his product range; I would love to hear it. It would be a step closer to Audio Nirvana.

What was the elusive name to the 'quality' I was hearing? It was micro detailing. It's those little messages in the mix that this CS300 preserves and

releases into the speakers that makes listening to this Leben CS300 so enjoyable.

Taku san, the master, I bow to you. With your long experience and dedication to valve hi-fi equipment, you have your carefully crafted product well sorted out and I am sure it will appeal to a growing group of audiophiles dissatisfied with solid state alternatives, that can be sterile and devoid of 'life.' If you are a true music lover I urge you to have a listen to this little Leben, I bet it will leave an indelible impression on you, as it has for me. Watts per dollar it falls a little short, but sound per dollar, this amplifier is great value.

Highly recommended to music lovers, however 'head bangers' need not apply. **AVL**

Ancillary Equipment: Cayin CD-T17A CD player, ME1400 power amplifier, Electrocompaniet EC3 preamp, Marantz CD-94II CD player, Perpetual Technologies P3a DAC, Acoustic Research M1 loudspeakers, Magnepan MG-1 loudspeakers

Opinion

The 'Opinion' expressed here is that of the reviewer, summarised in the form of a 5-star rating system, and should be considered as an integral part of the full contents of this Audition Equipment Review. As such, each category should be judged on its own merits and not necessarily used as a comparison with other equipment reviews in this, or other editions of Audio & Video Lifestyle magazine.

★ Shocker
★★ Average
★★★ Good
★★★★ Excellent
★★★★★ Perfection

"It's those little messages in the mix that this CS300 preserves and releases into the speakers that makes listening to this Leben CS300 so enjoyable"

Performance

★★★★★

Build Quality

★★★★★

Compatibility

★★★★★

Value For Money

★★★★★