

# AUDION SILVER NIGHT 300B REVIEW BY SAM TELLIG



A year or so ago the British mag, Hi-Fi News & Record Review, published a “Valves and Vinyl” supplement. There was a feature article on the Audion Silver Nights – a pair of drop-dead gorgeous mono tube amplifiers using the 300B output tube-made by a company named Alema, founded by David Chessell and Erik Anderson, both formerly associated with the UK firm Audio Innovations.

First thing I did was fax the manufacturer: “Do you have a North American importer?”

Not at the time. But they asked me if I would like to purchase a pair.

Purchase a pair?

I could see that, with shipping charges, it would make no sense to bounce a review pair back and forth across the Atlantic. But *buy* a pair, sight unseen and sound unheard? I held on to my wallet.

David Chessell was not deterred. “You won’t be sorry,” he said. “Several reviewers in Europe have already bought them.”

I returned to the HFN/RR article and lusted after the amps – beautifully finished with a brass nameplate on top, clad in gleaming brass on other parts of the chassis, those beautiful, glow-in-the-dark Shugang 300B output tubes. I sent Mr. Chessell my check (I often do impulsive things in hi-fi.)

The amps arrived a week later to join my system: a Pioneer Elite PD-65 CD Player, Audible Illusions Modulus 3 pre-amp, a pair of Quad ESL-63 USA Monitors, and an AR turntable with an SME 309 arm and a Shure Ultra 500 cartridge.

These beauties did things straight out of the box: truth of timbre, sweetness, smoothness, detail, delicacy. And, for their rated 20Wpc, they had a surprising amount of get-up-and-go (up to a point-20W- of course)

The Silver Nights are rated at 20Wpc for the export version, 18Wpc for the domestic UK version. The 300B output tubes, per side, are sourced from Shugang. There are two other tubes per side: ECC88/6922 Sovtek input tube and a 5687 double-triode driver tube sourced from National that says “Made in USA.” Silver wiring is used throughout the amp, and transformers are said to be designed in-house.

The manufacturer notes that the initial break-in period is two to three days. After that, the amps should be given a warmup period of 10-15 minutes. I’d give ‘em two to three weeks’ burn-in time (without the amps on all the time) using the 6-8 hours a day, before making any “judgements” (as Larsik likes to say) The amps require about an hour’s warmup in order to sound their best. This is not unusual – some amps take even longer. With the amps sitting on homemade stands, I used as short run as possible of Kimber 8TC – the excellent cable I keep coming back to – to each speaker. When using the Quads, I put the stands under the speakers, which are raised with Arcici stands.

Each amp is equipped with a level control, so you can run a CD player or processor straight in and keep your system simple. (The amps are mirror images of one another, so the volume-level knobs can be placed right next to one another.) This may be an excellent idea for those who just play CDs – you can cut out the line stage or preamp. There are connections for 2,4, and 8 ohm tap and found they were a little more gutsy, maybe, than if they were run off the 8 ohm tap.

No overall feedback is used, and the amps are supposed to incorporate “advanced phase cancellation circuitry.” In other words, this ain’t a single-ended design – it’s push-pull, using a phase splitter. I wouldn’t get hung up on this push-pull or single-ended stuff – what matters most is how well a particular design is executed.

I hear a strong family resemblance among all amplifiers that use the 300B output tube – whether the tube is sourced from Shugang/ Gold Dragon or the American-made Cetron/ Richardson. (The 300B is a direct-heated triode.)

The most remarkable thing about the Silver Nights – as with other 300B amps – is truth of timbre, or tonal accuracy. This is not so much a lushness as a *rightness* of sound – a freedom from anything that sounds mechanical, contrived, or artificial. Of course, good recordings help; but even not-so-great recordings can sound okay with this amp. I especially like listening things like old Benny Goodman, Glen Miller, and Bing Crosby records – and they sound great with the Silver Nights. What do you want me to listen to – Jennifer Warbler? Amanda McSweep? New Age? A unch of Swedes trying to play Yazz? (Sorry, Larsik.)

If you're listening to a multi-miked mess, this amp will reveal the recording for the botched job that it is. On the other hand, if you have a recording that sounds spacious and natural, this amp will give it to you in all its sonic splendor. Unlike some tube amps that seem to wrap everything up in a phasey haze, the Silver Nights don't cover things up – they're transparent. Unfortunately, they have a way of showing up other amplifiers which obscure so much detail – hide it behind a whale (or "veil", if you don't speak Swedlich).

Don't expect killer bass from these amps – it's not there in solid-state terms. On the other hand, don't expect flabby, I-won't-name –the-manufacturer tube bass, either – there's nothing soggy on the bottom. Bass is tight, tuneful, and surprisingly full without being overripe, as it is with, to some degree, the McIntosh 275 Commemorative Edition (I still love the Big Mac).

The Silver Nights really shine in the midrange and the treble. Coupled with the truth of timbre, there's remarkable clarity – a hear-through quality that you just have to experience. Of course, the rest of your system should be up to snuff. I'm not sure that some speaker owners – like Thielers, Loganites, or WATTs – will benefit as much as others. (Punishing loads, you know.)

Up to a point, the Silver Nights did fairly well with the Quads – the soundstage has a tendency to come forward a bit compared with more powerful amps, especially transistor jobs, and things had a tendency to flatten out. This is too bad, because when you couple that with the Quads' innate inability to focus – in, sya, Lecica/Agfa Rodinal – type terms – you're left with a somewhat homogenized soundstage.

The Silver Nights really came into their own with the ProAc Response 1s speaker. This is one of the most magical combinations I have heard in hi fi: power aplenty, a breathtakingly wide and deep soundstage with stunning precision of focus. With a great recording and performance, the Silver Nights on the Procacs have the power to make you weep for joy – and I mean literally.

Sure, these amps will run out of power, but by the time they do, you'd want to turn down the Proacs anyway. As for the Quads: I think their lack of power shows up in the somewhat flattened soundstage. (On the other hand, these amps should be terrific with old Quads.)

When you switch over to most amps, you'll realize how much detail you're missing: the Silver Nights are incredibly clean, but not squeaky-clean- they're clean without turning clinical (unless the recording is poor, in which case you'll hear it).

I'd guess that most monitor Audio speakers, especially the floorstanding ones, are sensitive. These speakers don't have a killer impedance, like so many American speakers which appear to be designed, in part, in order to let dealers sell more amps by Krell, Jeff Rowland, or Mark Levinson (the brand, not the man).

"What about yooce? What about yooce?" Lars asks. He's truly American – he craves power. The irony of this situation is delicious: Lars has an amp designed by a Russian. Alexander Nevsky returns to conquer Swedes. I, the Russophile with Russian wife and Russian-speaking child, have an amp half-designed by a Swede.

Too bad this is such a male hobby – music-loving women (if they weren't so intimidated and turned off by so many dealers) would love a pair of these amps. The Silver Night have plenty of WAF (wife

acceptance factor). My wife freaks out about their beauty – she actually polishes them. “All the other stuff you can sell,” she said. “You keep the ProAcs and the Silver Nights, right?”

“Right.”

The Silver Nights have not misbehaved in the slightest – no hums, no buzzens, no hisses, no solid-state listening fatigue. They also have more life: not only do they let more aire in, but they also let more sunlight in – there’s more happening between and around the notes, even with digital. While listening to ----’s system, I was conscious of little life there was – everything was damped and dead. When I went home and listened to the Silver Nights, there were light and life that went beyond delicacy, detail and transparency. These are truly extraordinary amplifiers.