

SONG AUDIO SA-1 Preamplifier

March 1, 2003



Nothing particularly noteworthy popped up when I hauled Song Audio's SA-1 preamplifier out of its shipping carton. Sure, perhaps the smaller-than-usual size of the two chassis (each 11.75" x 9.5" x 4.25"; separate power supply and audio sections slaved by a short, detachable umbilicus) might register a momentary note, but nothing of significance. I'm not ultimately a gear-size junkie anyway. Heck, the Art DI/O serving occasional DAC duties in my bedroom system has proved exceptionally capable, despite its diminutive size.

**"I recall thinking:
How magical
to find
someone so sure
of his circuits."**

What did stand out immediately about the SA-1 shipment, however, was the inclusion of a set of NOS Telefunken 12AX7s. The tubes had been added just in case I wanted to fully appreciate the voicing potential beyond that generated by the unit's stock Sovtek-offshoot brand of glass: the Electro-Harmonix 12AX7s. As a working rule, many manufacturers oppose tube rolling—often in no uncertain terms—but here was Song Audio de facto urging it. I recall thinking: How magical to find someone so sure of his circuits.

I found it equally magical to note that Song Kim was the name of the owner of Song Audio, a Canadian company of recent vintage. Unusual this little touch; it seemed so unforced and natural (big foreshadowing, that, dear reader). I did not suss out its karmic significance at precisely that moment. But I would learn shortly. And so the exegesis began.

No frills

The design of the SA-1 seems straightforward enough, if harkening just a bit to days gone by. A tube-rectified (5AR4) power supply (with a potted transformer) feeds the separately housed analog circuit of a basic 12AX7 configuration—one driver tube, two output tubes, each seated in ceramic sockets. The SP-3 from Audio Research came to mind initially, which on the whole seemed like a pretty damned good thing to me.

Then there were the circuit boards, by modern standards not wafer thin (yet another positive when one considers that the stiffness may help minimize the resonance that is more common with thinner boards). And the width of the traces—no hairlines these—seemed a perfect match for the solidity of the boards (poogers take note). The layouts are clean and uncluttered. Here are the specs I was able to obtain: input impedance of 100k ohms; an output impedance of 600 ohms; frequency response of 10Hz to 300kHz at 2V RMS; output rated at 6V RMS; THD unavailable; the 12AX7s are used in a signal step-up chain configuration. It bears mentioning that the basic design was done in Canada, the construction in Thailand, and the voicing by Song Kim, who as you shall read has an interesting ear.

Each of the two sections has an acrylic fascia (my review sample had chromed-steel fascias, which is also an option for the consumer), behind which sits a removable cage, which obviously allows the tube-generated heat to vent. The power-supply section contains a red LED for indicating power status, and an on/off toggle switch. After 30 seconds of power, a red LED will light on the audio section's fascia, indicating that you can switch the unit's mute toggle (located on the audio section fascia) to the "on" position.

The audio section's fascia contains another set of toggles, which allow you to select one of three inputs (the rear of the unit also sports two outputs, plus an IEC socket). Additionally, the fascia sports two rotary knobs, both in gold chrome, providing an aesthetic contrast to the field of silvery chrome. One knob controls gain, and the other

SONG AUDIO
SA-1 Preamplifier

Continued...

“... **adroitly**
handles the
live sonics
and the sense of
ambiance
of a
live performance.”

balance. A purist's dream, unless you're one of those who doesn't like getting up off the couch. The Song Audio SA-1 does not offer remote operation.

A word about the tubes: I listened for a while to the Telefunken's, then to the Electro-Harmonix. Each had its own character: light and airy if a bit soft on the bottom for the NOS tubes, warmer and richer sounding but with a bit less air for the current production tubes. Each tube type had its charm, but ultimately, since tube rolling seemed implied with the provision of an extra set of tubes, I settled for a premium selected set of Phillips 12AX7s, whose incisiveness I preferred in the present setup.

For this review, my system consisted of the Audio Aero Capitole 24/192 compact disc player; the VPI Aries Extended turntable with JMW 12.5 Memorial Tonearm and Grado The Reference cartridge, and the Art Audio Vinyl One Phono-Amp. In addition to the Song SA-1 under review, the Herron VTSP-1A and Conrad-Johnson 17LS line sections were on duty, as was the Audio Aero Capitole amplifier, and MartinLogan Prodigy speakers and Descent subwoofer. Interconnects and speaker wire were all Nordost Valhalla, save for a Quattro-Fil run from preamp to subwoofer. All power cords were FIM Gold (virtually impossible to bend, but ear-opening when in place), while power-conditioning duties came courtesy of Sound Application's latest models: the XE-6 and XE-12. The rack was an extended Countours Vantage Point number.

To begin with, one of the Song's most consistent features is its ability to render a sense of image as flesh, particularly when presenting instruments whose primary range resides in the midband. This trait comes through whether it's Shirley Horn on *You Won't Forget Me* [Polygram 847 482-2] revealing a beautifully weathered voice with commensurate emotion, or Diana Krall showcasing the next step in her evolution on *Live in Paris* [Verve 440 065 109-2]. It's this latter compact disc that bears a bit more attention in relation to image palpability.

While Krall's star has paled in audiophile circles (we are a fickle lot, but that's an article in itself), the *Live* compact disc arguably represents her finest outing to date. The SA-1 makes that immensely clear—the preamp adroitly handles the live sonics and the sense of ambience of a live performance. Even more important, it is able to expose emotion, which is in large part a function of the ability of a piece of equipment to render the more subtle harmonic micro layers of such things as a singer's pacing, inflection, and the naturalness of breathing itself. Krall comes across as an increasingly competent and comfortable-in-her-own-skin artist, and not a studio construct. Simply put, there's a palpable confidence to her voice. While it's difficult to explain why the SA-1 is so good at allowing this to come through (I suspect it may have something to do with the use of the 12AX7 tube rather than the 6922 so ubiquitous in today's preamps), the SA-1 nevertheless reveals Krall to be much better today—whether it's the sense of emotion or the competence of her playing—than on any of her studio albums. Moreover, the size of the image here seems truer to life than ever before. My friend Alan Kaftan of Audio Excellence made that abundantly clear at an earlier time when he pointed out how her head and voice seemed to be ultra-wide sounding on earlier discs.

Please don't misunderstand. I'm not saying that the Song Audio SA-1 imparts a coloration that turns everything into treacle. Nosiree, Skippy, that's not the case. Take Patricia Barber, for example. One evening at a Barber concert at a local Santa Monica nightclub, I wrangled a chat with the soundman handling Barber's setup. As it turns out, the harder sibilance, the slice-to-the-bone style of vocalization, is intentional. Barber apparently wants her voice miked in that manner, which, as an interpretive aside, makes perfect sense to me if you consider her presentation to be a reflection of our edgy, agitated,

SA-1 Preamp

Continued...

“What strikes me is the richness, the “realness” of the sound, much like what I’ve come to know through my monthly outing to music venues.”

self-involved cultural milieu. At any rate, that slight edginess is precisely how Barber’s voice sounds through the SA-1, whether you spin *Modern Cool* [BN 243 5 21811 2 4], *Café Blue* [BN7243 521810 2 5], or *Nightclub* [BN 7243 5 27290 2 9].

Of course, many of today’s preamplifiers can paint accurate and fleshy images, especially when they appear center stage. There are also preamplifiers that can just as readily sustain this illusion when another instrument assumes the lead in a particular passage of music—even if the instrument appears left or right of center. Of course, one should expect no less in 2003 from audio equipment at price points that make spouses and friends cluck in disbelief. And by that I mean a preamp that costs beyond \$3000. But the fact remains that few line sections can flesh out, simultaneously, a wealth of images on the soundscape. It’s either one or the other, even two at a time, but not many more fully fleshed positions, unless you can afford a preamplifier that matches your FICA score (the higher the number, the more impressive your creditworthiness).

Well, damn your credit: The SA-1, while still a significant sonic distance from C-J’s current masterpiece iteration of the ART (and its stratospheric price), allows access to a remarkable taste of the ineffable. There is feeling and emotion, in addition to the ebb and flow of music, and you won’t be forced to sacrifice the young’uns college fund to get this close to the original source.

No, for the price of the SA-1, you won’t get the ART, but you’ll come seriously close to C-J’s 17LS, which, along with the Herron VTSP-1A, has served reference duties for me for quite some time now. Moreover, you may even find that the SA-1, in its own magical way, may be equal to the C-J and the Herron (both are a bit more costly), depending on your particular setup. My feeling is, for example, that throwing the SA-1 before a solid-state amplifier can change your sense of what is possible to hear in the home. (As I write that last sentence, the sound of Patricia Barber’s resonant piano floats into my study. The body of the piano, its woodiness along with the fat sound, and the left hand counter-pointing the dryness of the right, rivets my attention. “I Fall in Love Too Easily” from *Nightclub* pulls me away from the looming deadline of this review. That doesn’t happen too often. What strikes me is the richness, the “realness” of the sound, much like what I’ve come to know through my monthly outing to music venues. To be honest, this moment, this experience, typifies what I’ve encountered quite often while listening to the SA-1. More than once I’ve put down pen and paper, so seductive, engaging, or thrilling was the presentation.)

There comes a time during the review process when matters can become a bit mind-boggling. What has been left out, what needs to be discussed so that the reader can get an adequate sense of my experience, and where should I go from here? Upon reflection, what begs for a bit of attention is this: dynamics—in relation to soundstage and imaging, from top to bottom.

Dynamics

What better way to get at dynamic shifts than RCA’s release of Sibelius’s *Concerto in D Minor, Op. 47* with Heifetz and the Chicago Symphony [LCS 2435] spinning on VPI’s marvelously revealing Aries Extended turntable. Sibelius’s second movement, “Adagio di molto,” displays an unusual degree of passion for the composer, calling for soul-stirring higher-frequency explorations by Heifetz, coupled to powerfully emotional lyricism from the orchestra. The SA-1 delivered just that, even with the entire orchestra swelling in unison. Rather than congeal the music into a mass of undifferentiated gruel, the SA-1 allowed the various orchestral sections to come through in such a manner that one could grasp both the flow of violin and orchestra.

SONG AUDIO
SA-1 Preamplifier

Continued...

Song Audio SA-1 Preamplifier

Price: \$3200 USD.

**Warranty: Tubes, 90 days; parts, five years;
labor, one year.**

Song Audio

451 Kenneth Ave
North York, Ontario
M2N 4W4
Canada

Phone: (416) 590-1791

Fax: (416) 224-1715

E-mail: info@songaudio.com

Website: www.songaudio.com

The ability of the SA-1 to capture dynamic shifts becomes readily apparent between "The Market Place at Limoges" and "Catacombae, Sepulchrum Romanum" on Fritz Reiner's *Pictures at an Exhibition* [LSC-2201]. The SA-1's nimbleness helps portray the sense of airiness of women gossiping in the marketplace before easily shifting into the sense of somber purpose within a catacomb. The SA-1 does even better with the demands generated by the frenzied nature of strings, brass, drum, and wind sections on Reiner's "Night on Bald Mountain" by Moussorgsky or Tchaikovsky's "Marche Miniature" (both on *Festival* [Classic Records 1-4005]).

The more I listen through the SA-1, the more surprised I become at its ability to add sinew, muscle, texture, indeed even heart and cardiovascular flow, to vinyl. To be honest, while both the aforementioned Herron and C-J have delivered hours of pleasure, my involvement with the 12" discs has taken on new meaning with the arrival of the Song. The sense of power combined with the staging and truth of timbre that the SA-1 imparts is revelatory at this price point.

Take *Canciones de mi Padre* [Asylum 9 60765-1], Linda Rondstadt's tribute to her Hispanic heritage, or Ornette Coleman's *The Shape of Jazz to Come* [Rhino reissue of Atlantic 1317]. Yes, each disc is radically different, yet what comes through is nothing less than an amazing tonal palette true to the character of each instrument. Moreover, each instrument inhabits its own space—whether front, side, or rear—which adds to the illusion of real music being played in real time. It must be mentioned, though, that the weak point in all these is the lessened sense of air surrounding images at the very back of the stage, especially when the music becomes very dense and complex. But that seems small potatoes compared to all the great stuff the SA-1 actually can do.

Of course, at this price, the piece can't be without some flaws. The lowest octaves, particularly those below 40Hz, start sounding a bit soft. Not enough to annoy, but not tight either. One gets slightly tighter bass with both the Herron VTPS-1A and the C-J 17LS, no doubt in part because of the leanness of the 6922 Sovtek tubes. As well, both preamps reveal just a bit more upper-octave air, though not enough to leave the SA-1 wanting significantly in that department, either. What the Song Audio SA-1 reminds me of, ultimately, is the Grado The Reference moving-magnet cartridge—that is, a midrange, as they say, to die for, although here we can also add more liveliness, too.

There was one unrelated hair to split, and it's been corrected now, though it's only fair to mention it. Song Audio's silver-wired umbilicus between the power supply and audio section was too short at 15". They've changed that now to a 36" cord made from the same materials. This should make placing the two pieces much easier.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the bottom line here is quite simple: For the money, the SA-1 is nothing less than an audio steal. I make no bones about that. It presents music—not merely digital artifact embellished by a euphonic patina—natural in its flow, open, spacious, quite dynamic, and as true to the source as some preamps costing several thousand dollars more. What it may lack in ultimate extension or resolution is merely subtractive, but only to a minor degree. As a final notation, here's the end result for me: I am going to purchase the Song Audio SA-1 preamplifier because what it does, it does so well as to move my soul. My hat is off to Song Kim and Song Audio, a magical confluence indeed.

...Jerry Kindela