

August 1, 2003



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Song Audio is a young audio company that is fast becoming a force to be reckoned with. This company is blazing their own trail from a marketing perspective with their unique line of low-power, high-fidelity products. Unlike the majority of exotic and ultra-expensive offerings now available in the rarefied arena of low-powered audio, Song’s products offer extreme fidelity at prices that rival mass-market gear.

The company’s proprietor is the irresistibly likable Song Kim of Toronto. He has set himself the goal of creating his own market niche by introducing young people to, in his words, “sound like they’ve never heard.” I leave it to the reader to speculate on the likelihood that today’s MP3-toting youth will choose good sound, or even great sound, over flashing equalizer lights in their buying decisions, but there you are, that’s Song’s mission. For those of us who view listening to MP3 as an experience on par with changing a diaper (hopefully that of a child and not one’s own), Song’s stuff is like manna from Heaven; so good it can bring tears to your eyes, and so inexpensive it can add years to your pension.

Pushing the envelope with traditional technology

Song’s latest innovation, the SA-34 SB stereo integrated amplifier, is a single-ended, zero-negative-feedback, pure-tube product that uses 12AX7s as input tubes and EL-34s as power tubes, both of which are current production models from Electroharmonic. The EL-34 is a pentode commonly seen in push-pull designs, but is used here in a triode-strapped configuration which causes the EL-34 to behave like a triode. Triodes, which have only three internal elements (a cathode, a grid, and an anode), are the darlings of the low-powered world because of their sumptuous sound quality. The problem is that triodes were historically superseded by tetrodes and pentodes because of their higher efficiency and better power-handling characteristics. As a result, true triodes are relatively rare, and high demand has made them very expensive.

Plentiful, high-quality, and inexpensive pentodes such as the EL-34 have five elements: a cathode, three grids (known as the grid, screen, and suppressor), and an anode. The triode-strapped configuration involves connecting (or “strapping”) one or two of the grids to the anode, which causes the tubes’ performance characteristics to resemble those of triodes. The intended result is triode sound with pentode ruggedness and low cost.

If you are not an experienced tube owner, the issue of biasing tubes correctly may have you worried. No need for that here. Song has designed the SA-34 SB with autobiasing circuitry that maintains the correct bias without adjustment for the life of the tubes.

The SA-34 SB is pure tube in another sense, in that it uses tube rectification in its power supply. Rectification is the process of converting alternating current from the house supply to direct current usable in the amplifier. Tube-rectifier diodes contain only two elements—a heated cathode and a “cold” anode—and were the first vacuum-tube device to be developed after the light bulb (which would be, yes, a monode, for you cunning linguists out there). Current can only flow one way in the diode because only one element is heated, which allows electrons to “boil” off it and travel to the anode. Tube rectifiers are the predecessors of the solid-state diode bridge rectifier, and are preferred by purist designers because they do not generate

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switching noise. Solid-state diodes are much more commonly used because they are cheaper and smaller, and do not require a power supply to heat the tube, so it appears that Song has spared no expense in this aspect of the design. Having heard the difference many times, I can tell you that tube rectification is hot stuff, and usually only found on very pricey gear.

Functionality and appearance

For the very modest asking price of the SA-34 SB, \$1600 USD, you get a nice-looking piece of equipment. The sides are cherry wood in a natural finish, with a polished chrome chassis, a solid-bronze volume knob connected to a high-quality Noble volume potentiometer in the center, and nicely anodized black rectangular transformer housings along the back. The Song Audio logo is attractively displayed in gold. The unit is small—approximately 14” wide, 10” deep, and 8” high—and weighs about 25 pounds. The gold, black, silver, and wood color scheme is one of my personal favorites. The overall impression is both eye-catching and sophisticated—a real jewel.

On the right of the front panel is an on/off toggle, while a similar toggle on the left switches between two source inputs. The speaker terminals are rugged five-way binding posts, conveniently mounted on the rear top panel at either side of the unit. A standard IEC socket is provided at the back, together with a high-purity solid-core silver power cord of Song’s own design, which is currently included in the price free of charge (for a limited time). This is a big bonus, people, as the cord is wonderful. It has all the lovely qualities of solid silver—detail, liquidity, and sweetness—and would certainly cost more than \$400 if sold separately. As I understand it, you can buy the cord separately from Song Audio. It is a purchase I heartily recommend.

Operation is dead simple. Connect the speakers and inputs, turn it on, adjust volume, and start listening. The amplifier becomes warm after a few minutes, but never excessively hot. I experienced no problems with reliability during the six months or so that I lived with the amplifier. The power output is a whoppingly small 4Wpc, which is less than the 7-8W claimed from most 300B triode designs, but rather more than the 1-2W that many ultra-low-power purists prefer.

Associated equipment

A Sony 777ES CD/SACD player acted as a transport with its digital output running through a dCS Purcell/Delius combination set at maximum upsampling. My digital cable is the MIT Digital Reference, while my interconnects are MIT 350s. My speaker cables are Cardas Neutral Reference. JMLab Electra 315.1 speakers were used, which have a rated sensitivity of 92dB. My reference amplifier is the KR Enterprise 32bsi, which is a single-ended triode tube amp rated at 25Wpc.

The food of love

I might as well spill the beans right away. This amplifier is terrific. I loved it. It sounds even better than it looks. At no time have I ever auditioned an amplifier within two to three times the price of this one that came close. Essentially right out of the box, with no tweaking and no upgrading of the stock tubes, this little marvel went right to work filling my living room with plump, juicy, intimate, radiant sound.

Some of my favorite music is made by female jazz vocalists in a small ensemble setting, such as Holly Cole’s *Don’t Smoke in Bed* [Alert 81020], backed by the wonderfully sparse Aaron Davis on piano, and the steady groove of David Piltch on bass. Cole’s voice is acrid, warm, and strangely comforting, like a bonfire on a hot afternoon, and never more so than on the title track of this album. I’ve listened to

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the sad, slow undulations of this piece hundreds of times on my own KR. Through the SA-34 SB—and it pains me to say this—the melancholy was even more fascinating, and the sadness more intense.

To start with, the soundstaging abilities of the SA-34 SB are remarkably good. You get a pure, room-filling effect that doesn't strong-arm the room but rather quietly illuminates it, like the rays of the sun at the bottom of a lake. The instruments and voices were exceptionally well separated from each other, with no bleeding between the images. Cole's voice, for example, was so distinct from the background instruments that I had no sense that the bass and piano were being produced by the same stereo. The ability of such a presentation to hold one's interest was surprising. I had no quibbles with bass detail or power, the foundation was extremely solid, and the high frequencies were rendered with delicate precision. The noise floor of this amp was among the lowest I've heard. I'm talking unnaturally quiet.

Comparing the SA-34 SB to my KR, both of which are stereo integrated tube amplifiers with zero negative feedback, was like comparing two very fine wines with similar pedigrees, except that one of the wines (the KR) costs about five times more. The KR is without much doubt the better amplifier overall, or at least more amplifier, in that it can play louder, produces more vivid texture and more detail, and has a more impressive ability to crack out sudden transients, like rim shots. The SA-34 SB, on the other hand, was subtler, sweeter, and more evocative on intimate source material.

Both amplifiers can do wonders in the area of timbral accuracy. The right balance between the percussive and the resonant properties of the piano that I get out of my KR, for example, was nearly matched by the SA-34 SB. Similarly, the high degree of realism on voices that I'm used to from the KR was matched and sometimes exceeded by the SA-34 SB. If the KR manages a tad more you-are-there realism than the SA-34 SB, it is also certainly more aggressive. Listening fatigue is an ever-present danger with the KR, while the SA-34 SB's smoothness gives a sense of safety and relaxation.

Did you say 4Wpc?

The low power of the SA-34 SB was honestly not an issue with my Electras. The 92dB sensitivity of these speakers was enough to produce a satisfying listening level in my smallish (12' x 14') room, and I tend to like it loud. There was no sense that the amplifier was crapping out in the bass, and no sense of strain elsewhere. It must be said, however, that normal listening levels are about as loud as this amp could go in my setup. For more volume, just add more sensitive speakers and stir. If you require a bit more headroom, I would aim for at least 94dB loudspeakers (and watch out for the tendency of some speaker manufacturers to overstate sensitivity figures). Even so, let's face it, this ain't no disco amp. If pounding subterranean bass lines and 12" woofers are your thang, then follow the flashing equalizer lights.

How quick and fresh art thou

My very positive experience with Holly Cole was repeated with a number of other female vocalists, including Rebecca Pidgeon, Alison Krauss, and Diana Krall. Small ensemble instrumental jazz and easy-listening popular music fared just as well. The lovely illuminating quality of the SA-34 SB's presentation often floored me. It was just beautiful, track after track. On busier and more aggressive material, such as Hugh Masekela's *Hope* [Triloka 8023-2], the SA-34 SB also acquitted itself admirably, though with less of the edge-of-your-seat speed and transient kick of which the KR



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SONG AUDIO
SA-34 SB Stereo
Integrated Amplifier

Continued...

Song Audio SA-34 sb Stereo
Integrated Amplifier

Price: \$1600 USD.

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

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is capable. Still, its remarkable separation and timbral accuracy stood the SA-34 SB in good stead, rendering even very energetic tracks such as my personal favorite, "Stimela (The Coal Train)," entrancing and satisfying. Again, I was struck by the ability of this amplifier to sing, and by the radiant sweetness and quiet background.

All in all

This is a marvelous amplifier in an attractive package at a heretically low price. Sooner or later, Song is going to take my advice and raise that price. At the very least, he won't be throwing in a solid-core silver power cord for free for much longer. If you are looking to get into the world of low power and extreme fidelity, this is your amp and now is the time. If I could come up with an excuse to buy another amplifier, I'd buy one myself. For those of you who do buy it, I'm already jealous.

...Ross Mantle
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