

December 2006

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Silbatone Ji-300MKII Integrated Tube Amplifier Revise, restore, and reign supreme!

Review By Steven R. Rochlin

It happened during one of those times when audiophile nervosa sets in. The past year reviewing various turntables and tonearms has been a revelation! Source components and loudspeakers can make a wonderful improvement to one's system. But what would you do if one day, out of the blue, you received an e-mail so enticing that it were like a moth to a flame. You knew the company's top-line preamplifier was the most revealing, neutral, and captivating device your ears ever had the privilege to examine. For the curious few who have not read my February 2002 review of Silbatone's C-102 battery powered tube preamplifier please see our Web site.

To this day the Silbatone C-102 is the standard by which all other preamplifiers have been measured. Nearly five years later there has been nothing that comes close to the spectacular performance of the Silbatone preamplifier. To quote my own review, "Ok, so it is three large chassis, takes up quite a bit of physical real-estate, weights what seems like a ton and costs \$30,000. So what?!?! The end result is a unit that reproduces music beyond that of any other preamplifier ever heard... and i have heard more [preamplifiers] than one cares to mention."



With that said, a few months later, May of 2002, another review of Silbatone's product appeared within *Enjoy the Music.com*'s *Review Magazine*. This time it was their Ji-300B integrated tube amplifier. Of course expectations were high, as the preamplifier unit was leagues ahead of the usual audiophile high-end kit. While the \$16,000 price was nearly half of the C-102 preamplifier, my hopes were to find a large amount of the C-102 preamplifier's performance had filtered down to their Ji-300B integrated. Sadly, the unit fell far short of expectation.

The Ji-300B was quite good mind you, though for \$16,000 it was hard for me to completely rave about it. My conclusion says, "There are other amplifiers that meet my preferences at lower costs." In life we all have preferences, and the Ji-300B was not quite my cup of tea. Perhaps too much of that 300B rose-colored glasses sound, which the C-102 preamplifier had not a hint of? Bottom line is that while i did love the sound effect, long-term ownership was not in the 'must have' category, unlike Silbatone's preamplifier.

New & Improved

While Silbatone was extremely pleased with my finding of the C-102 preamplifier, they were less enthusiastic with the assessment of their Ji-300B integrated amplifier. Frankly, i agree with them, yet from my perspective of course. Months ago i received an e-mail from Silbatone stating they have made improvements to their integrated amplifier and they wanted me to review it. Oh boy oh boy, could this really be my dream come true or another let down? When expectations are *very high*, you really can set yourself up for a fall. Am sure over the years many an audiophile has auditioned/purchased a product they felt would be the Next Step Higher Into Musical Bliss, only to be let down with a loud thump. Sad isn't it how we do our very best to make wise choices, yet sometimes even the best plans fall short of expectation.

As this is December 2006 and we are near Chrisma-anukka-Box-Quanza Day, it was time to unwrap my review of this new and stunning unit. Call it a gift for those who dream big, spend big, and live in the Big Time. The below review *is not* for the weak of heart or those with fragile backs. While your financials must be This High to enjoy the ride, the exhilaration factor may well be worth the price of admission. And now we enter a world where dreams *do indeed* come true.

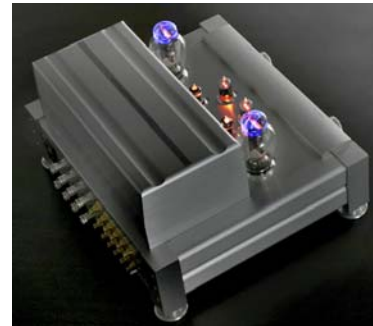
What Dreams Are Made Of

Silbatone's Ji-300MKII integrated amplifier (\$15,000) uses a pair each of the Western Electric 300B output, 5965 and 5687 small signal tubes. The front panel allows for easy selection of 5 switched stereo inputs using the large knob on the left. Input impedance is 10kOhms. The left, smaller backlit push button is for monitor output, which is provided for connection to other integrated amplifiers or recording purposes. The center button turns the unit on or off while the far right button is for muting audio output. The large knob to the right controls volume, with a total of 40 levels to choose from. Like the previous model, the movement and feel of the volume knob can be described as sensual. Ok, perhaps i need to get out a bit more, yet if you ever have the chance to operate one of Silbatone's volume knobs you will understand where i am coming from. The movement is silky smooth, yet very positive.



Output transformers have been upgraded from the previous version. They are now semisilverfoil to semisilverfoil nickel core and wired for both 4.8 and 8 Ohm impedances, with 16 Ohm available by simply rewiring the appropriate output transformer wires to the loudspeaker binding posts. Other improvements include doubling up the silver mica capacitors and all internal wiring went from being copper in the previous version, to now consisting of 100 percent silver. With these improvements, the price has actually come down from \$16,000 for the first version to \$15,000. This could be due to the low valuation of the United States dollar or more cost-effective engineering technics. Whatever the cause, it is good to see improvements *and* a lowering of price.

While the hefty loudspeaker terminals are silver, the RCA jacks are gold-plated. An interesting mix of metals, but who am i to argue? Like the \$30,000 C-102, the Ji-300MKII chassis and knobs are precision machined from solid aluminum blocks and are hand finished. The chassis has an extremely solid feel and is lavished with sensual curves. Visually, it is extremely attractive and refined.



Operation is quite simple, as once you have everything wired in you press the front panel power button and it will illuminate red (it also flashes when in the Mute mode). Once the unit's soft-start delay has run its course, the power button lamp changes to blue. Then all one needs to do is choose input and volume setting. Of note is that Silbatone suggests loudspeakers with 93dB/W/m sensitivity or higher. This is a good suggestion, though depending on how kind a load you may find lower-sensitivity loudspeakers will also work well. During this review i employed my beloved Reference 3a MM DeCapo-i and vintage Audio Note AN-J/SPx loudspeakers. Both are high-sensitivity, easy to drive units with the nod going to the Audio Note for bass extension.

And The Angels Sang...

Expectations were high, though perhaps a bit measured as my hopes were dashed when listening to the first version of this unit years ago. With quality and reliability never being an issue, it was good to just let her settle in and let my ears be my guide. My usual listening sessions for reviews start out with music that is quiet, serene, and with plenty of microdynamics. No need to induce ear fatigue on a 'fresh set' of ears mind you. What poured forth into my listening room was nothing short of a revelation!

For those who read my Silbatone C-102 preamplifier review, you will recall how the microdynamics of that unit were head and shoulders above anything else in my stable. Once again the brilliant minds at Silbatone have done it! Obviously the changes in design and parts are paying big dividends in this department. The usual comments of 'floating' and 'caressing' were noted. It saddens me that very few audiophiles have truly heard the *Magic of Microdynamics*. Part of the problem may not be system related as it is with the high amount of background noise i hear in other's homes. Ultra-quiet background levels, as is true in my humble abode, are usually only reserved for recording studios or purpose-built soundproof rooms. My point being is that the Silbatone integrated amplifier easily provides high-resolution in the lowermost sound levels and follows the music extraordinarily well, but you need a listening environment conducive to such things.

On a grand scale, call it rock n' roll time, the pace (PRAT) and dynamics were mesmerizing. Kraftwerk's *The Mix* (both vinyl and CD) had a staggering driving speed, with the synthesized uppermost frequencies extending to the stratosphere. Lesser units tend to miss the truly miss the airy highs in the song "Pocket Calculator." They should easily float about without any perception of being cut short. This is exactly how the Silbatone Ji-300MKII produced these musical passages.

On the song "Radioactivity" there are very obvious phase cues, expansive sounds, and driving deep bass. Over the years i have found that only units with immense inner resolution can do all things during this song. At 10 seconds you have a very long reverb effect with main sound delay. At 43 seconds is an expansive electronic sound. Add to that, at just over 3 minutes into the song you have the phasey, pulsating explosions for the next minute. Sure many systems can get parts of this, or perhaps a diminished version, yet only the most capable render all the above completely intact in every aspect.

Every Kraftwerk lover knows the songs "Trans Europe Express," "Abzug," and "Metal On Metal" and the constant tonal changes with phase. To be fair, this is not just a test of electronics, but also the resolution of one's speakers — especially the tweeters or supertweeters if you have them. Supertweeters usually show their advantages with the song "Homecomputer." Summing this all up, only the very few can really dig in and effortlessly produce these pyrotechnics in full. The Silbatone passed with flying colors.

If there was anything to possibly complain about, it would be the extremely deep sub-40Hz zone, though that is probably due to my review loudspeakers (Audio Note AN-J/SPx and Reference 3a MM De Capo-i). Neither of these are known for that very last octave (or two), though have heard this album using my M+K MX-2000 subwoofer. Those not familiar with this subwoofer should simply know it was their top-line unit, bettered the MX-5000 in my opinion, has hundreds of watts, dual 12-inch drivers in special dual-loading format, very steep crossover (36dB/octave), and was perhaps the most accurate subwoofer i have ever heard. Actually, you did not quite *hear* this woofer more than you *felt* it, as it should be with a proper *subwoofer* design (read: below 35Hz and reaching down to near single-digit territory).

"So how about acoustic music Steven?" you ask. Placing my fave Mile Davis *Prestige* vinyl box set by Analog productions on the turntable brought many hours of musical bliss. From breathing technics to subtle tones... it was all these to be heard. As a musician, it is also interesting to note that you can hear more of the musician's interplay between each other. It is these very small inflection and timing cues, and other bits. While most non-musicians may not fully understand this, those of us with years of experience will understand where i am coming from.

From albums of small-scale string ensembles to large-scale orchestral works... the resolution and ability to follow multiple groupings, harmonic shadings, and dynamics both macro and micro were nearly flawless. i would be hesitant to really put my thumb on any one deficiency, as said deficiencies seems to not be constant. It begs the question of whether it is the integrated amplifier, or perhaps the system or the recording itself. This also proves that when i have to go over my listening notes and listen further to make a conclusive analysis, and said analysis comes into question.

Ask yourself this, when was the last time you read a review where the reviewer is honest enough to know how good a component may be and the remainder of their system (or the recording) comes into question? Perhaps when one's system reaches a certain level you begin to hear so much into the recording, and the system is truly of such high resolution, that deficiencies become a moving target. Just when you feel you have things nailing down, the next recording unseats your findings and brings about newfound joys.

On the positive side, the extreme resolution and ability of the Silbatone Ji-300MKII is enjoyable. In the past my system became so hypersensitive as to make the music less enjoyable. In other words, it may not be that you hear *too much* of the recording and imperfections more than the way it is *presented* to the listener. Fortunately that type of irritating system i had years ago did not last very long in my home. It was an interesting educational experience and nothing more. If you desire very high resolution and musical pleasure, then the Silbatone Ji-300MKII should easily fill the bill when employed within the right system.

Imaging was excellent, with good instrument delineation without being what sounds like artificial etching. Depth and hall reverb expansion was also in the top realm of audiophile exotica, with perhaps a touch of shortening at the very far right and left of the front soundstage. All in all a very impressive, nearly unrestrained floating into the listening space. As previously mentioned, you need to have a very quiet noise floor to truly appreciate these subtleties to the Nth degree.

The Clouds Parted The Sun Shined Down On Earth

To plagiarize from my review of the Silbatone C-102 preamplifier review "So it seems the review above is one of those reviewer unadulterated raves. Well dammit it all if you had this piece in your system i would challenge you to say bad things about it. So what?!?!... What we have here is something so far beyond what i previously felt possible that the gauntlet has been raised for other designers to step up to the challenge." Integrated amplifiers have come and gone in my home, with the Audio Note Meishu and VAC Avatar being among the Best of Breed. Of course the Audio Note Ongaku was in another league, though for the price of entry that is to be expected.

i can wholeheartedly add the Silbatone Ji-300MKII to Ongaku status. It far exceeds that of virtually all other integrated amplifiers offered at *any* price. With the price being 2 to 3 times the cost of other units, one *should* expect such performance. While the first version was a let down, it appears this redesign has captured the magic found in their preamplifier. Sure other reviewers appeared to have been pleased with the first version of this unit, though perhaps having the privilege of reviewing their preamplifier swayed my opinion — as knowing what was possible brings into perspective the shortfalls of the first version.

Of note is that i have also been tube rolling the stock WE300B for other tubes. As one would expect, the differences are very audible. It may take me more time and analysis to fully explore this unit, though the past few months certainly does allow me time to get a handle on the stock configuration. There may indeed be a follow up to come, as one would expect when dealing with a unit capable of this startling amount of clarity.

This second, MKII version, corrects the previous errors and brings into focus what is *truly* possible. The Silbatone Ji-300MKII proves that time and evolution can produce remarkable results! Those seeking for the ultimate integrated 300B stereo amplifier should place this unit on the top of their list. Until you hear it, you may never know what is genuinely possible. Of course in the end what *really* matters is that *you*...

Enjoy the Music,

Steven R. Rochlin

Specifications

Type: Integrated stereo tube amplifier
Tube Compliment: two each 300B, 5687 and 5965
Frequency Response: 20Hz to 35kHz
Power Output: 8 Watt per channel
Signal To Noise Ratio: 98dB
Inputs: five stereo pair line level RCA
Output: One stereo pair RCA
Input Sensitivity: 750mV
Input Impedance: 10kOhms
Output Impedance: 4.6 or 8 Ohms (16 Ohms optional)
THD: Less than 2 percent
Signal To Noise: 100dB
Dimensions: 44 x 25 x 43 (WxHxD in mm)
Weight: 59 lbs.
Price: \$15,000

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