

Shuguang Audio S300MK Integrated Amplifier

By Jake Montzingo

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Specifications:

Output Power: 9 WPC Class A

Output Impedance: 4 ohm and 8 ohm

Vacuum Tubes: 300B x 2, 6CA7 x 2, 12AX7 x 2, 5AR4 x 2

MSRP: TBD (+/- \$1500)

Grantfidelity.com

Vacuum tubes are wonderful little devices swimming upstream in a world full of digital and solid state devices. If you were to poll a number of passersby on the street, I doubt half of them would know what a vacuum tube *is*, let alone have listened to one... nor could name an application for one. Narrow your scope to the home audio world and that percentage obviously rises—and dramatically, of course, if you're talking about two channel stereo to knowledgeable bottle-heads. Long gone are the days of vacuum tubes in televisions, radios and MIG fighter jets, but the recent proliferation of tubed audio gear on the market paints quite a “glowing” picture for their future. Further, new tube-only manufacturers are popping up all the time! Allow me to introduce to you the Shuguang Audio S300MK Single Ended Triode (SET) Integrated Amplifier.



If you've seen the name Shuguang before, it's probably been on the side of a vacuum tube with their bird logo next to the name. Shuguang is the oldest and largest tube manufacturer in China, established in 1958 by engineers educated and trained in the United States in the 30s-40s. Shuguang's vacuum tube production accounts for 40% of the world's total tube output, either under their own Shuguang name or another OEM brand. As of 2008, Shuguang expanded their selection of tubes to include a “Treasure” line—which became their top-shelf tubes in honor of their 50th anniversary. This line includes a 300B, 2A3, 6SN7GT, KT88, KT66, and 6CA7, all of which have an inner carbon compound coating making them appear to be 'black bottle'. Being that these are Shuguang's best tubes, their prices reflect the upgraded build and sound quality. Fortunately, you don't have to consider those MSRPs with the S300MK, as it already includes a matched pair of the 300B (\$600) and 6CA7 (\$450). Any good tube amp is obviously only as good as its tubes; these Shuguang Treasures may be so good in the S300MK, you'll dispense with tube rolling altogether and simply enjoy the music.

When I unpacked the amp, I was taken aback by its simple, yet effective design. Build quality was very good, with all the parts lining up correctly and all the buttons and knobs having smooth and effective functions. The unit has everything you would need in an integrated amplifier, from a full-function remote to A/C pots to reduce electrical noise. The silver chassis and matching tube cage are clean-looking with few visual lines, and marked only with the product name,

button markings, and tube and transformer labels. The tubes sit cleanly open on the front half of the amp, with the cage covering them if you wish, while the three transformers consume the back half of the chassis. On the back panel are five unbalanced inputs along with an IEC power connector and 4- & 8-Ohm gold-plated speaker binding posts for the two respective channels. Controlling the S300MK is very easy from both the front panel and the remote control. Additionally, the amp incorporates “POWER” as well as “ON/OFF” buttons, allowing the unit to stand by and stay energized without powering the tubes. The signal-path circuit utilizes a self-biasing 300B tube alone as the output in the SET configuration. This limits its output to 9wpc, but coupled with a sensitive speaker (like horns), it can be one of the simplest and most effective modes of music production available. Shuguang designed a simple yet effective vessel to power and highlight their exceptional new line of tubes, and it was my pleasure to put it through its paces.



Rachel, at Grant Fidelity, sent me the amplifier straight from its debut at AudioKarma Fest, so the tubes and amplifier already had a little break-in time on them. However, I still ran the unit for an additional 100 hour of mixed pink noise and music, just for good measure. Sitting down after a week to listen through my horns, I began my listening sessions with my favorite SACDs and digital files. Starting off with Bram Beekman's *Tocatta 200 Years Of German Organ Music*, I put the tubes through their paces and really allowed them to open up at varying volume levels. The first thing I noticed is that the Shuguang amplifier likes to be tuned up. Granted, my speakers also enjoy the power, but the music really started to come to life with the volume set past 10:00. Once the tubes were hot and the volume was inched up, the organ music truly came to life with this amp/speaker combination. Starting with "Organ Concerto in D minor BW," rarely had organ music ever sounded so powerful and palpable in my office. All of the detail was present, the bass was full and musical, but the overall feeling of the music just made me say, "Wow!" That evening I thumbed through album after album and listened for several hours... I couldn't remember the last time I enjoyed my speakers to that extent.

The next night, thrilled by the previous experience, I sat down again with a multi-hour chunk of time set aside for more listening pleasure. This time I started with some female vocals; I consider that to be the "bread and butter" of horns and 300Bs. Colbie Caillat's album *Coco* offers great vocals on an acoustic album akin to that of Jack Johnson and other So-Cal beach music. Her voice simply flowed into my office with the grace of an angel, yet the weight and strength of an earthly body. "Oxygen" was reproduced with ample beat and good instrumental separation, along with flawless harmonization of the voices. In "On Fine Wire," one of the elements that brought the recording to life was how Colbie sounded too close to the microphone. This sound was recreated beautifully by the Shuguang, to bring the experience of a recording session into my home. All of the airy highs and tight lows of a piano and vocal duo were present, without ever sounding mushy. I know the horns have something to do with this masterful balance of sound, but any set of sensitive speakers would benefit from the magic of Shuguang and their Treasure tubes—especially bright ones. If I did have one complaint, it would be that the bass is not the lowest I've heard, and a lot of that can be affixed to the 300B tube's design to emphasize the vocal range. However, anyone but the most stubborn bass-head would likely not notice the amplifiers lean, yet extremely musical use of bass and the lower frequencies. With as many great aural attributes as the S300MK has, I wasn't going to let one "smudge" on its performance detract from the musical euphoria it provided.



The bottom line on the Shuguang Audio S300MK Integrated Amplifier is that it is a steal of a deal. An amp that arrives at your doorstep with *upgraded* tubes is rare... one that arrives with the best tubes a company makes is rarer still. When Shuguang set out to build an amplifier good enough for their black bottle tubes, they set a very high bar indeed. The circuitry of SET amplifiers is not overly complicated, but it still needs to be done "spot on" to sound its best; Shuguang's match of tubes and circuitry is nothing short of magical in the S300MK. There are many SET 300B amplifiers in the world, but very few come with a remote control, and even fewer come stock with tubes that would likely never be rolled. When this amplifier hits the market (shortly) at Grant Fidelity, it'll be a giant-killer, as a majority of its MSRP would be the cost of its excellent tubes alone. I have been extremely happy with the Shuguang Audio S300MK Integrated Amplifier with Shuguang Treasure tubes, and I have yet to find a better match to my horns. Bravo, Shuguang Audio & Grant Fidelity!

Associated Equipment

Klipsch Forte Speakers with Jantzen Audio Crossovers, Audio Renaissance LS-845-5 Amplifier
KingRex T20U+PSU Amplifier, Stereo Knight Silverstone Balanced Preamp
Matrix mini-i Balanced DAC
PC Music Server