

Thivan Labs 300B Single Ended Anniversary

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(translated to English from Polish)

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The 300B magic triode amplifier is a dream of many people. Thanks to the Thivan Labs brand, it is easier to make this dream come true, as their 300B Single Ended Anniversary was priced quite reasonably.

The term "reasonably priced" can be applied almost blindly to Thivan Labs products. I wrote about this company on the occasion of the premiere review of the product of this brand, namely the Tube Music Processor 9038 digital-to-analog converter. For those who have not read that text, let me repeat the basic information. Well, Thivan Labs was established in 2008 in Ho Chi Minh, Vietnam. It was founded by two engineers, graduates of the electrical and electronic faculty of the local university. Gentlemen Thi Hoang Nguyen and Van Anh Nguyen, apart from the knowledge necessary to design and build audio devices, are also passionate about good sound, and the brand name is a combination of the names of both men. The offer is dominated by tube devices, mainly amplifiers, and high-efficiency loudspeakers.

Returning to the issue of reasonable prices, it should be noted that the top solutions cost a lot, but both the previously tested DAC and SET using 300B tubes, which I have now received, as well as several other products can be safely included in this

category. Of course, it is not difficult to assemble an amplifier or DAC from cheap components and sell it at an attractive price, but usually the sound quality suffers, not to mention the reliability and durability of the product. The Tube Music Processor 9038 converter proved that the Vietnamese company can reconcile an attractive price with classy sound. So I expected the same from an integrated amplifier based on my beloved tube.

As I wrote many times, the number one tube amplifier for me is the Kondo Souga with 2A3 triodes, but I am the owner of a SET on the 300B and I use every opportunity to listen to other designs of this type. Each of them, provided that they were created by a knowledgeable person, has an absolutely unique musical experience to offer. Whether the best possible one depends on a person's sound and musical preferences. SETs are, above all, the kings of vocals and acoustic music, which is why they are often the choice of people who like such a repertoire. Is it the same with Thivan Labs?

Construction

Like many producers of audio devices, Thivan Labs has developed its own, characteristic design, which makes it easy to recognize the products of this brand. The sides, front and back of the tested amplifier are made of wood, which is available in two natural veneers - walnut and rosewood. At the front and at the back, metal plates are screwed to them, in which all elements such as connectors, knobs, buttons, etc. are mounted. At the front, there is a central plaque with the company's logo, and above it, a red LED indicating the power is on.



On the sides there are two knobs - the volume control (left) and the input selector (right), and next to the latter the amplifier's switch. On the other side of the metal plate, symmetrically to the latter, there is a remote control receiver eye. With all quite classic design and a number of traditional solutions, the user's convenience

has not been forgotten by adding a remote control in the set. It is small, plastic, but it does the job.

On the back plate there are line inputs sockets. Two of them are based on gold-plated RCA sockets, and one on XLR (although the device is NOT a balanced design). The set of connectors is complemented by a single, gold-plated speaker socket that accepts both forks and bananas, and a classic power socket.

The outer wooden frame fits perfectly with the main body of the device. The latter is made of steel covered with hammer varnish. Three large transformer covers were finished in a similar way. Such a finish is a tribute to classic amplifiers of this type from several dozen years ago. It is not as effective as modern varnishes, but undoubtedly original and ... even if not at first sight, you can like them. According to the manufacturer, both the supply and output transformers were designed especially for the needs of this amplifier. The high quality of the power supply was also taken care of, which was separated for the preamplifier and output stages.

There are holes for tube sockets in the top cover of the amplifier, and there are as many as six of them. In the output stage there is a pair of 300B triodes (one per channel). The manufacturer decided to use Psvane products from the HiFi series, which should come as no surprise considering the moderate price of the amplifier. Nothing prevents you from using any other 300B, Psvane, or other brand instead. 12AU7 (x1), 6SN7 (x1) and 6V6 (x2) work in the input stage and as power tube drivers.



In the unit that was tested, all signal tubes are the so-called NOS, i.e. new (in the sense unused) tubes from old production. The circuit works, of course, in class A, without feedback. The amplifier is capable of delivering up to 7.5W of power per channel. It is heavy - it weighs 35 kg, which is not surprising, since one piece of the output transformer alone is 6 kg. For some users, it may be important to know that the manufacturer has prepared an appropriate tube cover for this amplifier.

Sound quality

As I mentioned, single ended amplifiers with triodes in the output stage (so-called SETs), especially when they are 300B, are my absolute favorites. They are not necessarily the best amplifiers in the world (not only because they are simply not there), but they are excellent and it's not just a matter of exceptionally real-sounding vocals and acoustic instruments. The better a device of this type, the less disadvantages it has, and more advantages, more features that give it an advantage over the competition. Although the price of Thivan Labs 300B SET is attractive, as the auditions showed, it offers a lot of SET magic. During the tests, the integrated played alternately with two pairs of loudspeakers - my GrandiNote MACH4, but also with a new, semi-active model of the German company SoundSpace Systems, aptly named Robin (meaning a bird, called robin in Polish). With the MACHs, the Thivan Labs amplifier drove all the speakers, while in the case of the Robins, the two bass woofers (in each column) were driven by built-in amplifiers, and the tested SET only controlled the mid- and tweeters. The main source during the test was the LampizatOr Pacific reference DAC.

Listening to the new, or rather unknown to me, SET on the 300B, it is difficult for me to resist the temptation to start listening with recordings, which are the specialty of such designs. That's why I spent the first evening with beautiful vocals, but diversifying it with various musical genres. The first album "Autumn leaves" by Jacintha reminded me why the 300B are my favorite tubes. And at the same time he showed that gentlemen Thi and Van also know very well what a fan of such constructions expects. The artist's voice was at the same time strong and delicate, colorful, but not colored, palpable, real and simply present.

This is the magic of the 300B in its pure form - well-recorded singers or lead musicians land in the listener's room, almost at your fingertips. Almost, because Thivan Labs did not push Jacintha forward. It materialized it on the line of columns and placed the accompanying instruments behind it. The reverb superimposed on the vocals sounded incredibly natural, giving the presentation depth and realism. The large piano sounded fantastic, dense and strong, although it was able to rapidly transform from a powerful instrument into an extremely delicate one when a given fragment required it.

Among the singing ladies, Leontyne Price, who daringly recreates the role of Carmen, could not be missed. Opera music is a huge challenge for an 8-watt amplifier. Thivan Labs presented the vocal and spatial aspect of the excellent RCA Red Seal recording simply perfectly. The thing is not only in the wonderfully presented colors and textures of the singers' voices, but also in the impressively devoted emotional layer, crucial for the listener to be completely immersed in the tragic (in its conclusion) history of Carmen. In this particular recording, I always listen to the spatial aspects when testing various components. These were captured perfectly on the tape. The singers move around on the stage and this is so accurately rendered that you can follow them with your eyes. The choirs appear and march far behind the singers and this is also clearly visible (or rather through binoculars, as

they seem to be really far away), provided, of course, that the given system can reproduce it faithfully. The tested amplifier, surrounded by other, much more expensive components, coped with this challenge so well that after the first few minutes I was able to settle down more comfortably in the armchair calmly that this reasonably priced SET in no way spoils the pleasure of listening to this performance and recording, which is my absolute favorite.



However, it does not mean that Thivan Labs reproduced this opera perfectly. It should be remembered that the singers in the opera are accompanied by an orchestra, and its dynamics, power and scale of sound are too much for many amplifiers, not only for low power ones (!). And the fact is that these aspects of the sound were acceptable, but not on a fully satisfactory level. Therefore, I paused the listening session for a few minutes and replaced the speakers with the semi-active Robins. It was a bull's eye! Tangibility, timbre, expression of vocals, spatial presentation, three-dimensionality of large phantom images, performance sparkling with emotions - all this remained at a great level, and the scale and dynamics of the orchestra were supported by large woofers driven by their own amplifiers. It was an absolutely complete and classy presentation.

While all these vocals from Thivan Labs driving the passive MACHs sounded excellent, charismatic and expressive, with the right power, hoarseness, or other characteristics specific to a given performer, wherever they were accompanied by electric instruments, the active Robins did a better job. taking care of sufficiently strong, but at the same time perfectly controlled low tones and more precisely reproduced transients.

There is exceptional musicality, fluidity, smoothness, palpability and spaciousness of the sound, there are also contagious emotions, thanks to which it is impossible to listen to this amplifier indifferently.

The Thivan Labs 300B SET itself with such music could go really low, reproduce even the lowest sounds of a bass guitar, drums or keyboard quite well, but it did not provide such good bass control, especially the lowest. As a result, the bottom end was a bit rounded, not as fast and tight as with more powerful amplifiers. This is not a complaint against the tested amplifier, because almost every tube sounds like this, and the advantage of the much more expensive ones is manifested, among others, by just slightly better control and differentiation of low tones. In this range, tubes are not as strong as strong transistors, but none of the latter will make the vocals of Joplin or Tyler sound as expressive, as natural and true, as with the SET 300B, so that the hairs on the hands stand on end, and the listener's spine shivered. These SETs do better than any other amp. As usual in audio - each solution has its strengths and weaknesses.

An interesting experience was listening to Prince's disc "Originals" with demos of songs written by the master for other artists. First of all, the tested SET differentiated them really well, because not all recordings adhere to the same high-quality standard of production (these are demos, after all). Secondly, it kept up with the fast, funky rhythms, making me tapping the rhythm involuntarily, or even rocking the whole thing. This is due to the clean, adequately fast presentation of the beats that set the pace and rhythm of most recordings, clean, fast drums or bass guitar. And thirdly, Prince's vocal abilities were (as it seems) almost endless, and Thivan Labs showed it very well, making me have a lot of fun listening to the whole album, although it's not really my atmosphere at all. Maybe beyond "



I closed the listening sessions of Thivan Labs 300B SET Anniversary as I played it, i.e. with acoustic recordings, focusing on my favorite instrument, i.e. the guitar.

Michael Hedges, Paco de Lucia, Raul Midon, Rodrigo y Gabriel and many other virtuosos played for me. Various musical genres, individual styles of playing, strictly acoustic recordings and supplemented with electricity, solo, in duets and whole bands. Each time, all these very different guitars sounded very real and tangible

above all. They sounded open, full of air, strings (nylon and metal) played, boxes (sometimes amplifiers) played, but most of all people were passionate, creative, masters in their trade, and the tested amplifier was able to approach each of them individually, adapt to the tempo and style of playing, to the sound of each instrument, to the atmosphere and mood of each recording. As befits a good tube, the tested amplifier not only took care of fast attack and sustain, but also long, full decay. Where it was needed, it showed the ability to convincingly present the acoustics of recordings and / or rooms in which they were made. It treated his concert realizations with particular reverence, creating in my room almost as hot atmosphere as must have prevailed during the recording.

With this type of amplifier, it is extremely easy to feel like a participant in such an event, instead of just a passive observer. This is an important aspect of the magic of the 300B, and Thivan Labs, despite its reasonable price, most certainly does not disappoint.

Summary

In the case of tube amplifiers, you can get the first impression of them before listening, when taking them in or unpacking them. There are few exceptions, but usually such a device simply has to weigh a lot, because a lot depends on the class of transformers. Thivan Labs with his 35 kg makes a great first impression already at this stage. Then it only gets better. It eagerly serves everything for which lovers of the 300B's sound love these tubes. So there is exceptional musicality, fluidity, smoothness, palpability and spaciousness of the sound, there are also contagious emotions, thanks to which it is impossible to listen to this amplifier indifferently. The excellent midrange is complemented by a clean, open, resonant treble, and colorful, reaching sufficiently low, well differentiated, even if not so tight in the bass. All this together creates an extremely friendly, coherent sound that encourages spending as much time as possible with music. This SET 300B offers a huge dose of magic from these unique triodes. It is worth listening and checking if this is what you have been looking for for a long time.