

QUATTRO STAGIONI

No, we didn't end up at an Italian restaurant, and we didn't order pizza either. Instead, we're at a Vietnamese restaurant that has something truly special to offer when it comes to hi-fi haute cuisine.







Here's a nice black version: two 300B tubes provide the high-gain amplification

The Thivan Labs Ultimate 300 is a preamplifier of a very special kind, because it actually handles something like all four seasons: It can handle high-level sources, MM cartridges, MC cartridges, and, last but not least, electro-optical DS Audio systems.

In general

As if that weren't special enough, this impressive two-part machine does all of this using tube technology. The icing on the cake: part of the amplification is handled by two classic 300B triodes, which, as is widely known, are arguably the most famous power tubes on the market and have been doing their glowing job since the 1930s. In hi-fi circles, these classics – originally designed to amplify telephone signals – are used in the vast majority of cases as power tubes to drive loudspeakers, and despite their modest power output of just a few watts, they send audiophiles all over the world into ecstasy.

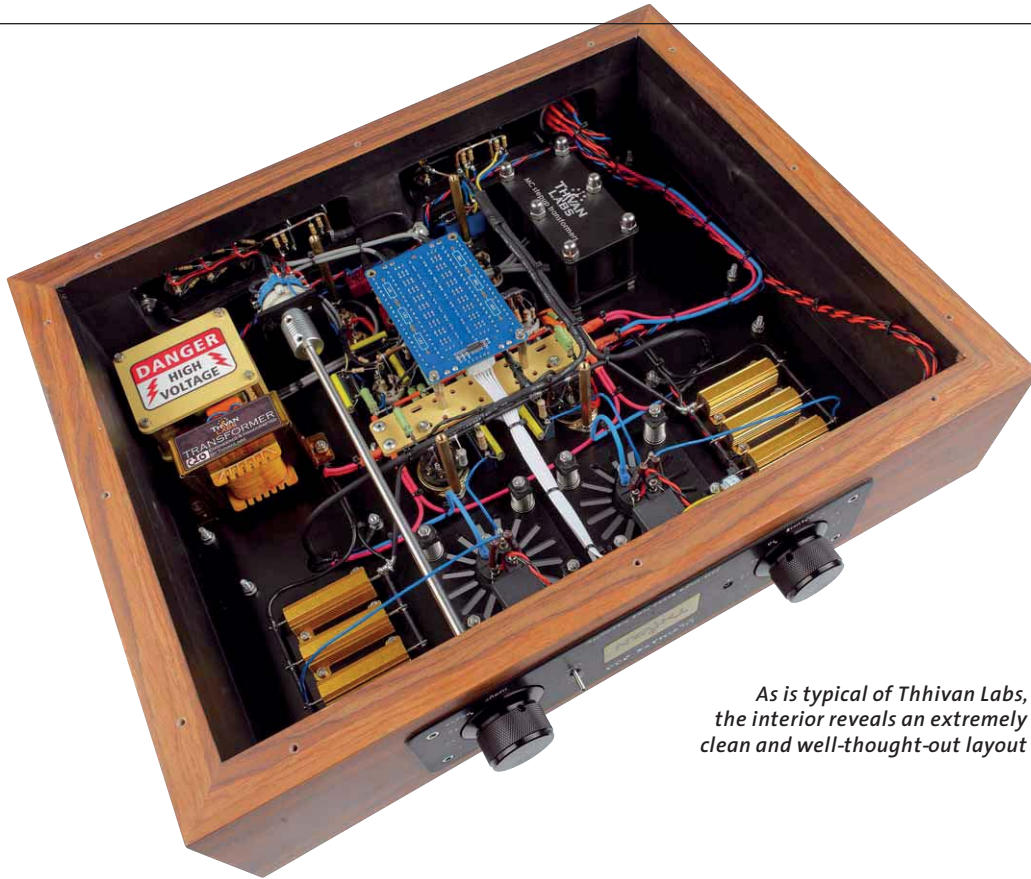
Here, however, the triode queen gets to take on a less demanding job and “merely” drive RCA and XLR outputs.

At first glance, the Ultimate 300 is instantly recognizable as a Thivan Labs device. The open design, in which tubes and transformers are prominently displayed atop the top panel, is just as much a hallmark of the manufacturer as the exotic wood-veneered frame that forms the base of the unit. Of course, such an elaborate device doesn't come cheap. In Germany, the unit would cost around 16,000 euros, if it were available here.

For that price, however, you get a true gem of an analog control center for ambitious hi-fi systems. I could very well imagine pairing it with the outrageous three-part integrated amplifier Sun 833-X, for example. Externally, we're dealing with an absolutely impressive design, and the weight alone suggests that no expense was spared here: the amplifier section weighs in at 20 kilograms, and the power supply at 24 kilograms.



Surprisingly, the solid-state amplifier section is the lighter of the two components in the Ultimate 300B



As is typical of Thivan Labs, the interior reveals an extremely clean and well-thought-out layout

Power Supply

Let's start with the power supply unit of the Ultimate 300B. Inside the unit, there are nine inductors – some transformers, some choke coils. Thivan Labs consistently relies on filtering all operating voltages with coils and capacitors, which is why there is also a significant collection of large-capacity ca-

pacitors. The whole unit is powered on via a rather unspectacular small toggle switch on the front panel – there are no other controls on the power supply.

The connection to the amplifier section is provided by a multi-pin cable equipped with large, high-quality connectors, which,

Teammates

Turntable:

- Thales Elegance / Simplicity II

Cartridge:

- Lyra Atlas Lambda
- DS Audio DS 003

Power amplifier:

- Yamaha P-2200

Speakers:

- JBL L300

Competitors

Phono preamplifier:

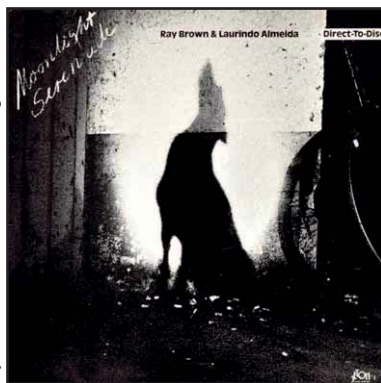
- DIY tube technology



This metal plate serves as a shield for the volume control



The MC transformers are also isolated from external influences



What we played

Ray Brown Laurindo Almeida
Moonlight Serenade

Ten Years After
Recorded Live

Archive
You all look the same to me

Chick Corea
Return To Forever



A total of nine inductors provide the operating voltages in the power supply

given their diameter, would also serve well as a fire hose. The lockable connectors, in particular, make a very high-quality impression. Reportedly, the cable is also available with angled connectors upon request, which should result in significantly less space required behind the devices.

Amplifier Section

The amplifier section is already a very impressive unit even without the external power supply and would pass as an ambitious integrated amplifier elsewhere. Not so at Thivan Labs: Here, two 300B tubes (our review sample features excellent PS Vane models) and two US 6SN7 dual-triode tubes are solely dedicated to boosting high-level

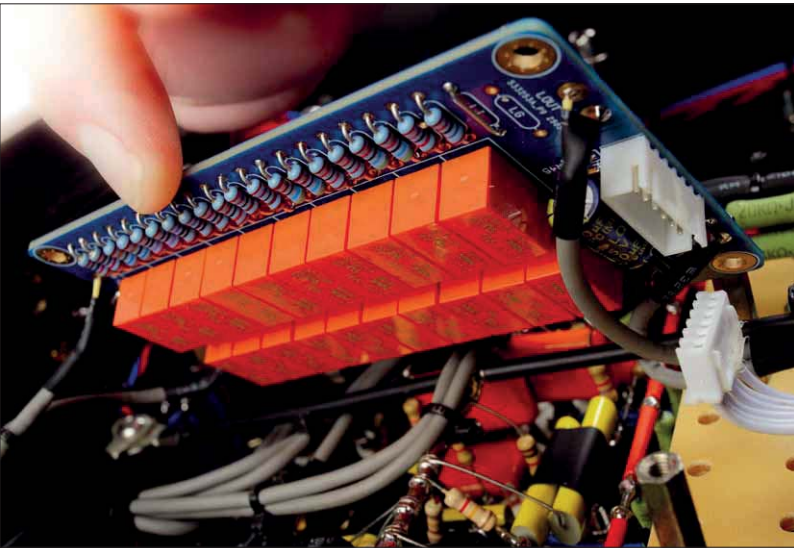
signals to drive a power amplifier. This can be connected via either RCA or XLR cables; the balanced outputs are – of course – generated using transformers. On the high-level input side, there are three RCA and one XLR input; the corresponding jacks are located on the rear panel. The fifth position of the input selector switch on the front right is simply labeled “Phono”; when selected, the connection panel located on the top rear of the unit comes into play. Here, as mentioned earlier, you can connect MM, MC, and DS Audio cartridges. All connections are unbalanced; the MC input features a rotary switch for input impedance. You can choose from 22, 47, 150, 220, and 470 ohms, which should work for the vast majority of cartridges. The somewhat unusual values can be explained by the fact that the MC preamplification is implemented using transformers. MM cartridges are terminated with the standard 47 k Ω ; for DS Audio optical cartridges, no adjustment is needed. The actual phono preamplification is handled by three dual-triode tubes of the 12AX7 and 12AU7 types. MM and MC cartridges are driven through the same amplifier stage, while optical cartridges are driven separately. What is missing: switchable high-pass filters, which have sometimes



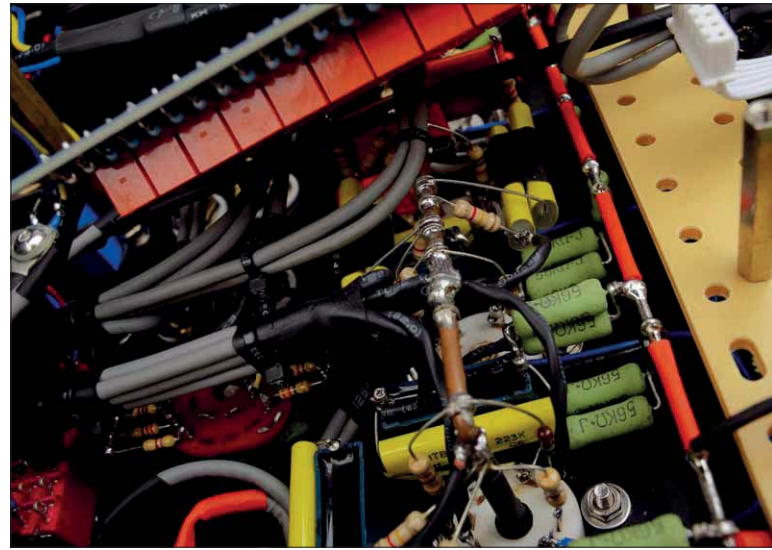
The Vietnamese take the power connector seriously. Here's an XLR plug for size comparison



The heavy-duty connection cable between the power supply and the amplifier is also available with angled plugs



A total of 20 relays are responsible for precise volume control



The professional build quality really shines through under the volume control board

proven useful with DS Audio cartridges that pick up signals down to DC voltage. However, there is a standard filter that does the job to full satisfaction.

The unit's volume control also deserves a mention: it operates using a number of relays, each of which switches appropriate fixed resistors into the signal path. This works well in principle, but isn't yet fully refined in every detail: particularly in the range of maximum attenuation, the level tends to jump slightly, and you can't turn the volume all the way down to mute. Certainly something that can be fixed with a software update. It would also be nice to have some kind of volume indicator; without it, given the extremely fine resolution of the volume control, you have no idea where on the scale you currently are. Remote control? It's included in the package. Naturally, it's a solid metal design.

Sound

The Ultimate 300B definitely has its own sonic signature, which is noticeable across all the different inputs. This is likely due to the fact that the exotic 300B high-current tubes are responsible for its sound.

Even when driving the unit via an external phono preamp, the powerful, sonorous upper bass range stands out, complemented by a bright, intense mid-high frequency reproduction. The Ultimate 300B clearly

does not try to hide its tube character, but proudly displays it – which I consider entirely appropriate for such an extreme piece of equipment.

In keeping with the exclusivity of the device, I immediately put the MC input to the test with an extreme cartridge: the Lyra Atlas Lambda. Also a very expressive component, the top-of-the-line MC felt right at home on the Ultimate 300B. Ray Brown and Laurindo Almeida played together with tremendous power and focus; their

Where there are coils, capacitors are never far behind: the power supply is also generously equipped with them

