



EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Pure Sound L300 Line-Stage Preamplifier

by Roy Gregory

How many really good line-stages are there? My personal list starts to run out at about the same time I exhaust the fingers on one hand – and most of those products are seriously expensive. Well, now there's a new addition to that list and, given the company it's keeping, I have to say that it's £5K price looks mighty attractive...

The Pure Sound L300 distinctive appearance, dimensions (210mm tall and fully 500mm deep!) and the 300B tube sticking through its top panel all set it apart from the crowd. And those differences are just the ones that you can see... Try on a transformer-coupled output stage, no fewer than ten tubes and no remote control for size. But there's a powerful logic at work here – one that ticks many of the 'what makes a good preamp' boxes. The circuit is essentially built around two, direct couple gain stages, the second one feeding an output transformer, a topology that delivers plenty of gain*, both single-ended and balanced outputs and a very low output impedance (without resorting to negative feedback) making it largely impervious to cable length and insensitive to the input impedance of the matching power amp. Source selection is located directly behind the inputs in order to keep the signal path as short as physically possible, while the entire circuit is hard wired: So far so very good.

Someone who knows an awful lot about the subject once told me that the output transformers are 80% of a valve power amp, while the volume control is 80% of any preamp. While using the best volume control in the world won't guarantee preamp greatness, a poor one pretty much guarantees failure. Pure Sound designer Guy Sergeant eschews the fashionable conventional stepped attenuator or passive control, for reasons clear, cogent, and on his web-site. Perhaps more surprisingly, given the L300's chosen output topology, he also shies away from the notion of a tapped transformer volume control, but again, the clearly laid out reasoning is hard to fault. Instead, he employs a simple precision film attenuator, favouring the infinite adjustment it provides, consistent sound quality and the absence of those issues associated with motorised controls or banks of remotely operated relays. It's hard to argue with the results and as I feel remotes cause sonic havoc, their absence is entirely positive.

* In fact there is sufficient gain available from the L300 that those with high-gain power amps, CD players with excessive output levels or very efficient speakers would be well advised to check its use in their own system context. It shouldn't be a problem, but it's worth making sure...

Of course, as with any preamp, the other key factor will be the power-supply and once again, the Pure Sound doesn't disappoint, with a heavily choke smoothed, valve rectified and 300B regulated topology that occupies most of the chassis space. There's a gas voltage reference tube to ensure absolute stability of the HT supply, and the filament supplies are also fully regulated to keep the noise levels low.

On a practical level, you get five single-ended inputs, two pairs of single-ended outputs and two pairs of balanced outputs (selected via a rear panel toggle switch). Sockets are of excellent quality and power arrives via a standard 13 Amp IEC. There's a front panel on/off switch, source select and the centrally mounted volume control. Construction is first class, with a substantial internal deck separating the tubes and transformers from the other components and eliminating any danger of flex in what is a very large chassis. The heavily shaped front-panel certainly makes a statement; it fitted right in with the dCS Pagannini and the arrival of matching power amps will do no harm. I was pleased to find the chassis equipped with four shallow, conical aluminium feet, a set up that meets my criteria for both mechanical coupling and material consistency. When it comes to accommodation, you'll need to make sure that you've got sufficient height and depth to house the L300 without excessive front or rear overhang, and you can get additional focus, transparency and dynamic range with superior, aftermarket couplers like the Stillpoints or Symposium RollerBlocks, both working well.

As soon as I heard the L300 in anger I was reminded of the first, jaw dropping time I was exposed to the Audio Research SP10 preamp – and believe me when I say that in audio terms, that was definitely one of my formative experiences. What the two-box ARC delivered was a sense of sheer power and presence, coupled to a majestic musical authority. No matter how big the drum, how big the orchestra, you just knew the preamp was going to deliver the full, unvarnished wallop and scale, right there, right then and without any strain whatsoever! It might not have been the ultimate in resolution or detail, but this was a preamp that could make you fear for your speakers.

The L300 has that same power, presence and stability, an unstoppable momentum that literally seems to drive the musical energy and performance physically into the room. You'll never want for drama listening to a system

with the Pure Sound in the chain. But the similarities run deeper than that. After all, what was the standard high-end solution all those years ago? A tube preamp in combination with a solid-state power amp. There's nothing like learning the same old lessons over again, this time with the L300 singing through the Gamut M250 monos, the Hovland RADIA and the Primare A33.2 power amps!

As well as the amps mentioned above, the L300 saw action with the Berning Quadrature Zs (which almost count as solid-state, sonically at least) the Citation Sound 2 monos (push-pull 6550s) and my recently refurbished Jadis JA30s. Front-ends included various Wadias, the three-box dCS, VPI Classic and Kuzma Stabi XL4. Speakers included the Gamut and Avalon Time models recently reviewed, as well as the new Focal Stella Utopia EM (one down from the Grande, with a smaller EM bass unit and no tilting mechanism). That's some pretty demanding company and the Pure Sound was never less than comfortable, simply slotting in and getting on with the job, a sure indicator of both its class and its utterly unflappable versatility. Electrically speaking, matching is not going to be an issue with the L300. However, sonically it's another matter and this unit has character to match its power and presence.

A recent, pleasant discovery has been the range of Philharmonia concert recordings on Signum Classics. Nice to have ▶



▶ recordings of your 'home' orchestra in familiar venues, but nicer still when they really capture the sense of performance that escapes so many, technically hamstrung modern classical recordings. It's a quality that the L300 fastens on and pushes well to the fore by preserving precisely the chemistry between conductor and orchestra that shapes the performance, mapping the demands for musical energy that Davis places on his players and then delivering them in full measure; no sparing the horses here! The sense of musical substance and orchestral sweep is palpable. The pulsing phrases of the woodwinds contrast beautifully with the pizzicato playing of the strings, the whole vignette driven to its triumphant conclusion by the power of the brass and percussion.

It would be easy to conclude from the description above that this is a typically rich and powerful sounding valve line-stage, but one that pays for that power with a lack of agility and dynamic finesse, weighed down by extra colour and harmonic padding. But in practice, nothing could be further from the truth, although personally I'd hesitate to mate the L300 with the warm and wooly sound that typifies so many triode coupled power amps; not so much a case of too much of a good thing, more hiding its light under a bushel, masking how responsive the Pure Sound is to shifts in tempo and musical density.

It's this way that the Pure Sound has of effortlessly mirroring the energy distribution, the musical flow and instrumental density of a performance that makes it so engaging and enjoyable to listen to. In this regard (and in my experience) it lies second only to the Lyra Connoisseur, a product that betters the L300 for harmonic and textural resolution and dynamic discrimination but can't match its sheer power and the absolute, rock solidity of its bottom end –

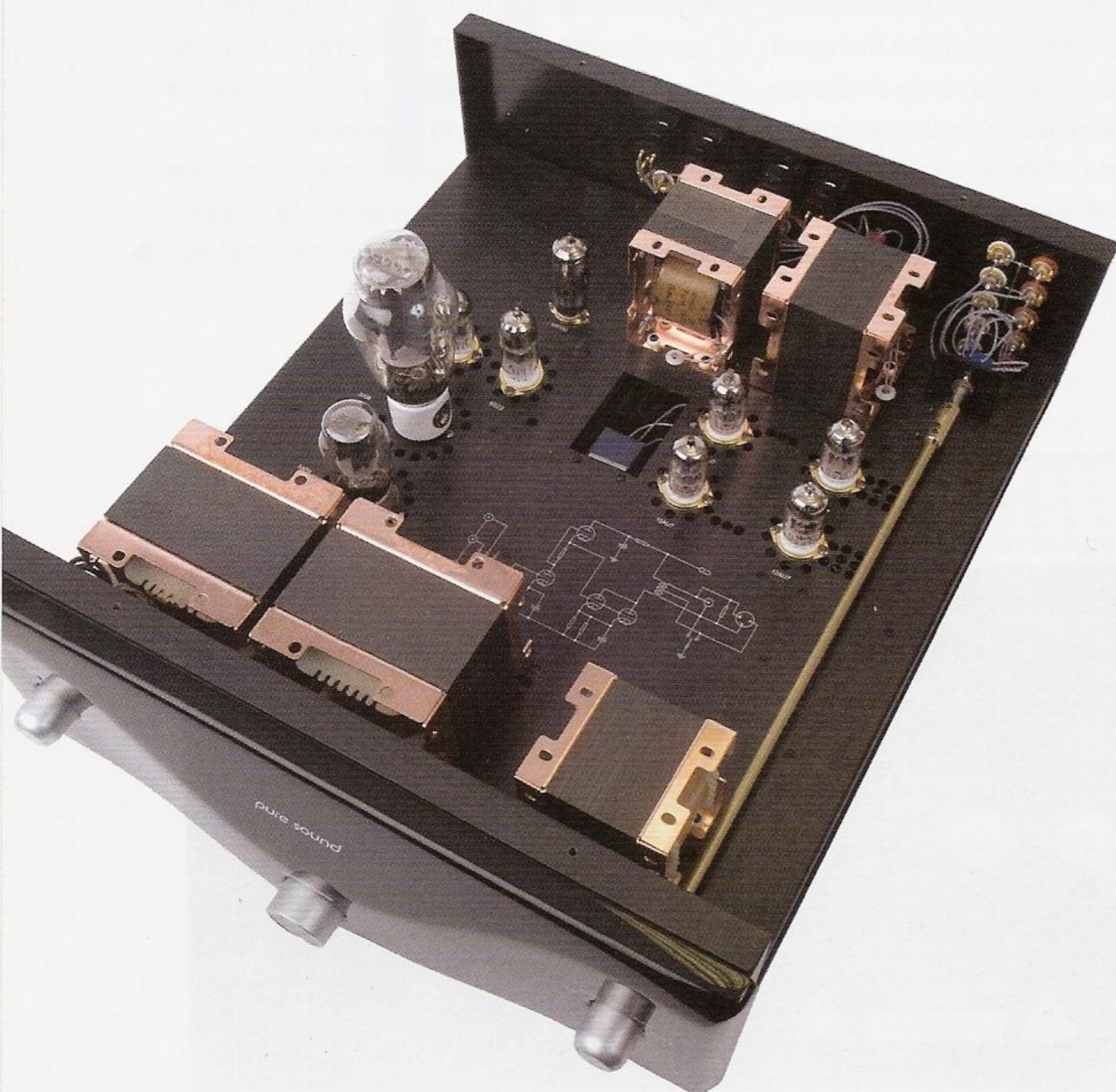
all the while costing you well over three times the price for the pleasure! Just listen to the Philharmonia's percussion on the *Enigma* – or even better, the storming *Serenade For Strings* that shares the disc – and you'll hear exactly what I mean. Real drums in real space have a complexity and independence, a carry that allows them to provide a solid footing beneath even the most frenetic orchestral crescendo. The L300 captures that quality perfectly, not just letting you hear the drums, but giving you a new level of insight into their tuning and the subtleties that go into their playing.

“The real virtue of the L300 lies in the breadth of material and recording quality it so enthusiastically embraces.”

And it's not just great recordings and performances that benefit. In fact, the real virtue of the L300 lies in the breadth of material and recording quality it so enthusiastically embraces. If there's a performance in there, you can be sure that this line-stage will dig it out. So whether you are talking the recent spate of 'live from the desk' concert discs that have emerged from the vaults of everyone from Neil Young to Elvis Costello, or just the kind of murky, impenetrable digital morass that characterizes so much mid-'80s pop, the Pure Sound line-stage does an uncannily effective job of sorting the musical wheat from the recorded chaff, elevating the bits you want above the mess that obscures.

The longer I listened to the L300, the more fascinated I became with the question of just why it works so well. What makes it so remarkably effective when so many far more costly designs fail? The answer is that we have become so obsessed with resolution, detail and definition that we are sacrificing other, musically more significant virtues to achieve those goals. Yes, the harmonic resolution and instrumental texture I referred to earlier is important, but it's also the surface that rests on an underlying structure.

Just like a CD player, all the microdynamic detail and texture in the world is no use if it's not positioned correctly in space and time. In this respect, the Pure Sound gets its priorities spot on too. But there's more to its success than just good bones.





sound too, but therein lies its appeal. When so much of this industry is charging down a high-resolution, flat frequency response blind-alley, a step back onto the musical straight and narrow is no bad thing. In reality, the Pure Sound simply presents a different set of musical priorities, the demands of hi-fi fashion subordinated to the musical demands of structure and the artistic demands of the performers. On first listen, the L300 might come as of a shock, but you might rediscover what got you into hi-fi in the first place.

I have no hesitation in elevating the L300 to the most select list in hi-fi – the list of musically great line-stages. It's not perfect, and those line-stages that surpass it offer greater resolution, harmonic texture and dynamic discrimination – at a price. But put the Pure Sound L300 in your system, and just like those few other units that make that list, you'll be taking a significant step towards listening to more music and less hi-fi. Listen and enjoy – it's hard not too! +

► The L300 allows recordings to retain their own character. Each disc sounds different from the one before, your system is subordinate to the recording rather than the other way round – and that's exactly how it should be. Scale, tonality, the character of the acoustic, the deft touch of the producer or the heavy hand at the mixing desk, each is equally apparent. Where so many modern line-stages impose their own character on proceedings, the Pure Sound lives up to its name, with each disc sounding just like itself. Why? Because the L300's flaws are entirely subtractive in nature, rather than additive; it presents the musical ingredients naked, where so many units season everything with too much spice, and the same spice all the time.

The question is, how much subtraction is acceptable? Once again, that depends on fashion and our current tastes and obsessions distort our view. The hoary old debate about stereo, focus and resolution needs to be had in another place, but since the arrival of the L300 I've been paying far more attention to the way an orchestra actually presents in a live acoustic and I've come to the conclusion that seating position and repertoire can introduce a bigger variation than you'll hear between the Pure Sound and Connoisseur line-stages. In the Festival Hall where I hear much of my live orchestral music I favour row F: row D is noticeably more detailed and immediate, but lacks overall orchestral coherence, while row J is already well towards a classic mid-hall balance, long on warmth and holistic qualities, but with far less separation of individual instruments and less dynamic impact. At ROH there's no substitute for the front two rows, but that's very different repertoire, while preferences at the RFH also shift according to the programme, Concerto as opposed to Symphony, Mozart as opposed to Shostokovich, violin as opposed to piano. But in all of this it's interesting to note one thing; of the various seats I have discussed, row D are both the cheapest and the ones that most resemble the sound of current, high definition hi-fi.

The Pure Sound L300 is old fashioned in both its choice of tubes and the way it chooses to use them. You could argue that it's old fashioned in its

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Transformer-coupled valve line-stage

Valve Complement:

Audio Circuit

4 x 12AU7 (ecc82)

Regulated Power Supply

1 x 5AR4 rectifier

1 x 300B

2 x 12AU7 (ecc82)

1 x 6922 (ecc88)

1 x VR150

Inputs: 5x single-ended line-level RCA/phono

Input Impedance: 100k ohms

Outputs: 2x single-ended RCA/phono
2x balanced XLR

Output Impedance: less than 20 ohms

Dimensions (WxHxD): 42x22x53cm

Weight: 20 kg

Price: £4,795

Manufacturer: Pure Sound

Tel: +44(0)1822 612449

Web: www.puresound.info