

Leben CS300XS

integrated amplifier

Chris Frankland

The retro trend is everywhere these days. It pervades every consumer product from bathrooms and cars to light bulbs. No reason to assume, then, that hi-fi should escape this treatment and this integrated valve amplifier from Japanese manufacturer Leben is no exception.

The CS300XS screams retro from every orifice, from its very attractive gold anodised front and rear panels to its large knobs and beautiful Canadian ash end panels – a hard-wearing wood that is used, they tell us, to make baseball bats. Even the on/off switch and the selector toggle switch for headphones and tape monitor have an unashamedly retro look and feel.

Leben's founder is a chap called Taku Hyodo, who is a highly experienced audio engineer who has worked for the likes of Luxman and went on to form a company that produced electronic components and PCBs in 1979. He

then branched out to manufacture amplifiers under the KFH brand for PA use.

His first model under the Leben brand was the RSA-35a power amp (with 6L6GS valves) in 1995. With a growing following in Japan, Hyodo started to produce lower-cost amps, starting with the CS200 – the first in the line that includes the CS300XS reviewed here, the CD300F that our editor reviewed back in August 2021, and the more expensive CS600X, which sells for £7,995, offers 32W and uses four 6L6GC power tubes.

Beautifully put together

The CS300XS is beautifully put together and has a ruggedness that encourages one to think it is built to last. On the front panel are three large, chunky selector switches that select the input, adjust channel balance and, on the far right, provide a bass boost of +3dB or +5dB. I have to admit I never once felt any need to use that. Then there is

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» a large rotary volume knob, while toggle switches turn the amp on and off, select headphones or speakers and tape monitor. Tape monitor is unusual to find these days, and while the rebirth of cassette may be a hipster flash in the pan, there is a serious revival under way of reel to reel and so this would be music to their ears.

On the rear panel there are five RCA line level inputs, a ground terminal, four chunky WBT speaker terminals and a rotary selector to select the right tapping from the output transformers of either 4Ω, 6Ω or 8Ω, depending on the nominal impedance of your chosen loudspeakers.

Internally, all wiring is point-to-point with no PCBs. The valves sit in smart gold-plated holders and in addition to the large mains transformer there are two newly-developed, custom-made Leben output transformers designed for an extended high frequency response.

Two EL84 pentode power tubes are used in push-pull configuration with one ECC83 driver per channel. EL84s are found in many designs today and were originally developed by the Philips/Mullard Group specifically for audio use. The amp uses a self-biasing circuit that will accept new tubes without the need to rebias and which adjusts to any

variations in the tubes themselves. Leben says they also use precision industrial grade resistors, Nichicon Fine Gold condensers and a 4W high-power cathode resistor.

I have been using valve amps for some time now and will confess to a leaning in that direction, although let's not forget there are some mighty fine solid state amps around these days too. You'd be mistaken though if you were expecting today's modern tube amps to sound warm and cuddly. They may have great musicality, but they can still be detailed and dynamic – just listen to the Audio Note OTO or Cobra or the Rogers ES20a II.

Running in... I'll pass!

Luckily, the importers assured me that no lengthy running in would be necessary with the review sample, and so I gave it the customary half-hour to warm up before settling back for each listening session. Obviously, with just 15W to play with, you will need to choose your speakers carefully, depending on their sensitivity, the size of your listening room and how loud you like to listen. If hard rock played at full tilt is your bag, avoid inefficient speakers. There are speakers around that offer good sound and high sensitivity – consider

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» models like the Klipsch 8000F II or Forte IV with sensitivities of around 99dB, the Audio Note AN-J at 93dB or various models from Heco (around 93dB) and JBL (L100 Classic is 90dB). I would suggest that if you find a speaker to your taste with a sensitivity of around 90dB or more, you will enjoy even high levels in a normal room without problems.

I used the CS300X with both the Audio Note AN-J LX Hemp and Klipsch RP8000F II and it drove both perfectly. I also at the end of my listening hooked it up to a pair of Neat Petite Classic, which have a sensitivity rating of 87dB, and they were fine too, but I do not think high levels in a larger room than mine (19ft x 13ft) would have been ideal.

As a source, I used an Audio Note CDT-Five transport and DAC5 special to assess what the Leben could do, as well as vinyl from an Audio Note TT3/Arm2/lo1 and S9 transformer through the very nice Puresound valve phono stage, as the Leben, for all of its retro credentials, does not come with a phono stage built-in.

No confusion

First track on the TT3's platter was 'A Place for Skipper' from ace guitarist Larry Carlton's *Discovery* album. The whole balance and presentation of the Leben was immediately pleasing. No harshness, no muddiness or confusion. Carlton's guitar had a beautifully crisp sound and the detail of how each note was played was well presented, teaming up with drums, bass and percussion to form a cohesive whole that made sense of the music. Bass lines were weighty, tuneful and moved well. I had a very good similarly priced solid transistor to hand that I also like a lot, but while it was detailed and coherent, the overall sound was somehow colder and less engaging. Instruments on the Leben had a depth and sense of solidity, fullness and presence that simple made them seem more real.

Spinning up Ben Sidran's CD 'Shine a Light on Me' from the *Enivré d'Amour* album, the Leben was immediately in the groove and it was great to hear how the track moved and the musicians played together to create a musical performance that was just so tight – as top session guys such as these always are. Sidran's vocals were full of emotion and had great warmth and articulation. Rhythmically, the Leben had a grip of iron on the music, allowing a fluidity and sense of movement that were immensely pleasing and compelling.

Still on CD, I tried the track 'Honey Dipped' from the *Saxophonic* album by one of my favourite sax players, Dave Koz. Straight off, the Leben captured the funky, driving

rhythms of the track and conveyed Koz's sax with power, detail and delicacy all at the same time. The track moved along beautifully on the Leben, and switching back to the solid-state amp just seemed to remove some of that cohesiveness and magic that usually brings a smile to my face and gets my foot tapping along.

Up until now I had been listening to the Audio AN-J, so I quickly swapped to the Klipsch RP8000F II I reviewed recently (**hi-fi+** 216). They got on like a house on fire – dynamic, lively, detailed, melodic, and musically coherent. No nasties. They just worked and made a combination I would wholeheartedly recommend.

I also had no trouble using the Neat Petite Classics (sensitivity 87dB) with the CS300X. It drove them loud enough for me in my listening room and was a good partner for the very musical and well balanced Neats. Listening at sensible levels – after all, I do have neighbours! – I could detect no signs of harshness or grittiness that might suggest the amp was clipping.

On balance, the Leben CS300XS turned in an admirable performance and joins my growing list of recommended valve amps. But what does set it apart is its price. It's great value with a sound quality that betters many more highly priced solid state amps. And if you combine them with the Klipsch RP8000F II, you have the makings of an exceptionally good system without breaking the bank. +

Technical specifications

Type Two channel valve integrated amplifier
Valves 4 x Sovtek EL84, 2 x Sovtek ECC83
Inputs 5 x RCA Outputs 1 tape out, 1 x headphone jack
6.35mm, 1 x speaker
Power output 2 x 15W
Distortion 0.7% @ 10W
Input sensitivity 600mV
Input impedance 100kΩ
Dimensions (H×W×D) 140mm × 360mm × 270mm
Weight 10.5kg
Price £3,950

Manufacturer Leben Hi-Fi Stereo Company
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