



Single issue

Icon Audio's new MB30SE monoblock offer the magic of single-ended triode sound without many of the drawbacks. Jon Myles is seduced.

Single-ended Class A triode amplifiers seem to divide hi-fi enthusiasts more than any other piece of equipment.

To some, they simply make the most satisfying, effortlessly natural music out there. To others they are hopelessly archaic museum pieces whose loose bass and low power ratings render them just too compromised for effective everyday use.

As ever, though, the case is not nearly as black-and-white. Proving

this is the new Icon Audio MB30SE monoblock power amplifiers.

Retailing at a (relatively) wallet-friendly £1,799.95, designer and Icon Audio founder David Shaw claims the MB30s afford all the advantages of 100% Class A single-ended triode output, without the drawbacks of flabby bass, hum and low power that other designs suffer.

Hence the choice of the new Super Tung Sol KT120 as the main output valve. This gives considerably more power than expensive triodes like the 300B; the MB30s can deliver

16 Watts in triode mode and a heady 27 Watts ultralinear. The KT120 is not expensive, so replacement costs when they finally do give up the ghost are reasonable – around £30 each.

The output transformer is Icon Audio's own Low Distortion Tertiary design with taps for 4 Ohm and 8 Ohm speakers.

Input sensitivity can be set on a toggle switch on the rear of the unit – giving the choice of low feedback (low sensitivity) or none at all (high sensitivity).

Custom-wound choke regulation is employed in the power supply and valve regulation comes courtesy of GZ35/5AR4 tubes. The audio preamp and driver stages use 6SN7/CV181 valves.

To complete the package the units are point-to-point hand-wired throughout with PTFE insulated silver-plated pure copper cable and all input and output terminals are gold-plated.

In common with the company's other products the MB30s are manufactured in Icon Audio's own factory in China before being shipped to its Leicester base for final assembly, adjustment and testing.

Decidedly utilitarian in design, the monoblocks are never-the-less sturdily built and purposeful-looking once installed.

Set-up is also simplicity itself via the handy bias meter on the front of

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the unit. Simply turn the small screw situated on the chassis behind the KT120 tube and once the needle hits the grey area you are good to go.

In use the meter can also be switched to provide a handy indication of output power – useful if you want to know whether you're in danger of running out of grunt.

SOUND QUALITY

I've heard many SET amplifiers over the years – some good, some not so good. These Icon Audios are firmly in the former category. In fact, play them to someone blindfolded and they might struggle to identify them as single-ended triodes at all. Not that they don't exhibit any of

the characteristics of the breed – just that they manage to dial out many of the pitfalls at the same time.

For one thing, they give an absolutely luscious rendition of tonal colour, best in Triode mode, yet never once stray into the sort of syrupy soft-focus that can rob the music of leading-edge detail. Yes, there's a warmth there but not the sort that concentrates the ear on the midband at the expense of everything else.

And then there's the bass – so often the downfall of SET amplifiers. OK, you are not going to mistake the MB30SEs for a 100 Watt solid state design – but you might well be surprised at just how much drive, control and depth they exhibit when hooked up to moderately efficient

loudspeakers, with sensitivity at Low as recommended by Icon Audio. Using High weakens bass slightly. Driving a pair of Spendor SPI00Rs (new Mk2 version) the Icon Audios managed to keep the lower registers both taut and tenuous. Although the Spendors are big speakers capable of producing prodigious levels of bass, the MB30s kept them under exemplary control.

Paul Simonon's trademark bass from the start of The Clash's 'London Calling' wasn't just a background thump – but the distinctive ascending/descending thrum that underpins the song's dynamic. And when Joe Strummer's voice comes in there is something so natural and unmistakably right about the sound that whatever your previous opinions of lowish-powered valve amplifiers you'll instantly forget them.

A slice of King Tubby's 'Dub Fever' collection underlined the MB30s' bass attributes. Admittedly, they don't plumb the depths of more powerful designs (whether valve or transistor) but they do have a wonderfully rich, tonally accurate lower register to them. And, let's be honest, anyone seeking a diet of thumping dance tunes at foundation-shaking levels isn't going to be



considering a pair of 16 Watt SET monoblocks in the first place.

Interestingly, moving between the 4 and 8 Ohm taps with the big Spendors revealed a definite preference for the latter. The sound a shade softer and less focused with the 4 Ohm output.

Moving to more traditional valve amplifier fare and the Icon Audios continued to shine. In fact, I could have sworn they were built especially to play Dave Brubeck's 'Time Out' so fresh did this classic sound. That famous Class A liquidity served to emphasise the swing and intricate piano work of 'Blue Rondo A La Turk' – giving a new insight in the dynamic shadings and interplay of the group. Not surprisingly, these traits surfaced time and again on acoustic jazz and well-recorded vocals where the MB30SEs really shone. The moment Jacques Brel catches his breath on 'Ne Me Quitte Pas' is enough to set anyone's spine tingling when heard with the resonance the Icon Audios manage to convey.

It's not all perfect. Where the MB30s can fall down at times is in their reproduction of big orchestral climaxes. Not that they do anything wrong – but you don't get the same sense of size and scale that more powerful equipment can convey. Try as they might, with Vasily Patrenko's rendition of Shostakovich's 11th Symphony the Icon Audios couldn't quite manage to deliver the power and majesty of the first opening crescendo.

The MB30s won't give you the rhythmic drive and propulsion of, say, a similarly-priced Naim amplifier but they do have a thoroughly liquid, deeply lifelike sound that conveys



music with a sense of flow and realistic timbre, without hint of electronic grain.

Switching between Ultra-Linear and Triode mode, I developed a definite preference for the latter lower-powered alternative. There wasn't a great deal in it – but Triode operation exhibited a smoother, more mellifluous sound while Ultra-Linear seemed to add an extra edge to the music. There may be times when that edge and greater power are actually a benefit so it's nice to have the choice.

As for the sensitivity setting, Icon Audio recommend low as the default

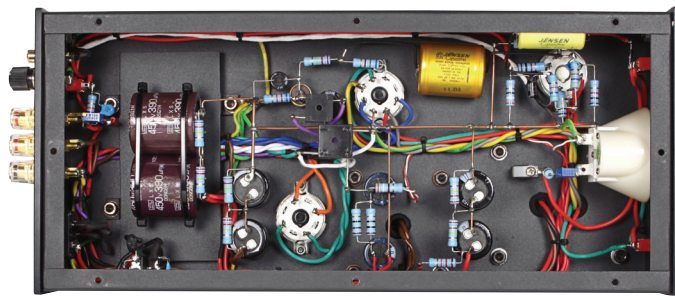


and I found this gave a better, fuller bass with the Spondors, especially in Triode mode. Switching to the high setting seemed to give a drop-off in low frequency definition and a slight blurring of the sound. This will be loudspeaker-dependent and, to a certain extent, depend on individual taste. But, again, the options are there to explore.

CONCLUSION

The Icon Audio MB30SEs offer the joys of single-ended Class A triode valve amplification without the well-known pitfalls. The new Super Tung Sol KT120 delivers realistic power mixed with a beguiling sound. You are still going to need a pair of relatively efficient loudspeakers to get the best out of the MB30s but once you do then you are greeted with a sound that is both wonderfully organic as well as richly detailed.

There's no doubt they offer remarkable value for money. Even if you've never considered a valve amplifier before, I'd recommend a listen. They might just change your mind.

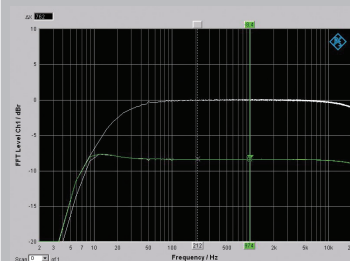


MEASURED PERFORMANCE

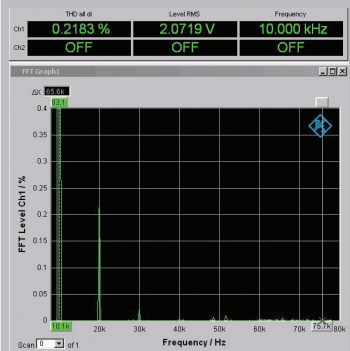
In Ultra-Linear mode the Icon Audio MB30 produced 20 Watts; in Triode mode it produced 12 Watts. Why use Triode mode? Because it is favoured for good sound quality and, in keeping with this, the MB30 produced almost exclusively innocuous second harmonic distortion in Triode mode. Switching to Ultra Linear increased third harmonic and higher orders, which will sharpen the sound just slightly. To confuse matters, total distortion stayed roughly the same between the two modes, only its harmonic structure changed, as well as its lack of change with level, meaning Triode mode has smoother transfer characteristic. Sonic differences will not be great, but Triode mode was well implemented in the MB30 and is likely to sound best, staying within the available power envelope.

Complicating matters is a 'Sensitivity' switch on the rear panel. This switches feedback, not an attenuator, so it affects results in each mode, distortion being a little lower in L (Low) sensitivity mode, meaning high feedback. In L sensitivity measured 0.8V for full output, a normal enough result

FREQUENCY RESPONSE



IMPEDANCE



and sufficient to allow the amp to need no preamp with silver disc players (2V output). Switching sensitivity to H (High), decreases feedback, increases gain to give 0.3V sensitivity, high enough to work with low gain phono stages.

However, changing feedback also changes frequency response and output impedance, meaning damping factor. The MB30 gave widest frequency response and highest loudspeaker damping in the L setting where feedback is highest, but interestingly low frequency time constants are such as to produce slight bass peaking of +1dB at 12Hz, our response analysis shows with a subsonic roll off below that frequency, lessening core saturation by reducing lows. Switching feedback out (H) reveals the open loop response, bass rolling off below 50Hz, so this setting will give lighter bass. Putting less bass into a loudspeaker may usefully counterbalance the drop in bass damping H also produces, damping factor measuring 1.8 (4.4 Ohms Z) against 4.6 (1.7 Ohms Z) with feedback on (L).

As a side note to all this, switching feedback out also lessens modulation of the distortion pattern and this may be why it is commonly preferred to feedback on. However, Icon Audio recommend L by default as it gives the sort of controlled sound most people are used to; it also best controls loudspeakers, which are designed for high DF transistor amps. Zero feedback can give boomy bass, depending upon the loudspeaker's acoustic damping.

In all then, the MB30 offers a good 20 Watts of power in Ultra Linear mode, and likely strong bass with Low sensitivity selected (default modes). In can be switched to Triode and low feedback for a more purist approach if desired. It measured well and should deliver fine sound quality. NK

Power	20watts
Frequency response	7Hz-22kHz
Noise	-113dB
Distortion	0.2%
Sensitivity	800mV
Damping factor	0.8

ICON AUDIO MB30SE
£1,799.95 PER PAIR



VERDICT

A gorgeous, liquid valve sound with sufficient power to drive real-world loudspeakers.

FOR

- smooth Class A sound
- triode or ultralinear operation
- economical valve replacement cost

AGAINST

- need relatively efficient loudspeakers
- not the last word in bass extension

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