



COLOTUBE AMPLIFIER 300B monos

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN



SWITZERLAND



colotube

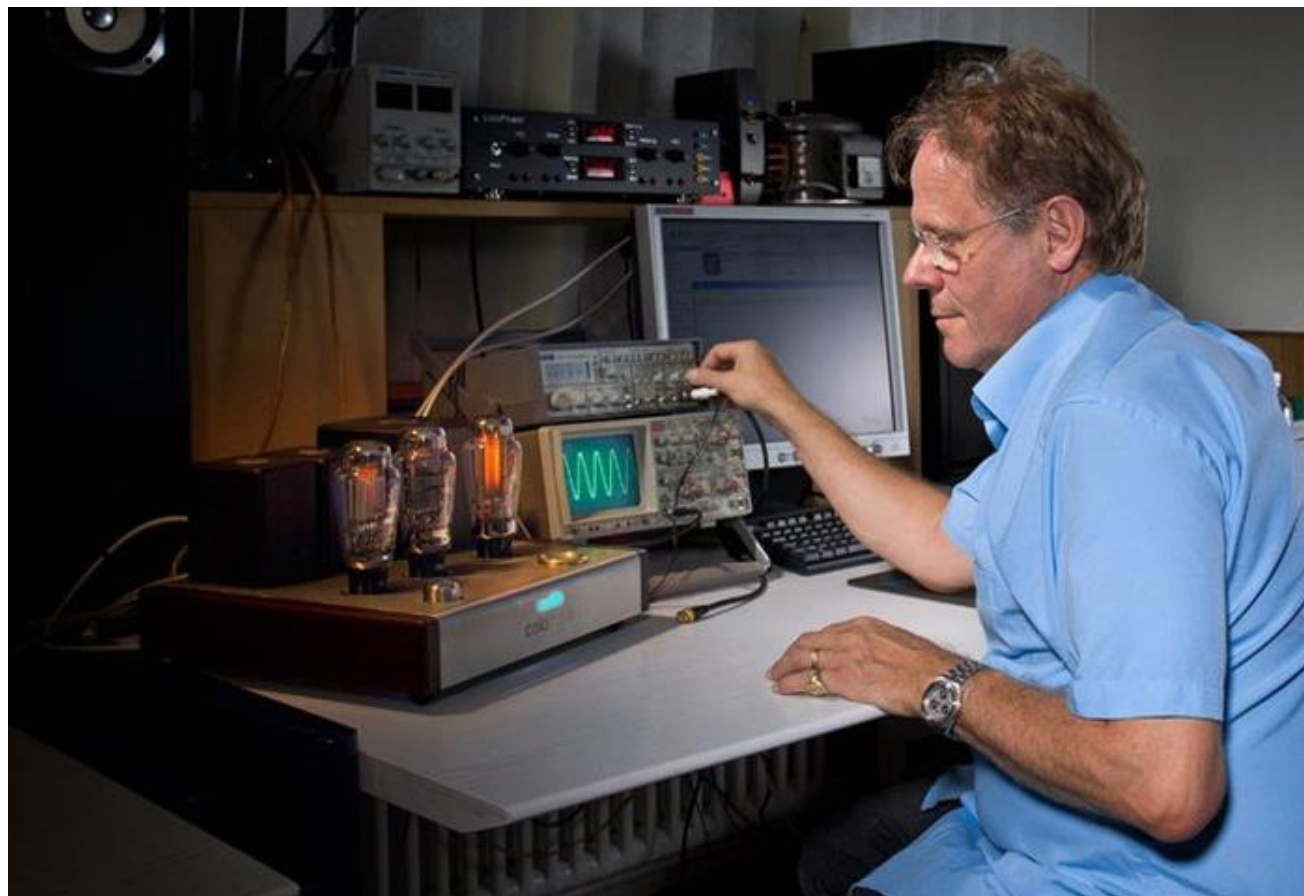
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Colombo. Gino Colombo. His expensive 10-watt Colotube 300B mono amps won't shake but stir. Like Kang Su Park's Allnic Audio Labs 5000-Series 300B prototype monos which I briefly listened to 18 months ago before they were recalled—those used an HL2 driving a 3A109A driving a fixed-bias 300B with a Zenith 5U4G rectifier—the signal path here only sees direct-heated triodes



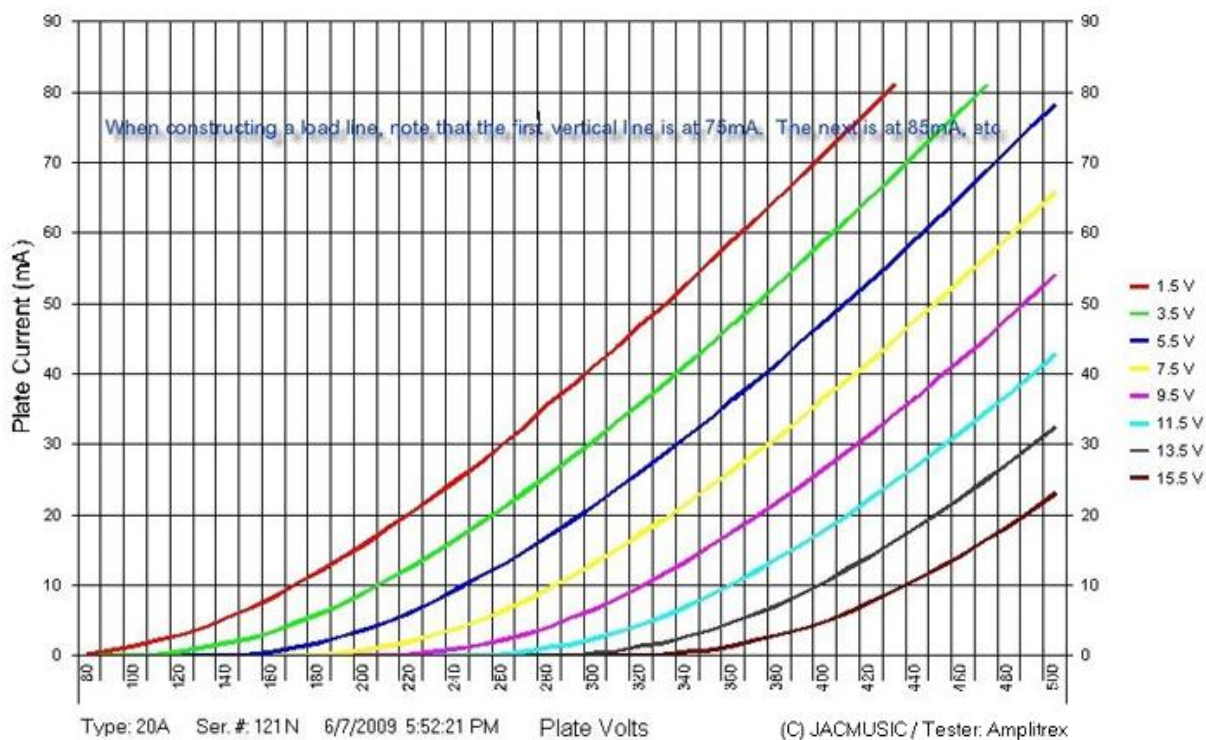
The Swiss monos simply manage with one less voltage gain stage than the Koreans did. That's because of the choke-loaded true mesh-plate 20A*. It offers a colossal 21 x amplification factor (the related 30A goes to a staggering x 32). This bulbous and tall DHT drives the single 300B with a 5U4G handling AC rectification. Voilà, just three bottles on deck and from one lone but contemporary supplier at that. Gino's choice of Emission Labs plus classy bias meter, superb Teflon sockets and precision attenuator sourced from Yamamoto SoundCraft might suggest that Yamamoto's Shigeki-San—he imports EML to Japan—was somewhat of an inspiration.



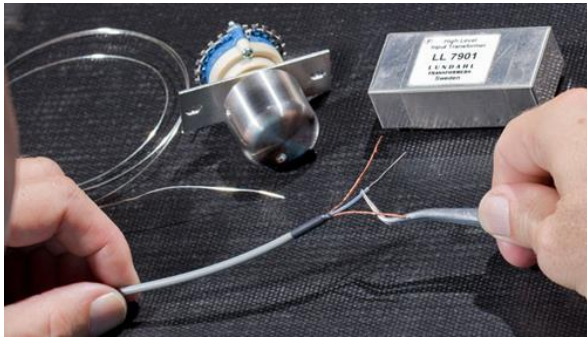
Gino admits it with a grin. He'd simply add Sakuma-San. As to why Emission Labs, "I wanted the very best of current production tubes. Nothing beats these modern Czechs from Jac van der Walle."



"The 20A, 20B and 30A tubes are based on a very old principle where high gain tubes had much wider plate distances. This is still the ultimate way to make a very linear DHT high-gain tube. Miniaturization has always been the enemy of tube linearity especially with DHTs. The 20A/20B/ 30A will outdo any small size tube. However these larger tubes require higher operating voltages. That's why after 1935 when miniaturization became more important this type of valve stopped being made. With our new production tubes, miniaturization is no requirement. For high gain we can now focus on lowest possible distortion and build these valves again the original way - with wide plates. Measured small-signal distortion is below 0.08% at 10V out and with a 400V plate voltage. When one DHT tube drives another, some part of the uneven distortion of the second tube will be eliminated by the first. This harmonic cancellation occurs only with triodes and they must be similar triodes like a 300B driven by one of the tubes from this series."



Quality Colotube ingredients continue with massive copper-lined Wenge hardwood cheeks, laser-cut mirror-imaged stainless steel casings, refinements to the 26-position Inox volume control by Swiss jeweler **Stefan R  thy**, iron from Lundahl and an undisclosed vendor who beat the usual famous suspects for output and power transformers plus B+ rail choke



There are Mundorf capacitors, custom-drawn silver signal-path hookup wiring again from R  thy and top WBT posts for 4  , 8   and 16  . Very serious raw parts costs and 2 weeks of Swiss hand labor per pair enforce a fair but hefty sell price which through the usual channels of specialty retailers and importers would become unrealistic. So the husband and wife team of Gino and Pia Colombo decided to service European customers with direct sales and personal auditions in their home in the small Swiss town of **Lyss**

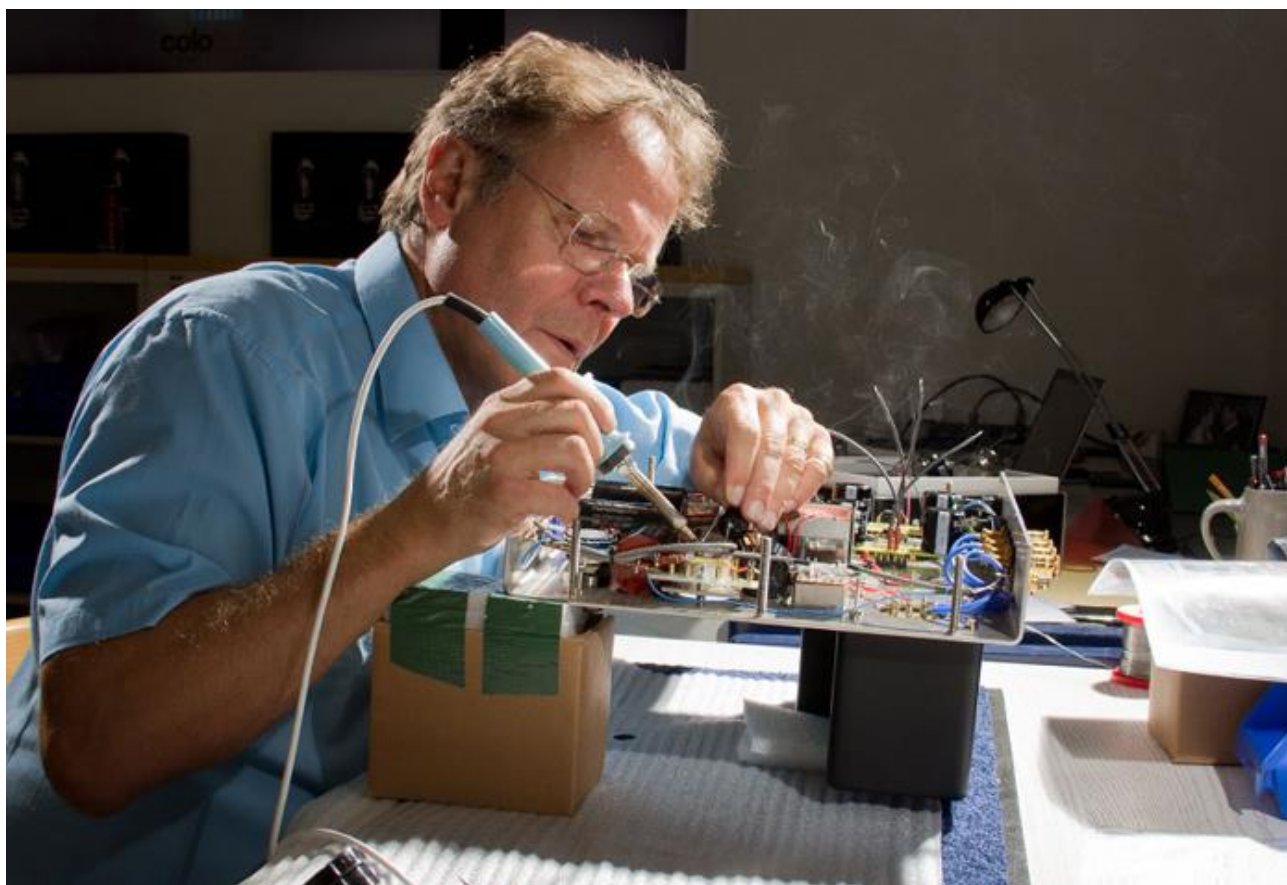
With personal airport pickup from Geneva, Bern or Z  rich and overnight stay in their home if desired*, this approach more than halves the sell price and gives clients a true behind-the-scenes assessment for what after all remains a significant investment. Conversely Swiss customers and those within a reasonable driving distance can audition the amplifiers in their own homes. Colotube will personally deliver and set up a pair for a day. Also on offer are complete systems, currently with Vincent Audio source components and specific Tannoy and Avant-garde Acoustic speaker models. A 5-year warranty for the amplifiers is implicit to how the Colombos wish to conduct business - the old-fashioned way where trust and long-term customer support aren't forgotten concepts but fundamental



*** The Colombo's 50sqm separate suite with bathroom and jacuzzi is made available free of charge for one night. Airport pickup is free as well. Air fares up to CHF 700 are deductible if the customer buys a pair of amps**



When it comes to high-end pricing, cynicism is useful. My response to Colotube's review solicitation was simple. "Hand-deliver the amps to me for a brief audition as you would for a customer. If your performance exceeds my value-priced Yamamoto A-09S [above] and Woo Audio Model 5 [left] by a commensurate margin, I'll be happy to do a review." I'd learnt my lesson the hard way after the outrageously priced €76.000 Swedish The Lars integrated amplifier



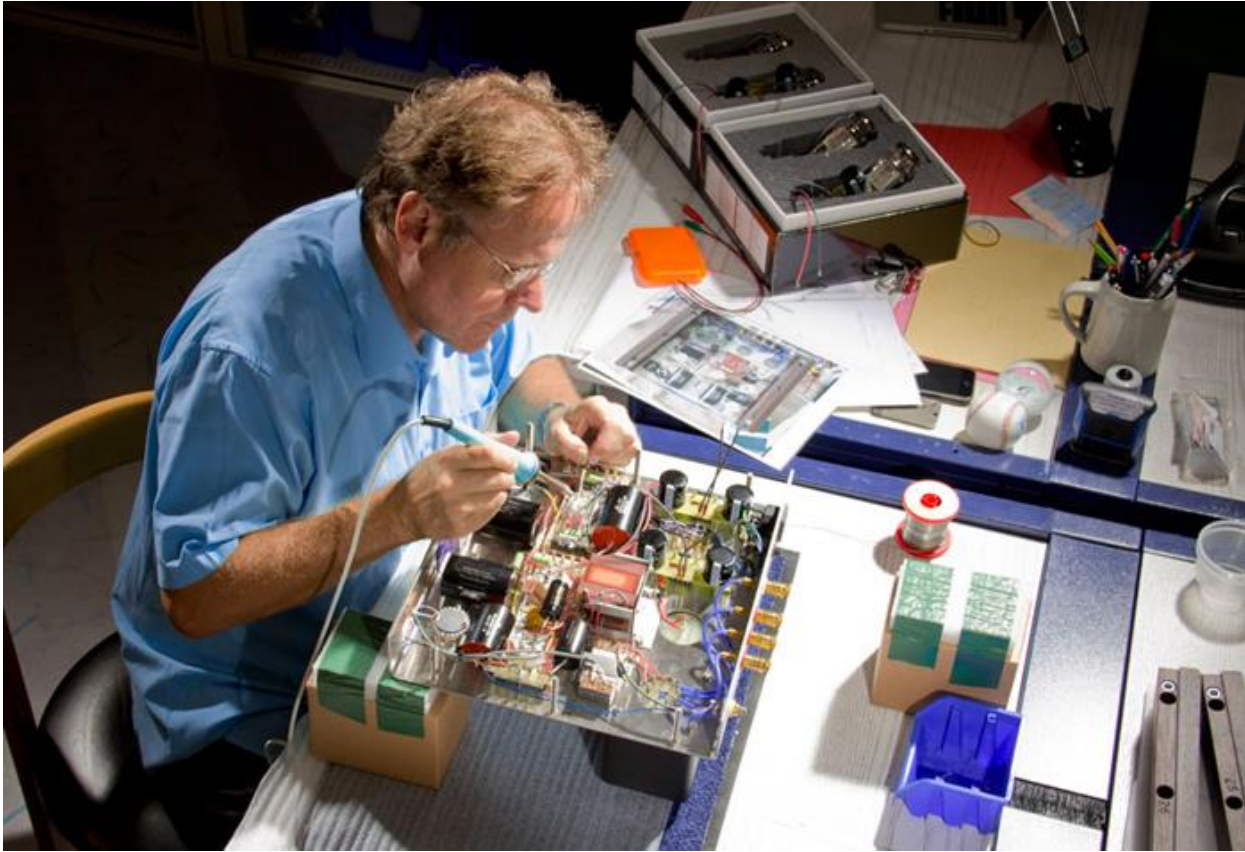
Having listened to both my 300B amps the evening prior, the Colotube monos on my Zu Essence and ASI Int. Tango R speakers cleared the hurdle. Theirs was an unambiguously higher plateau. Opening up one amp to inspect build and parts quality, then inquiring about the Colotube operation clinched the assignment.

Gino neither is nor has to be quitting his part-time trade-school teaching job. The couple has no ambitions or illusions about turning into a big outfit. They don't need audio to survive. It's mostly a love affair. Handcrafting exclusive low-volume artisanal valve audio in Switzerland à la Audio Consulting and Da Vinci Audio Labs is quite different from Nagra's game. Incidentally their push/pull 300B amp with solid-state drivers is a direct competitor and twice as powerful. Entering Nagra's world—which is *heavily* subsidized by the Kudelski Group corporate colossus of which Nagra Audio is a tiny subdivision—differs once more from shopping top Sino brands like Eastern Electric, Melody or Cayin



The Colombo system at home

Everything has its place, everything its target audience. One simply remembers that higher prices don't automatically reflect commensurately better (if better at all) performance. Luxury tags need not mirror any reasonable multiplication factor of raw build cost. There's always room for what the market will bear. There's the object d'art angle. And let's not forget crass snob appeal. This plays to the notion that 'best' must mean buttock-clenching sticker shock to be real. For reviewers, personal comfort based on what one considers fair (and how one's own lifestyle educates buying decisions in general) factors into all of this inextricably



It explains why, when Kamzy CEO Lars Dam emailed me about reviewing their Dutch KAAM-800 or KAAM-1000 valve amps whose €50.000 tags include *gold plating*, I was out. Personal limitations intruded. I'm told however that our Polish collaborator Wojciech Pacuła is made of sterner stuff. A Kamzy review thus might appear in these pages sooner than later

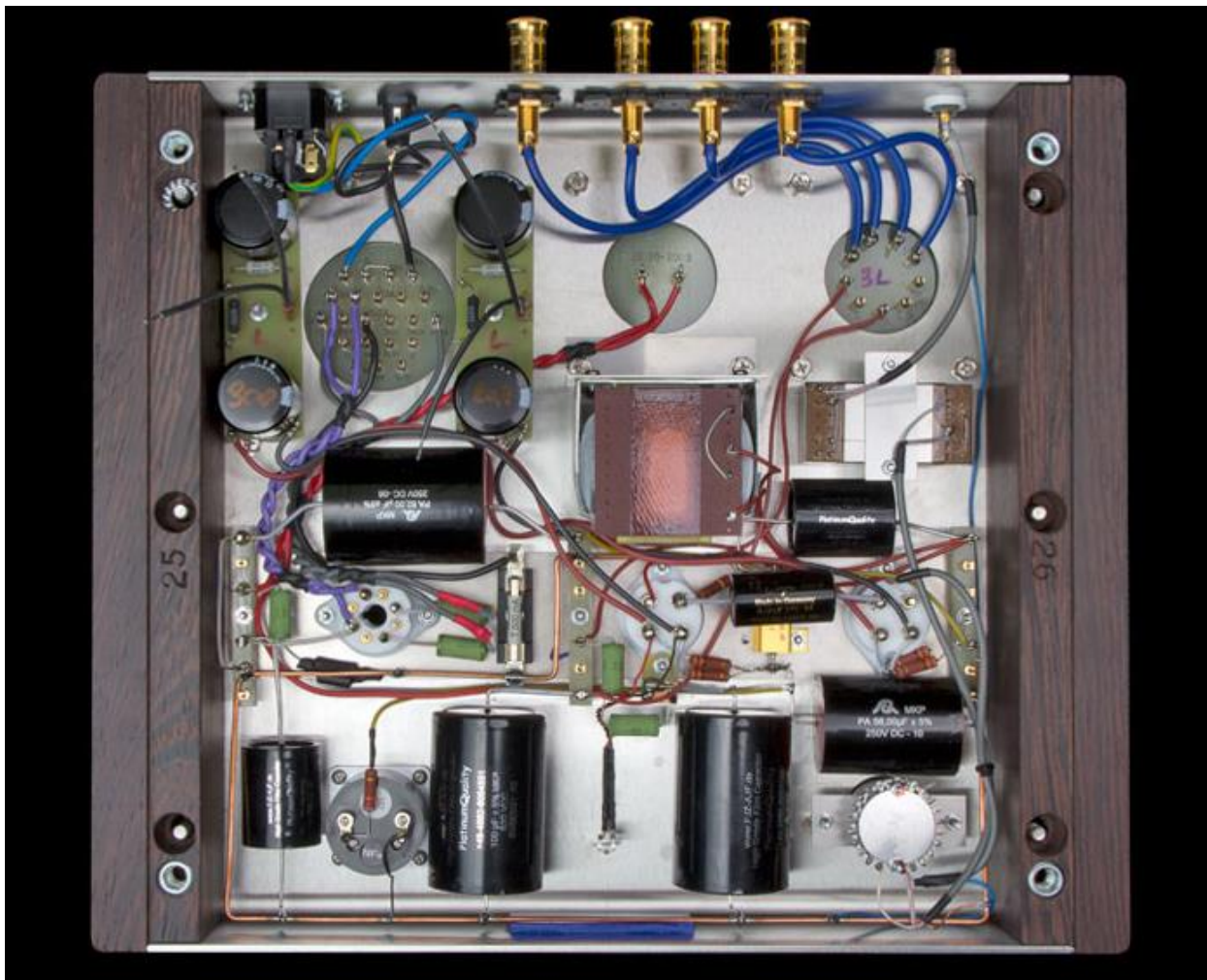


Enough shekelanigans now. If you've read this far, you plainly need no advice on how to spend your money; or be told that 10wpc of output power imposes very real limitations in speaker choices; or that EML glass isn't cheap to replace when the time comes. All that is boring boiler plate stuff. **Let's inspect the Swiss monos more closely** now and learn what specific design decisions Gino Colombo made in his quest for best subjective performance

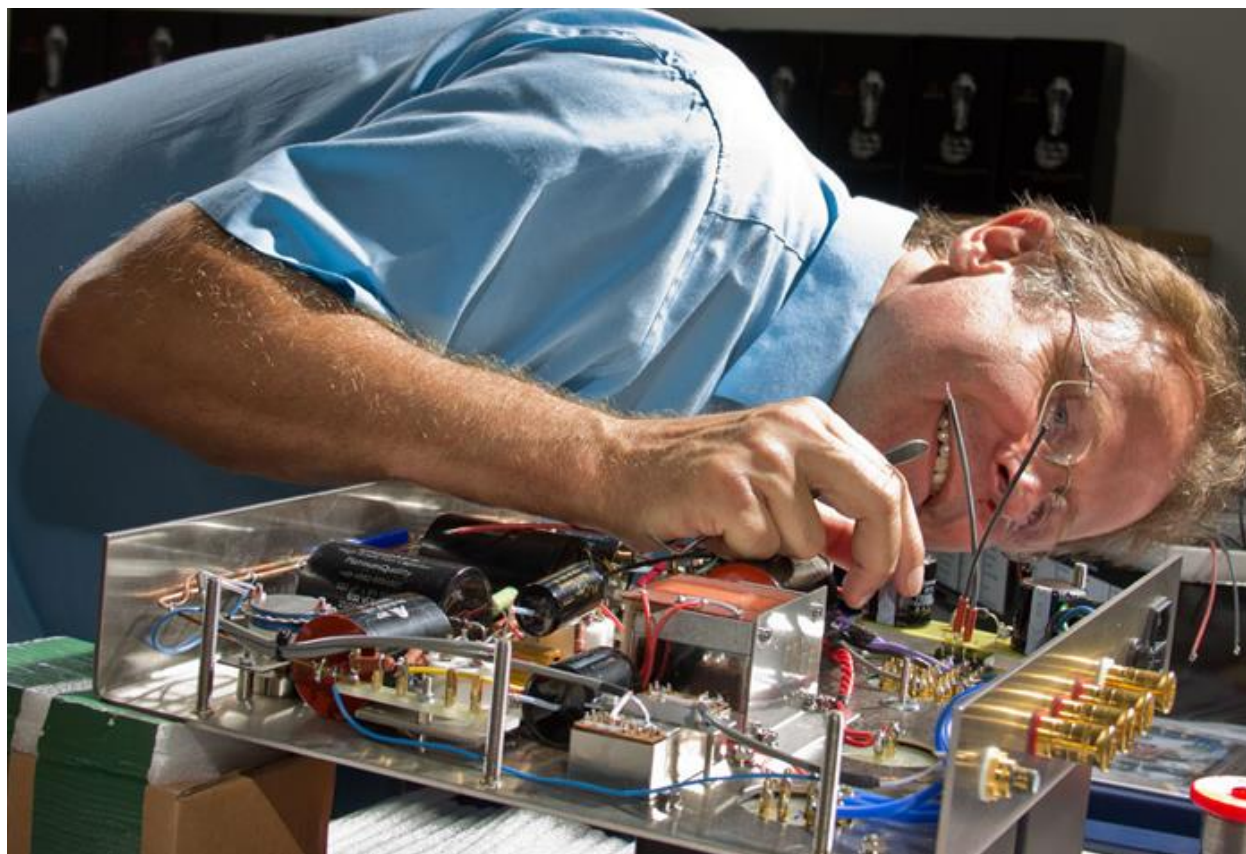
The lack of bias adjustments shows that just as with Yamamoto amps, the meter only confirms operational output tube fitness. There's no doubt when exactly the 300B fails to bias up properly. The DC current needle wants to sit at 80mA. At 60mA the tube has tired to need replacing. But this really is plug 'n' play auto bias sans trim pots



The circuit is a minimalist 2-stage concept with two direct-heated triodes for voltage and current gain. The 20A driver is choke loaded, then coupled to the 300B via a high-quality Mundorf silver/gold oil capacitor. The iron on deck consists of a power transformer, an EI output transformer with Z9 silicon steel core and a high-voltage filter choke. The Lundahl anode choke for the driver bottle sits below deck. So does a Lundahl **7901** dual-coil stepup transformer with a 1:3 ratio, i/o Ω of 1.1K/10K and extreme level capability (+34dBu @ 50Hz) with two primary and two secondary windings per coil separated by electrostatic shields and a high-permeability mu-metal lamination core.



All filaments are DC heated and RCRC filtered. Residual hum is ca. 50mV. Input sensitivity is 1.5Vrms and optimized for high-level outputs. My choice of auto bias was due to convenience, intensive auditions and the fact that the EML tube is of such high quality that auto bias doesn't incur the usual compromises."



As it happened, my friend Dan took up the Colombos for a home audition in his house near Lausanne. He wished to hear how their monos would do on his 100dB field-coil Voxativ Ampeggio Dué speakers. His office system runs the smaller Voxativ **Ampeggio** from a **Yamamoto A-010** SET followed by a Burson 160 transistor amp set to current-buffer mode. Sources are an Esoteric UX1/APL Hifi NWO4.0SE and Human Audio **Libretto HD**. Dan was looking for Yamamoto-type sound with more power than the VT-52s' 3 watts. He wanted a tube option to alternate with the **Devialet D-Premier** that's already in his big system. Like me he much favors a 45, 46, 50 or VT52 over a 300B. Just so he was intrigued by my impromptu assertion. These Swiss had *not* sounded anything like typical 300B amps during my first quickie session which had booked this review. As some of his inventory shows, Dan's tastes and mine overlap more often than not. Thus on a Friday morning in early July the Colombos and team Ebaen met at Dan's for a *dégustation*, potential sale in the wings. I'd be able to report on noise floor and sonics with 100dB speakers regardless and add useful data to those I'd subsequently generate in my own home with my own speakers and sources.





In the Voxativ system. To recalibrate his VT-52/Devialet ears to upscale 300Bs, Dan the evening prior had leashed up his Kondo monos. After taking us on a wild romp through his music library—from Rococo counter tenor to Johnny Cash and June Carter, from *Mozart l'Egyptien* to the Hadouk Trio's *Live at the FIP*, from some Bach with harpsichord and solo oboe to Buddha Bar lounge and Fado numbers, from Trilok Gurtu & Robert Miles ambient with synth bass to some fierce Andalucian coplas by Rafael 'Falete' Ojeda—he now turned to me with a whisper. "On these speakers I favor their amps to my Kondos. Do you think I should tell them?"



Gino Colombo in the hot seat

I'm not sure he ever did. Purchasing the amps on the spot probably said enough. The **Colotube** monos in gestalt and auroma were very similar indeed to the A-010 but more powerful. Shigeki-San has C3m drivers for his VT-52s with four 80s, one rectifier per signal tube. The VT-52s in that circuit behave like super 45s. They're a clear higher octave for any Yamamoto A-08S owner. They are as fast, lit-up and direct as the Emission Labs solid-plate 45s with a bit more of everything and add an attractive infusion of 300B-type body and grounding (and 50% more power for one more mighty watt). Having owned each amp Yamamoto makes, Dan considers

the A-010 the crown jewel of that range. I'm familiar only with three models. On that basis I'd concur fully. Perhaps this made it fait accompli that Dan would now find the Swiss monos just as irresistible?



Sharing Dan's suspicion that the smaller Voxativs in the office were better suited to his current systems, we next moved them in front of the broad field-coil versions. A few tracks into this impromptu A/B, five listeners agreed. In this room, with these electronics and our given biases, everyone favored the standard Ampeggios. On vocals in particular it was uncanny. They had more body without the forward presence energy of the Dué which particularly at higher levels injected more white, sharpness and textural leanness. The smaller model with its strategically faceted rear horn also had the more potent midbass to be fleshier, punchier and in this context more finely balanced



€700 Metrum Acoustics Octave DAC vs. Esoteric UX1/APL Hifi NWO 4.0SE

Gino's circuit is noticeably faster and less colored than other 300B amps I've met before*. This provides no buffering *gentlification* or gentrification if you will. Plucked/popped strings and percussive hits enjoy unfettered rise times. There's only very minor harmonic enhancement to be moister than the French D-Premier but otherwise reflexes are similarly greased. Having a vast open floor plan, generous listening distance and complete privacy to indulge stout SPLs, this was a perfect opportunity to explore these very qualities. The Voxativ Dué would probably prefer a somewhat mellower more luscious amp like a Kondo. Because that's not a direction Dan presently had in mind, he promptly contacted Inès Adler with a request. Trade back the Ampeggio Dué for two pairs of smaller Ampeggios. She could retain the difference to offset shipping impact. Inès responded flexibly to accommodate her customer and also appreciated how tastes and ancillaries don't make anyone's top model always the most suitable

One design I suspect could perhaps equal the Swiss in that regard are the Polish Ancient Audio €30.000 Silver Grand Monos.

Asked how he felt about his amps in this unfamiliar context, Gino merely shook his head. "Eh bihn total begeischtert" he gushed in that charmingly mild Swiss-German Basel accent I can make out completely unlike real deep *Schwyzerdütsch*. Having heard widebanders in Musical Affair's PHY-based models, he still hadn't known single drivers could completely energize a space like Dan's to *this* extent. To be able and offer their clients complete turn-key systems where desired, the Colombos had silently shopped around for suitable speaker mates. For now they'd settled on Tannoy and Avantgarde Acoustic but Gino confessed that as amp builder, the latter's semi-active nature (their bass systems are self-powered) bothers him. He'd prefer his amps to exert complete control over final sonics rather than share the spoils with transistor bass amps.



Colotube monos on temporary Combak footers until they find a permanent home in the rack

With PHY's legendary Bernard Salabert no more and his family squabbling over the estate, ongoing availability of the drivers wasn't guaranteed. Voxativ's distribution model and business association with Schimmel to manufacture and lacquer their cabinets meanwhile entails the kind of pricing structure **Colotube's** direct model wants to avoid. I could sense Gino's conflict. Having just met the perfect speaker mate, it might ultimately be less attractive from a max-value business perspective. Reviewers of course never concern themselves with complex realities. We wear blinders and report on performance only. On that score the Swiss 300B monos and Voxativ Ampeggios from Berlin were *sensational* and did not require Dan's massive JL Audio subwoofer for augmentation.

***Since October 2011 colotube is the exclusive dealer for the Metrum Acoustics Octave DAC in Switzerland.**

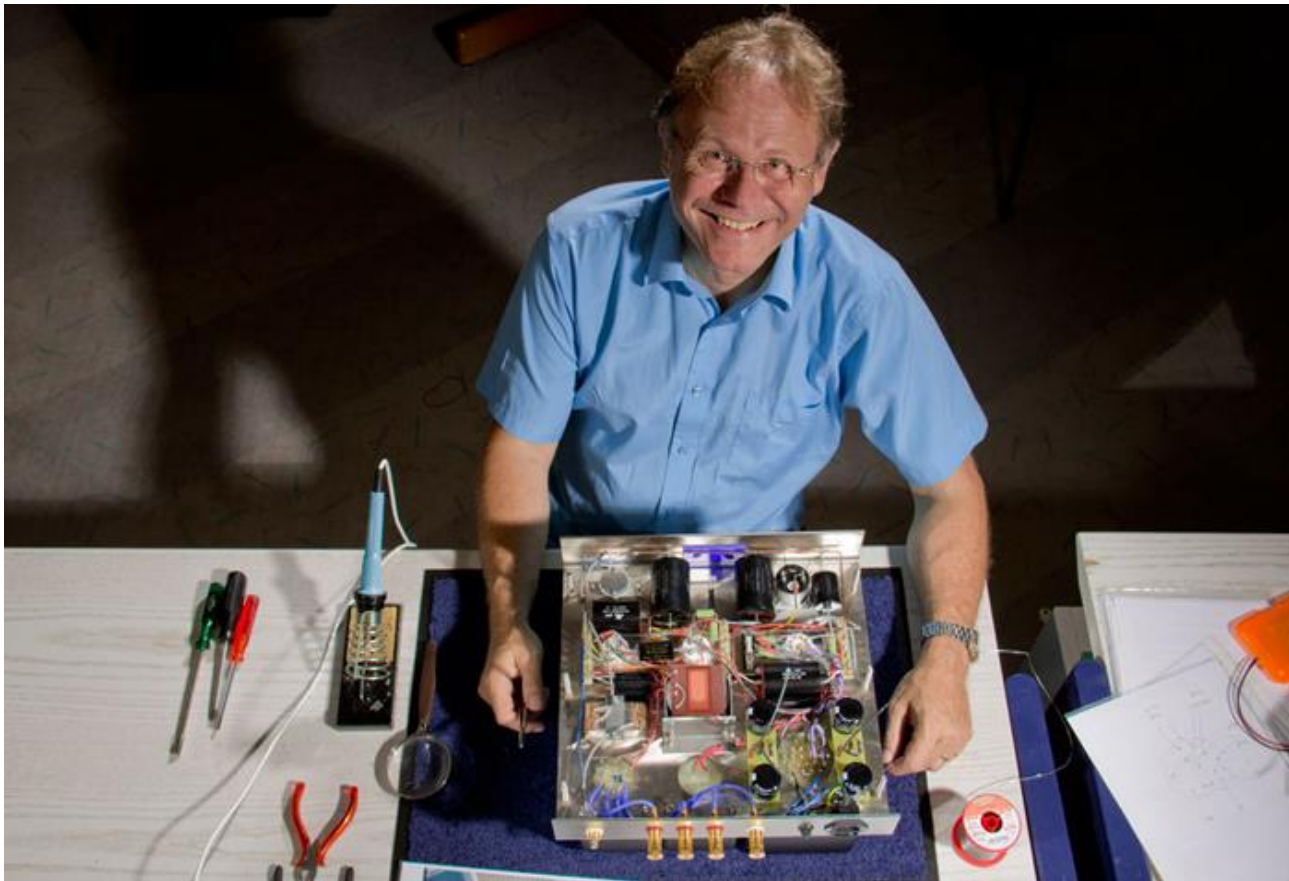
The silver one with 14VA power supply costs CHF 980

The black one with 14 VA power supply costs CHF 1'040



Yes there was *some* noise with my ear directly at the driver but no more than is the norm for no-feedback SETs into 100dB speakers and as such inaudible from the seat (for truly zero noise you'd want to switch to Dan's high-power Devialet). With the Lundahl stepup input transformer and 20A drivers, gain was plenty sufficient to drive the Colotubes without a preamp and achieve lease-breaking levels. Sources for the occasion were either Dan's rebuilt Esoteric or the surprising **€700 Metrum Acoustics Octave DAC*** where four industrial 'super' chips per channel are the D/A and I/V converters and output devices. Gino's precision attenuators of course mandate getting up to change volume but with Alex Peychev's hybrid digital/analog volume control Dan has remote trim convenience if desired

The upshot of this outtake—besides relinquishing my earmarked review pair to a good friend and thus stall a loaner dispatch by another two weeks—was simple. As a diehard valve fancier who's played early patron saint of the thermionic custom arts to Electronluv's young Josh Stippich, Dan over the years has taken himself on a self-guided tour through the terrain. As an enthusiast collector he's lived with very exotic tube amps like TL75s with mercury vapor rectifiers and all the usual suspects from Art Audio, Jeffrey Jackson, Kondo, Korneff, Supratek, Wavac, Wavelength, Wyetech Labs et al. He routinely commissioned things when curiosity over a particular valve meant no commercial amp specimens existed to hear them. Dan's hifi journey at this precise juncture had returned him to living with Devialet's brilliant class A/class D amplifier. He also conceded that the best tube amps still offer that little bit different/extra which he wants to enjoy as an alternate flavor on occasion. To go after that flavor simply can't involve common liabilities. A useful reference like the hi-tech Devialet would instantly betray those. The **Colotube** amps fit that bill perfectly then.



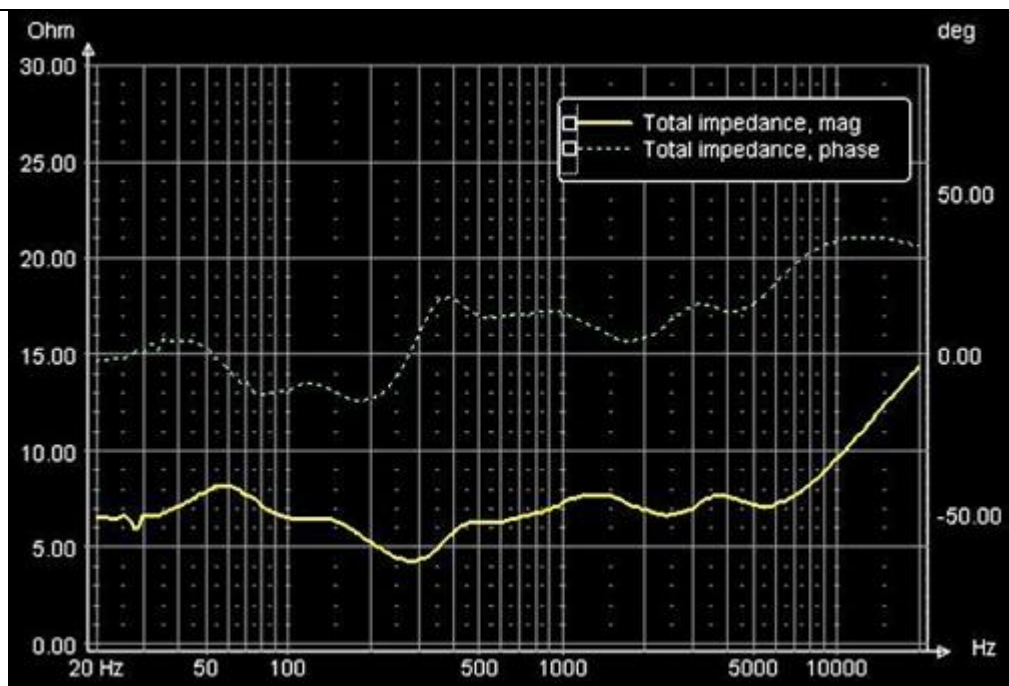
On a relevant aside, Dan expressed what lovely people he felt the Colombos were. As I learned, Pia Colombo used to work in international media relations for domestic telecom giant Swisscom and studied at the universities of California/Los Angeles, della Svizzera Italiana and Fribourg. She has serious experience in business and customer affairs. I was pleased to have rendered solid introductions. At this level of investiture I proceed very carefully whenever personal friends or family are involved. The artisanal hifi world has products that not always are backed up by the kind of professionalism that would be concomitant with pricing and performance. If our combined instincts are anything to go by, **Colotube** isn't that by a long shot

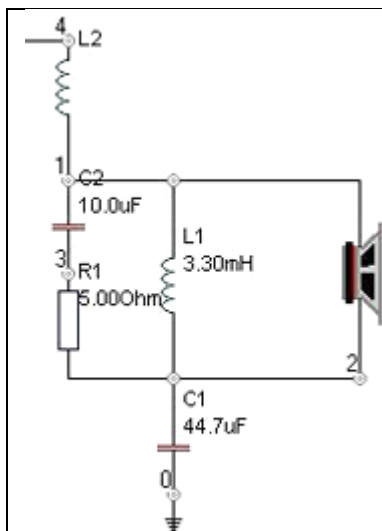
In Villeneuve: At 86dB sensitivity and 3-6 Ω impedance, no matter *how* upscale the amp's providence, you would not mate Mark+Daniel's Fantasia-S two-way to a 10wpc 300B SET. Even so the foolhardy must try. It worked surprisingly well. Naturally I had to increase the gain setting of my Esoteric preamp and run it over the last quarter of its range. That's expected. In a 11.5m long room where the seat is about 4 meters from the speakers, achievable loudness well exceeded what would be acceptable for thick-walled town house conditions. But clearly the low bass the Fantasia-S generates with my 100wpc ModWright KWA-100SE transistor amp was now bloomier and less striated though not really less extended.



The *prime* reason to call this match sub optimal were two giveaways. At low volumes the sound wasn't as resolved and easeful as it should have been; and the general quality of effortlessness was compromised. It lacked the organic breath I'd heard at Dan's. Rather than falter much on audiophile measurable qualities (bandwidth, linearity, low distortion) it faltered on more immeasurable attributes. This confirmed why one shouldn't attempt such a mating if perhaps not for exactly the reasons most would suspect. In its most basic form, playing loud enough without apparent distortion isn't the same as playing at the top of one's game.

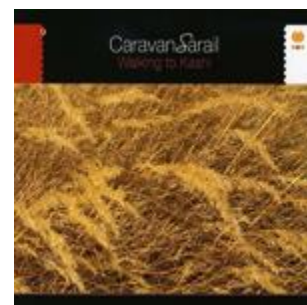
Enter the Cypriot **Gladius** from Aries Cerat. A 12" 3-way with Alnico mid, Raal ribbon and broad/shallow stacked-Ply cab with wind-tunnel bullet head, it runs an external leatherette-covered network box with acrylic screen and very large transformer-type inductors.





As the Gladius plot shows, its massive Acoustic Elegance woofer with Lambda motor is loaded as an acoustic suspension or sealed alignment. The plot's 6.5Ω nominal impedance thus lacks the wild saddle response and steep phase angles of ringy ported schemes. It also never falls below 4Ω. Given that Aries Cerat specializes in SET valve electronics, one expected such designed-in benign drive.

My most splendid Colotube results reconfirmed how it's *this* behavior which is most relevant to any truly successful low-power no-feedback pursuits. Actual voltage sensitivity—here a true 91dB—is a far second. Instant as though flipping a light switch, acoustic proof of interface happiness came by way of two items. First and most profoundly, the gushing liberated waterfall quality had gotten reestablished as though in response to that Bing Cosby song "Don't fence me in". It now also tracked unbroken down into subdued playback levels.

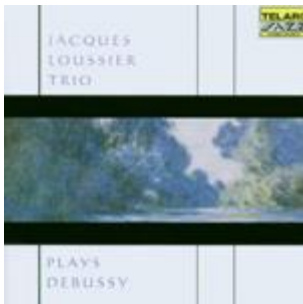



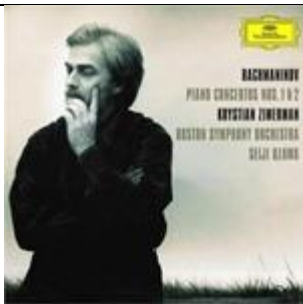
Two, low bass (inherently not as extended as with my Mark+Daniel or ASI Int. speakers due to the sealed loading) was texturally *continuous* and as such as elastic and boisterous as the midband. Popped foundation lines on Caravan Sarai's *Walking to Kashi*—this is right up there with desert world beat classics *One* and *Prayer for the Soul of Leyla* by Jamshied Sharifi—didn't alter their texture as the bass player skipped back and forth between two or more octaves to lay down a tight groove. Ditto the Hadouk Trio's Lou Ehrlich and his funky gumbass. These examples had little patience for popular claims that SET amps can't do proper bass. The Gladius woofer with its underhung voice coil, impulse-optimized loading and group-delay tweaked crossover followed orders with snappy salutes. The only noticeable item not on the menu here was complete 1st-octave coverage. That was a deliberate quality-over-quantity decision by speaker designer Stavros Danos who wanted a still moderately sized enclosure. For reference, the famous didgeridoo on Dead Can Dance's *Spirit Chaser* was reproduced in full glory however



To go straight for the jugular, the Colotube sound *with appropriate speakers* wouldn't recognize pipes and slippers if you spelled them out. Then it's an electrifying and energized sound of speed, high pop and incisive articulation. A close-mike'd bowed electrified sarangi for instance has all the raspy grittiness and twangy bite that make this traditional Indian instrument so fiercely modern. Percussion where the player physically taps a microphone with his hands has all the cayenne pepper such direct coupling implies. Unlike fast class D amps whose ultra-low output impedance creates a drier whiter very damped sound, the Colotubes have more blackness in their palette and are more billowy of gestalt. The blackness makes for properly saturated cinema colors with the necessary half tones. Your sound won't be an Electric Avenue telly whose contrast and sharpness settings are pushed up to 100.

Properly set up where speaker path lengths to the seat are matched to within better than 0.25" with a laser, a richly fanned soundscape with multiple depth layers will have spiky percussive elements and emphatic performer actions jump out like embers from an open fire. This is the opposite of homogenization or thickness which zero NFB triodes are often accused of. Such live-wire twitchiness relies on excellent microdynamic reflexes and speed. It also relies on a low level of harmonic distortion which particularly in the usually exaggerated 2nd tends to close down the music fabric to shrink its looser weave together. Presumably the DHT-drives-DHT circuit creates some deliberate distortion cancellation. Whatever the reason, this sound exhibits significantly lower 300Bness than usual.

	<p>But this triode plus über driver still couldn't do the uppermost treble. My Kaivalya monos with Russian military 6P14P-EV (an ultra-spec EL84 equivalent) playing "Promenade" from Vassilis Tsabropoulos' <i>Melos</i> showed how the Serbian ribbon tweeter with amorphous-core transformer now captured the triangle with far more inner energy. "Like diamonds" my wife opined. Perfectly put too - hard, refractive, pure, sparkling and scintillating like an expertly lit diamond with inner fire. Moving on to Jacques Loussier <i>Plays Debussy</i>, drummer André Arpin's spiderwebby workout on cymbals confirmed it.</p>	
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	<p>With a fast and very extended tweeter like the Raal, the 300B simply cops out on ultimate extension. I suspected this for years. Testing a wildly more expensive such amp than previously reviewed simply settled it. The so-called queen of triodes has a soft top no matter what. Where this one excelled however was on Loussier improvising solo on Chopin nocturnes. During certain mostly true-to-score rubato intros prior to his dreamy staccato Jazz morphs, the sense of <i>viscosity</i> whereby individual tones without damper pedal felt like bubbles slowly bursting in oil was fantastic. Krystian Zimerman performing Rach 1 & 2 with the Boston Symphony under Seiji Osawa stressed again that the Colotube amplifiers love piano with just the right tonal voluptuousness and material heaviness.</p>
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Due to not fully teasing out the upper harmonics whilst making a U-turn into a different genre altogether, e-guitar distortion with its overdrive harmonics lacks some nails-on-chalk-board nerve. While that might arguably not be high priority for DHT aficionados, it's fair to mention that despite their accelerated shot of double espresso in general, the Colotube tonality retains that recognizable 300B trait. Compared to a more upwardly ambitious 45 for example—or a common 6P14P-EV in class A pentode mode—the very top clouds over mildly and with it a degree of overtone finesse and brilliance.

Despite this extreme treble suppression, the **Colotube** sound particularly with an ultimate tweeter like the Raal was anything but dark however. It was very billowy, fluffy and airy in fact. Transitioning to my white Serbian amps altered that. With them self noise decreased to zero (in my room which is rather smaller than Dan's, even 91dB speakers transmitted some hum with the 300B). With the small pentodes diamantine brilliance and an accompanying hue of bluishness increased. This enhanced retrieval of what I call gossamer stuff. Think iridescence and tintinnabulation. Simultaneously—and remember that I deliberately specified the IT-coupled Kaivalyas as true pentode amps which Sasa Cokic implemented with two ultra-minimal local feedback loops—the white monos shored up overall gestalt. The bed sheets were tucked in on three sides rather than hung loose over the edges.



Where the **Colotube** amps wafted to feel spatially expansive and unmoored—strangely a certain amount of tube noise can act a sort of dither to emphasize this quality—the Kaivalyas were more focused down and anchored. The no-feedback single-ended direct-heated sound was sweeter and more radiant. The low feedback push-pull sound was more separated out, distilled and taut. These type of poetic descriptions drive engineers up the monkey pole. But how else to point at very real performance differences that don't bluntly revert to frequency response charts? If one didn't fuss to go instead with the first thing to mind after making the switch from EL84 to 300B, one would simply say that the 300Bs sounded *bigger*.

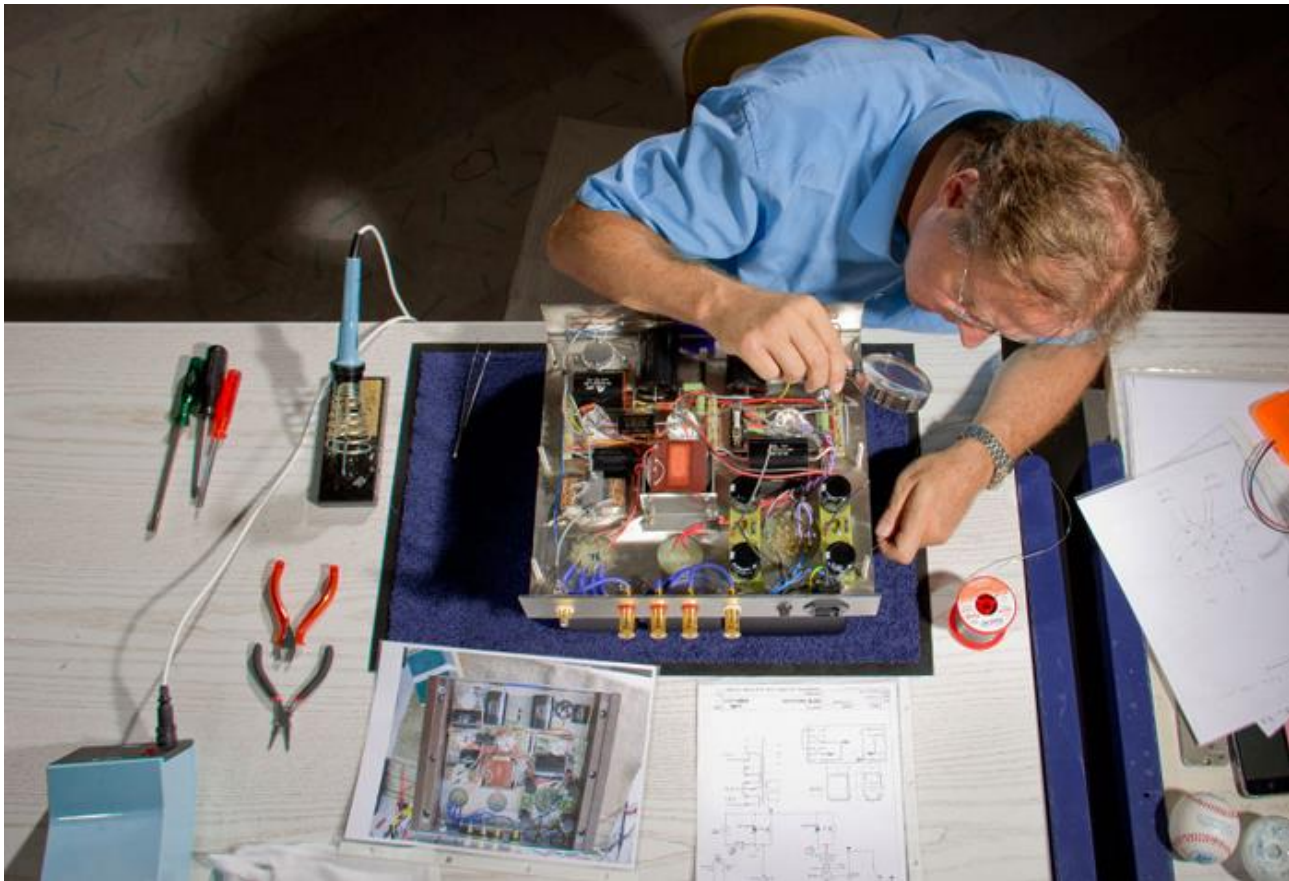
If one felt compelled to inquire why and carefully inspected this impression over various music samples, one should arrive at something like the above. One might even fall back on the oft-cited inner radiance of triodes. Working from the inside out, radiance reinforces the impression of expansiveness or scale. This explains why despite diminished light on the very top this still is a very *lit-up* sound which doesn't rely on the last degree of effervescence. It's not a function of ribbon-type super tweeter behavior. It's about how the vast majority of the sound appears, not a very small fine fraction that's often overwhelmed by heavier action in the first place. By now the core appeal and distinctiveness of the **Colotube** amps should be clear. Their lithe illuminated aerated qualities have far more in common with quality 45 circuits than most 300B implementations. It's only a guess but a big reason for this must be Jac van der Walle's buxom 20A driver tube. I've not encountered it before anywhere but reading his descriptions makes clear that he intentionally designed this driver tube for exactly this type of application. To my ears it finally moves traditional 300B sound out from antiquity into the 21st century. By the same token those married to the 'quintessential' queen of triode sound could find the Colotube version too light and fresh. I presume Kondo then would be more applicable. There *are* remnants of octave-doubled THD here but those seem quite diminished. It's fair and poignant to think of Gino's amps as 'high-power' 45 SETs with just a minor downshift of the tonal center of gravity. But even a paralleled 45 would still make only less than half their useful power.

In use, the rear-mounted mains switches right above the power inlets should only bother those who'd install these amps in a rack where they must reach behind them.

It's skin oils from handling that will put the usual lie to steel's 'stainless'. Like Art Audio, Gino doesn't use a clear sealant. You'll have to remove finger prints with just the right industrial agent. Good luck. For any expensive electronics (which these unapologetically are), I'd never specify stainless steel because it'll never again look as pristine as it did new. Chrome does handle better but requires care not to burn in swirl marks - and it shows up dust more and is very expensive to have applied with Harley-type quality. Stainless steel it is then.



Conclusion. Swiss hand labor is costly. Premium parts cost money. 10 watts are limited. And there is some self noise. If those realities don't conflict with your budget and ambitions, Gino Colombo's 300B single-ended monaurals **are everything they should be for a modern listener who expects resolution and linearity as premium transistor amps have established but then wants that elusive X factor.** Satisfy inherent demands with copasetic speakers like the Aries Cerat Gladius or Voxativ Ampeggio and there's no way anyone listening from behind a thin black curtain could point at coagulated triode distortion, homogenization, portly reflexes or ponderous fuzzy bass. Instead there are terrific microdynamic reflexes, vast staging and tonefulness that's realistic rather than overdone. While experienced listeners should eventually suspect tubes, I'd be very surprised if they could/would properly identify 300Bs. No way. That's how much these amps diverge from their archetype of popular (and justified) perception.



Reactions to that accomplishment will depend on alliances - to the archetype or to hopes for something more modern. *This* listener considers the implementation here a full and rare realization of the tube's true potential

Srajan Ebaen

Quality of packing: Card board with foam cheeks.

Reusability of packing: A few times.

Ease of unpacking/repacking: A cinch.

Condition of component received: Flawless.

Completeness of delivery: In person as is standard for Switzerland.

Human interactions: Very good.

Pricing: Artisanal high-end, i.e. expensive but in line with current conventions.

Final comments & suggestions: Colotube Amplifiers sells deliberately direct only to eliminate dealer/distributor markups. Potential clients are invited to audition the amps in the designer's home. Pickup from three different Swiss airports and one night of accommodation in the Colombos' guest suite are offered free and up to CHF 700,- in travel expenses can be applied towards a purchase. Reproduced with permission of 6moons.com. Thank you very much, Srajan!

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Sechs Röhren für ein Halleluja

Der Lysser Gino Colombo hat sich einen Traum erfüllt: Seine **Colotube** baut die besten Röhrenverstärker weit und breit. Betuchte Kunden werden von ihm gar am Flughafen abgeholt.

TOBIAS GRADEN

Plötzlich durchfuhr Gino Colombo ein Wunsch: Mal wieder so richtig etwas mit den Händen machen. Mal wieder etwas machen, das man in den Händen halten kann. Ein handfestes Produkt.

Der Lysser ist gelernter Elektriker, hat sich danach Richtung Informatik weiterentwickelt, zuletzt war er Chefentwickler bei der Unico Data AG in Münsingen, und er lehrt Informatik an der Gewerbeschule Bern. Er war gänzlich im Digitalen zuhause. Doch der Wunsch ging nicht mehr weg. Zurück zu den Wurzeln!, rief es im Herzen. Röhren! Also: Glas! Eisen, das glüht; Elektronen, die fliegen; und am Schluss kommt Musik heraus!

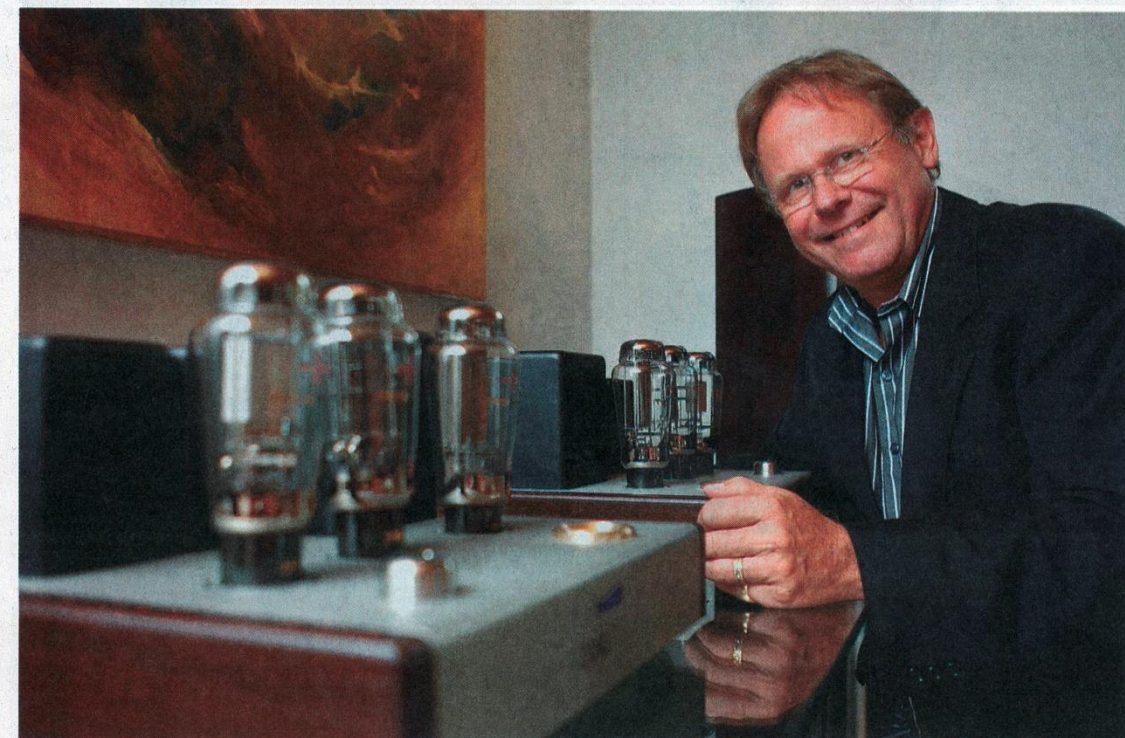
Also begann Gino Colombo, Röhrenverstärker zu bauen.

Mit wenig Technik so schön

Jetzt steht er im Wohnzimmer des kleinen Einfamilienhauses in Lyss und betrachtet sein Werk: den Colotube Trioden-Röhrenverstärker 300B SE. «Mich fasziniert, mit wie wenig Technik es so schön tönt», sagt er und lächelt kaum wahrnehmbar – die Leidenschaft für das Produkt kommt bei ihm vor dem Stolz über das Resultat. «Wenig Technik», das könnte missverständlich wirken. Vom Prinzip her mag der Röhrenverstärker ein vergleichsweise einfaches Gerät sein, doch bei der Qualität der Komponenten geht Gino Colombo gar keine Kompromisse ein.

Der Verstärker ist mittlerweile geadelt. Von anerkannter Stelle geprüft und für mehr als tauglich befunden. Srajan Ebaen, Herausgeber der Highend-Zeitschrift «6 Moons», zeigte sich nach einigem Zureden bereit, den Verstärker zu testen. «Er sagte: Ihr müsst besser sein als Yamamoto!», erzählt Colombo, «da gefror mir das Blut in den Adern. Yamamoto, das war mein Vorbild.»

Ebaen testete den Verstärker mehrere Wochen lang auf Herz und Nieren. Das Testergebnis,



Im letzten November fand **Gino Colombo**, hier habe er nun ein Produkt, das sehr gut sei.

Bild: Tobias Anliker

publiziert in der Zeitschrift Colotube, sei eine Klasse besser als Yamamoto.

Das Beste ist gut genug

Bis es so weit kam, wendete Colombo mehrere Jahre Entwicklungs- und Tüftlerzeit auf. Vor sieben Jahren hatte er mit dem Bau des ersten Verstärkers begonnen, elf Modelle hat er seither fertiggestellt, ohne eines davon zu verkaufen, hat unablässig Qualität und Bauweise optimiert, alles ihm verfügbare Wissen zusammengetragen. Letzten November dann fand er: Hier ist nun ein Produkt, das sehr gut wird.

Er kündigte seine Stelle bei Unico, stockte gleichzeitig sein Lehrpensum etwas auf und gründete die Firma Colotube. Diese ist ein kleines Familienunternehmen, seine Frau Pia, ehemalige Swisscom-Mediensprecherin, ist Teilhaberin, bei Bedarf helfen auch die (erwachsenen) Kinder Dario und Fabia.

Gino Colombo investierte einen sechsstelligen Betrag für den Bau der ersten zehn Verstärker, bestellte Materialien aus aller Welt, stellte Kontakte her zu Schreibern, Zulieferern, Chromstahlbiegern.

Der erste Messeauftritt

- Colotube stellt den Verstärker an der Fachmesse «High End Swiss» vom 21. bis 23. Oktober vor
- als Markenbotschafterin wird Miss Earth Schweiz, die Lysserin **Graziella Rogers**, anwesend sein («Wir wollen eine Brand Awareness aufbauen», so Pia Colombo)
- Ort der Messe: Mövenpick Hotel Zürich Regensdorf (tg)

LINK: www.colotube.ch

Von allen Teilen verbaut Colombo jene, die ihm am besten scheinen. Die Kondensator etwa sind zehn Mal so teuer wie handelsübliche Modelle. Herzstück sind natürlich die Röhren, in Prag werden sie hergestellt, nach «altem Rezept» mit heutigen Materialien. «Das Gerät soll zum Erbstück werden», sagt Colombo, will heissen: Es soll lange funktionieren, in einer Familie von Generation zu Generation weitergegeben werden können.

Diese Qualität kostet. 26 675 Franken für den Verstärker. Wobei es sich genau genommen um zwei Verstärker handelt, je einen für den linken und rechten Kanal – was eines der Erfolgsgeheimnisse von Colotube ist, wird so doch das Übersprechen eliminiert. Wer kann sich das leisten? Es sind Highend-Freaks aus ganz Europa, die sich für Colotube interessieren, gut betuchte. Sie werden falls gewünscht von Colombos vom Flughafen abgeholt, können sich für eine Nacht im Gästezimmer mit Whirlpool einquartieren und in aller Ruhe im Wohnzimmer das Gerät testen. Diese Leistung ist im Preis des Verstärkers eingerechnet – das Testen samt Übernachtung erfolgt unverbindlich. Colombo will Interessierte mit dem Produkt überzeugen, nicht mit Verkaufskünsten überreden.

Der lange Schnauf

Ein erstes Gerät ist verkauft, Colombo zeigt Bilder aus dem Haus des Kunden am Genfersee – der Mann scheint richtig Geld zu haben und eine ganz grosse Leidenschaft für Musik. Im nächsten Jahr wollen Colombos zehn Stück verkaufen, mittelfristig streben sie

eine Jahresproduktion von 20 an. Auf ein Händlernetz wird verzichtet, «wir wollen selber mit Leidenschaft kommunizieren». Allzu gross soll die Produktion gar nicht werden, es gilt auch die Aura des Exklusiven zu wahren. «Wir wissen, dass wir einen langen Schnauf brauchen», sagt Pia Colombo. Ein internationaler Versand ist mittlerweile möglich, alleine die eigens für Colotube entwickelte Verpackung ist nicht ganz billig.

Was ist denn das Geheimnis des Colotube-Verstärkers? «Ich habe die Kombination der Röhren und die Art der Schaltung so konzipiert, dass sich die als unangenehm empfundenen Verzerrungen fast aufheben.» Noch einfacher lässt es sich nur mit der Reaktion eines Interessenten ausdrücken, der erst kürzlich für abertausende Franken einen Verstärker gekauft hatte, wie Colombo erzählt. Er rutschte in Colombos Wohnzimmer unruhig hin und her, seine Miene verdüsterte sich zusehends, er begann zu schnauben und rief schliesslich aus: «Jetzt habe ich erst gerade so viel Geld für meinen Verstärker ausgegeben, aber im Vergleich zu diesem hier tönt er wie Blech!»

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