

CARY AUDIO SI-300.2d digital integrated amplifier

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<https://www.hifi-voice.com/testy-a-recenze/zsilovace-integrované/5134-cary-audio-si-300-2d>

My brand. Cary Audio. I love them. Sure, it's a subjective affection that I interpreted as "our shared warm relationship with tubes", but in this case, the argument doesn't apply. Times change and so do we. The reviewed component is purely solid-state: digital integrated amplifier SI-300.2d.

For a long time, Cary Audio has been offering, in addition to iconic tube monoblocks and preamplifiers, also solid-state machines, with equally convincing pleasant tube character of the sound, and with performances that cannot be reasonably achieved with tubes.

The SI-300.2d model, see <https://caryaudio.com/products/si-300-2d-integrated-amplifier/> is a product of the modern age: it contains a fully equipped and high-end DAC with many inputs and digital outputs, the possibility of oversampling, with Bluetooth and USB interface, and with (optional) control application for iOS/Android. The power amplifier has a high output of 2 x 300W (8 Ohm) or 2 x 450W (4 Ohm) in class AB and is also equipped with classic analog inputs (2x RCA plus 2x symmetrical XLR) for old-timers like me. For the listening and dancing, the amplifier was fed by a very good stablemate - Cary Audio DMS-650 Network player, a recent review of which was published here: <https://www.hifi-voice.com/testy-a-recenze/streamery/4827-cary-audio-dms-650>



At the first sight

The amplifier is built in a classic way, i.e. a nice and honest front panel made of polished aluminum, an "American" slightly more ordinary cover made of perforated sheet metal, and a back panel full of high-quality gold-plated connectors. The MOSFET power amplifier is located on the right side, which is indicated by the large profile heatsink in the guts of the case, covered from the outside by a side plate (or possibly by another component from above). The speaker terminals are brought out in the upper corner of the device. One could say - functionality above all else.

The front panel is dominated by the aluminum frame concealing a semi-graphical status display and VU-meters, and by a large central volume control knob with pleasant operation. Below it are series of buttons for selecting all inputs, the DAC resampling mode button, display dimmer and the power switch on the far left.

What can no longer be seen from the pictures, but must be experienced, is that when the device is switched off, everything is off, including the POWER button. So it is impossible to tell, whether the mains power is on (or you can, but only by looking into the perforation of the cover, where the situation is saved by the red LED shining somewhere in the middle between the printed circuit boards). If you want to listen to music at night, then you have to find either the switch-on button, or the remote. Then everything necessary on the amplifier will light up blue and a clicking relay will announce, that the device has come to life (the situation is similar in the case of the DMS-650 player,

where in addition, the display only starts with a certain delay, and those first night seconds of uncertainty about turning on the device pass really slowly).

The displays and especially the VU-meters shine quite brightly, but luckily they can be dimmed in a few steps or switched off completely. Worse is, from my point of view, that even if the blue is good, each element has a slightly different shade, and the VU-meters subjectively shine a little more than the display at all brightness settings, which overall seems rather inelegant to me.



The overall favorable impression of the otherwise very well-maintained and honest construction of the amplifier is underlined by a nice and solid-looking remote control with a long range (significantly greater than the remote for my DMS-650 player) and with an intuitive button layout; the only exception is the volume control located above the cursor keys, which, on the other hand, can be easily located at night thanks to this.

Cables and connectors

The view of the rear panel and gold-plated connectors is no less impressive for the technically minded user, than of the front panel. The built-in high-quality DAC has Toslink inputs, 2x coax, AES/EBU and similarly equipped outputs located in the middle of the device, with comfortable access, where there are also connectors for Wi-Fi antennas and LAN above them. But these are only needed when using the Android/iOS application, for someone who likes it more than a remote control.

A slightly worse access is to the analog section of the inputs; there are 2x unbalanced RCA and 2x balanced XLR line inputs, located on the left of the rear panel, directly below the speaker terminals. There are just 2 output terminals for each channel, which makes bi-wiring practically impossible. That is a bit of shame for a device of this category and performance. Cables with angled bananas or spades will either run down and tangle between the analog inputs, or they will be seen from the front facing behind the amplifier cabinet.



The DAC connector section on the SI-300.2d is strikingly similar to the DMS-650, and also provides de facto the same digital playback capabilities and connectivity as the player. It is nice that there is also an analog pre-out among the connectors, which can also be configured as a subwoofer output.

On the first listen

It plays great. Delicately and musically, the character is very similar to the tube monoblocks, on which I compared the sound of the SI-300.2d, and on which I enjoyed the sublime sound of the excellent player and streamer DMS-650 from the very first moment.

I didn't feel, that it was necessary to let the amplifier warm up. The character of the sound seemed to me to be more or less the same after switching it on as after playing for a long time. It should be noted here that, at normal listening volume, when I was cruising at the level of a few Watts, the needles of the VU meters were at zero. In order to set them in motion (I mean unstick them somewhere around the 5 watt level), I had to choose a volume that could not be sustained for very long in my listening room. After about 30 minutes of operation, thermal equilibrium was reached; the device was very decently warm and it was still possible to comfortably hold your hand on the heatsink, which was subjectively much warmer than the perforated cover.



Switching of the inputs is fast, including the digital ones. The display briefly shows the name of the input in significantly larger letters when toggled, which is quite a nice feature. Resampling or the bypass when switching the input takes place in approx. 1-2 seconds, the actual resampling of the DAC after pressing the button on the remote or the front panel takes less than a second, which is user-friendly. The amplifier allows you to set the volume in the menu mode, when either the volume of the currently played input is changed and the others remain unchanged, or the volume changes "classically" for all inputs. Because I played music mainly from the DMS-650 player/streamer, where there are similar options for configuring its DAC, including resampling (DMS can convert a digital signal up to 768kHz or a DSD256 stream, the SI-300 samples "only" up to 384kHz and also provides DSD256), I was able to compare the sound performance of the DAC and individual sampling modes in the DMS, as well as the DAC in the SI-300, and of course the analog output of the DMS in combination with the line analog inputs of the SI-300.

So the combinations are indeed many; the differences in sampling are quite noticeable and the typical Cary Audio user (including me :) can get quite worked up. A music listener will rather listen to the music itself, which is the point of audiophilia, but I assume that everyone at least on the initial listen will go through all sampling options, up to DSD-stream and settle on some preferred setting.



Personally, I liked the 192kHz or 384kHz sample with its balanced, distinguished, noble and welcoming musicality, or the highest DSD256, which was honey-smooth and sweet, caressing not only the ears but also the head and sometimes the back... simply an experience. The combination of listening to the DSD256 stream from the analog output of the DMS-650 player fed into the line input of the SI-300 was interesting, when overall the sound differed slightly from the previous combinations, as if with a wider, albeit slightly shallower (in the front-back direction) presentation of space and a more noticeable liveliness and even urgency; but overall, I rather preferred the grandeur and ethereal perspective in the music when the stream was output from the DMS digitally to the amplifier, and only then it was converted to analog in the DAC and amplified locally "in house", so to speak.

In any case, the imprint of the SI-300 amplifier itself on the music is perceptibly minimal. The mentioned effect was rather given by the character of the analog section in the DMS-650 player (when compared to my Per-Jadis JA30 tube monoblocks and, for completeness, to the AVR Pioneer SC-LX59, which has power amplifiers in D-class).

True High-End

Soft, smooth sound, full of details and liveliness, which forces you to actively follow the music and stomp with both feet and sometimes help yourself with your hands. This is why I have a soft spot for Cary Audio. Musicality, detail, beautiful rich bass, tube-like transparent and picturesque midrange with explicit highs, a living joy of listening. No decent tightness of middle age or sterility of older age, even with that animal joy still maintained accuracy and consistency. The SI-300.2d willingly offers all of this.

Separately, whether you are listening to the quiet passages or to rock events, the music flows as it should. And also regardless of the fact, that the devices are a classic concept, a nice front + an ordinary sheet metal cover, i.e. without showing off of the cast aluminum ingots and milled fiscules in the entire volume of the cabinet, i.e. separately from whether you look at the components or JUST listen, the music is just as fun as you'd expect.



I was struck by the directness and lightness of the piano in "Topsy" [Dick Hyman, From the Age of Swing], with its beautiful full sound, dynamic keystrokes and gradual reverberation, accompanied by soft and clearly defined cymbal flutters. The atmosphere of a jazz club was present all around, the rhythm of the song and precise bass drew you into the story and encouraged you to dance. The beautifully constructed space of the stage and the placement of the instruments made you forget that

there are speakers somewhere in front of you and that the listening space is only a few square meters. You are simply drawn into the atmosphere and space of the recording. Everything is well integrated and natural. Great!

When listening to similar jazz recordings via the analog input, I perceived a slight subjective preference for higher mids, so I took the signal from the player digitally via coax before its analog output and gave preference to the DAC in the amplifier here - and I settled on this configuration when listening.

Paul McCartney's vocals and backing guitars came through beautifully and unobtrusively from recordings such as "No Words" or "Let Me Roll It" [Paul McCartney & Wings, Band on the Run], without any tendency to be shrill on the vocals and shrill on the guitars, when other machines sometimes show a kind of polish in the midrange, but here everything was completely fine. Natural but distinctive and personal, urgent and friendly, very nice. I realized here, that the bass line was perfectly natural and clearly palpable, but in no way favored or blurred. It stuck to the music nicely and just clearly dictated the rhythm of the tracks. I played the rest of the album only through the SHAN Aztec bookshelf speakers (without the subwoofer that helps me with my little home listening on the AVR), and lo and behold, the Aztecs cut through the bass with ease and playfulness. I had even to make sure, that the SWF was really turned off. A really nice surprise.



As expected, the SI-300 played great from an LP record, with tube preamps plugged into the line input. The choice fell on an absolute classic - the first track of the 2nd side "Ooby Dooby" [Roy Orbison, The Original Sound, Wifon 1988]. There was the right rock'n'roll barrage, full of unrestrained joy and electric guitars, with Orbison's omnipresent and yet gentle voice, music that cannot be turned off, only listened to until the end. Songs that rocked even the blue VU-meters.

So I tried what a normal daily coexistence with Cary Audio DMS-650 and SI-300.2d would taste like, in the style that I normally use at home when I only have music as a background when I work. This is how I usually listen to Internet radio from AVR with bookshelves and SWF, or, when I catch a note, from the AVR pre-out to the tube preamp, monoblocs and the SHAN Snowman ManII speakers.

First of all, I was amazed, how a stream from online radio could play so well. In other words, no Hi-Res, but nice AAC or more commonly MP3 320kbps (Linn jazz), even just normal 128kbps (in the case of Rádio 1, which I really listen to very often, even with their new-age advertisements for bananas from Lidl), both on the streaming service vTuner, and it was just something great.

Music was suddenly pouring out of the radio with a solid and precise bass line, a soft and nicely defined midrange and pleasant highs, present and free of hiss and any kind of shrillness that digital filters like to add to music, and with a convincing sense of space. If the creators of the compression formats MP3 & Co. heard this sound, they would probably be surprised. I clearly was surprised a lot. Really very nice.



Of course, I understand, that this kind of sound from digital radios is the work of the DMS-650 streamer, rather than the expression of the SI-300 amplifier. But it is, after all, a company pair, and the quality of the amplifiers and other parts of the audio chain can only be known from a great source like Cary Audio DMS is without a doubt (and also on the great music that - occasionally - even my lovely R1 can still play).

Here I also realized the difference and character of the amplifiers (more or less independent of the loudspeakers used), which I compared to each other while listening to the combination of the DMS-650 and the given amplifier. I was quite pleasantly surprised at how well the D-class power amplifiers played in the Pioneer AVR. With the DMS-650 player (connected into the AVR's coaxial dig. input) they showed off what was in them, and it was nice and proud (making me understand what a poor scrap is the streaming and probably DAC part in my otherwise still decent, and at the time premium, AVR). At the same time, the sound of the power amplifiers in the AVR has quite similar in character to my tubes and also to the SI-300, except, of course, for the unbreakable certainty on the bass and the extension on the highest heights, which Cary Audio so confidently demonstrates.

When I played from the analog part of the DMS to the line input on the SI-300, or into my tube setup, it was felt that this DMS analog output slightly adds its enthusiastic personal style to the sound and therefore brings a certain signature to the music. On the other hand, the neutrality and yet musicality of the SI-300.2d respects the music and at the same time it really has all the attributes and warmth of a tube sound, from transparent soft vocals to a metallic-sounding and absolutely clean presentation of percussion and treble in general. There are still many watts of power output left there, that I just haven't had a chance to try and they are just waiting for their time.



My days with the combination of Cary Audio DMS-650 and Cary Audio SI-300.2d were very pleasant and went by faster than usual. I could live with these devices permanently, except perhaps for the price in the case of the SI-300, which despite all the qualities of this component, is relatively high - although still appropriate for the given category.

In the case of the DMS-650 player, I would accept all its pros and cons, and in the ongoing search for a better streamer, I would like to welcome it to my stable (see its review for more; but I still miss at least the Play/Pause buttons on the front panel and the input selection, and from a practical point of view, apart from the app, there is also the possibility of integration into the home control system - so that I don't have to first look for the remote when the phone rings or scroll through the control application and the MUTE function in it); otherwise it's a very good machine at a reasonable price.

I would say in conclusion - a balanced combination of the excellent player/streamer Cary Audio DMS-650 and the really good digital amplifier Cary Audio SI-300.2d, which can offer a pleasant tube sound to large and small loudspeakers, which stands out for its connectivity, wide configuration options, and mainly which will please you during every music listening session (...and in which there will be a little extra one great but redundant DAC).

CARY AUDIO SI-300.2d

- + pleasant tube sound full of details, dynamics and clearly defined bass à la Cary Audio
- + great presentation of space, both in width and depth
- + plays relaxed and naturally in quiet as well as loud passages, to both small and large loudspeakers
- + rich connectivity of inputs and outputs, useful for audio system integration
- + great DAC with upsampling options up to 384kHz and DSD256
- + a solid remote control with long range, the possibility of control from the Application

- placement of the speaker terminals at the upper edge of the device above the line inputs, not suitable for bi-wiring

- dimmable displays, but of unequal brightness and shades; VU meters not much active under normal listening conditions

- the appearance from a different angle than directly on the front panel does not quite correspond to its High-End class or price