

Solen Tiger Tube/MOSFET Integrated Amp Reviewed

By Author: Home Theater Review

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Deliberate planning for 1992 may or may not have had anything to do with it, but the Europeans used the late 1980s to make their mark in high-end audio. Smashing a UK-US monopoly on 'serious' equipment, companies like Goldmund, Gryphon, YBA, Sonus Faber, Ensemble and others have shown that the Continent can now boast some serious competition. Until recently, though, any Euro-fi of merit has been decidedly expensive. Now there's a new piece aimed straight at the heart of the entry-level sector...where UK electronics reign supreme.



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Solen is a French manufacturer of tube/MOSFET hybrids, their initial appearance at the Hi-Fi Show eliciting an expected response: 'The shape! It's a triangle!' Well, sort of, but Solen's designers are clever enough to know that too radical a look means death in the shops. At eye level, therefore, the Solen Tiger B50 line-level amplifier in its solid aluminum case looks 'normal, with a rectangular faceplate bearing a volume control, source select buttons (each sporting a red tell-tale –inside– the button) and a power switch.

But the upper corners, when viewed from the front, are slotted, and it's only when the eye travels to the top plate that the observer realizes that those slots are the front edges of the amplifier's heat sinks. The designer sweeps these down the sides, and they meet at the back, forming a rear panel 150mm wide --

compared to the frontal width of 370mm. So yes, it is triangular, but with the rear point sliced off to produce a sensible surface for mounting the five-way speaker binding posts, sockets for CD, Video, Tuner and Tape In/Out, and gold-plated sockets marked Phono/Aux.

Straight out of the box, the Tiger is phono-stage-free, as its line-level tag suggests, but the company does manufacture an outboard phono section, the PA-2 Phono Module, as an option. This consists of a small, Walkman-sized black box with gold phono sockets, an earthing tag and a captive lead terminating in a tiny, Neutrik-style connector. This is the power lead, the phono stage being driven by the Solen Tiger itself via a tiny socket labeled 'VA', sited just below the speaker terminals.

The Tiger is small but densely packed with circuitry, the triangle of a chassis surrounding a massive toroidal transformer; the main circuitry is best viewed from the underside. The relatively small size of the unit reiterates the company's intention to employ ultra-short signal paths. The circuit itself consists of a hybrid design in shunt-regulated push-pull configuration, with a pair of ECC81s used in the pre-amp section. The company, as with others who have used this topology, states that valves at the input stage offer the widest possible overload headroom, 'with the dependability and low output impedance of a solid state design in the power stage'. MOS logic-controlled circuitry is used to route the signals directly from the inputs to the pre-amplification stage.

The power amp section was designed for stability and 'grunt' but with fast rise times, in effect creating one of those NAD-like situations where a tiny amp can behave as if it were a big mutha. I used the Tiger -- the name became more appropriate with every listening -- with all manner of 'difficult' speakers, including Sonus Fabers and Apogee Stages, and it served dutifully without complaint.

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Two main strengths allow the Tiger to stand proud in a price sector crowded not only with good integrated amps (with phono sections) but also with less expensive separates combinations. The first is its way with dynamics. In no way does the Solen have the sheer power of the similarly-rated BB100, but it still behaves like a lot more than a 2x50W amplifier selling for under #900. To keep within its capabilities, I'd recommend slightly less difficult matches than the Sonus Fabers -- the Monitor Audio Studio 10s, for example, worked a treat with the Tiger -- but the

hungrier, more ornery designs will not embarrass this baby. It is able to swing from soft to loud with consummate grace, especially if it's not being asked to deliver the kind of bass possible with a design like the Stages.

The other noteworthy characteristic is its gloriously transparent midband. Slight cloudiness affected the extreme treble, almost a softening effect, but this is only worth noting because the all-important midband is so open and refined. And this effect was noted more when using the Tiger's outboard phono section than with the line inputs or the phono section of the SP-14. Not that the phono stage is that bad; it's just that the line stages are better. And as far as the PA-2 goes, keep in mind that it retails for a mere #170 so it's actually pretty good value.

The general behavior of this unit favors CD, so offering it in standard form as a line-level-only device means an instant savings for those who have abandoned the LP. Using CDs designed to impress rather than entertain, the Tiger was able to handle outrageous 'torture tracks', like the stampedes on Telarc's Round-Up or our own 'garage door' without suffering from compression. More thrilling was its superlative behavior in all three dimensions, with space and location perfectly preserved, even if the soundstage seemed scaled down a shade...but in the right proportions.

But this slight reduction, say to 9/10ths scale, is wholly in keeping with its 'little jewel' nature, a reminder that good things often do come in small packages. It has charm on many levels -- aesthetically, sonically and ergonomically -- and the triangular case occupies a comfortable spot in between novelty and domestic acceptability. At #870 in line-level form, it has to be judged a wise purchase for the iconoclastic audiophile, a musical, wholly pleasurable bargain of an amp. Funnily enough, it'll even make you feel good about the pending Europeanization of the UK.

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