

VERITY FINN EN LEBEN CS-300

Leben A Motion Sound LEBEN HI-FI COMPANY

tested

music
emotion

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Twoe **verschillende** producten,



The image shows a gold-colored Leben CS-300 stereo integrated amplifier. It features a large central volume knob, a selector knob with positions for LINE-1, LINE-2, LINE-3, LINE-4, and CD, a balancer knob with LEFT and RIGHT settings, and a bass boost knob with 0 dB, +3 dB, and +6 dB settings. There are also switches for TAPE MONITOR (OFF/ON), HEADPHONE, and SPEAKERS/PHONES. A power button is located on the right side. The text 'Leben A Motion Sound LEBEN HI-FI COMPANY' is printed at the top, and 'STEREO INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER MODEL CS300' is at the bottom right.

Two different products , One musical soul.

tested

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één muzikale ziel



The image shows two tall, black, rectangular speakers standing side-by-side. The speaker on the left has two drivers visible (a tweeter and a woofer), while the one on the right has one large driver visible. They are set against a light-colored background.

VERITY FINN AND LEBEN CS-300

During my test of the attractive high quality Accuphase product line, Hi.Fine importer Paul Hattink already mentioned that he had some other nice toys besides his dearly beloved Japanese elite brand. They may be totally different in appearance, specifications and sound, but according to him most certainly very beautiful and special as well. The first product that he showed turned out to be a tiny tube audio amplifier of the Japanese brand Leben, whereas the other was a brand new model of the Canadian brand Verity. This time the highlight of the day had nothing to do with one of these products though, but a lot more with experiencing music yourself. To my great surprise, Paul had brought his acoustic guitar with him, and wanted to play some tracks of his last album 'Concierto de Stonehenge' in the listening room!

The 'Leben Hi-Fi Stereo Company' is a Japanese producer of tube audio amplifiers. Mr. Taku Hyodo is the designer and owner of Leben and he is one of the eight most prominent designers of tube audio amplifiers in Japan. Before he started his own company in 1979, he worked for the famous Luxman until his thirtieth birthday, where he cooperated in the design of several famous and well-known tube audio amplifier designs. His first own creations reach the market under the name of KFH and are mainly meant to be used in pubs, bars and restaurants. The first genuine commercially suited product is the KFH Triode 33 power amplifier, introduced in 1991, which uses 3C33 tubes. The name Leben did not come 'to life' until 1995 for the introduction of the RS-35, a power amplifier, and was completed in 1998 with the matching RS-28c pre-amplifier. This product is still available today in an updated form!

One musical soul

We will discuss the CS-300 which, as are his brothers CS-200, CS-250 and Cs-300x, especially designed to grant the wishes of less wealthy music lovers. These are the people who want the Leben sound, but could not afford it before. All Leben tube amplifiers have a Self biasing circuit, with which the tubes are always operating automatically and are stable in their optimal work area.

Users can also replace the tubes without needing a screw driver or multimeter. Just like all other Leben products, the CS-300 tube amplifier is the odd one out. This is not because of its compact form (36 cm width, 14 cm height, 27 cm length), but because of its extrovert visual looks. The CS-300, as it happens, is a perfect example of Japanese retro design, which is rather explicit. The aluminium front is anodised with gold with slim moss green edges at the top and bottom, the side panels are made of painted brown wood and even the button, switches and other parts look like they came right out of the seventies. However, when I look closer at the device and touch the buttons and switches, the aversion quickly starts to turn around into a growing enthusiasm. This is because everything clearly moves around smoothly and without resistance, with the same kind of sharply outlined interim steps and the same preciseness as photographic optics of brands such as Carl Zeiss, Leica or Nikor. The front side has whopping four control knobs (choice of

source, volume, balance and bass boost), two switches (tape monitor, speakers/headphones), and an on/off switch, and even a 6.35 mm audio jack headphones connection. The amplifier has six pairs of line in and one pair of line out connectors, but the relatively subtle bass boost option, with two intensifying levels (0, +3 and +5 dB) under 100 Hz, can make small speakers with a weak bass sound little stronger and more mature. On the back side, one finds the same perfection as the front.

There are neatly arranged connectors visible for European socket connection, speaker connections for two pairs of speakers which can hold loose wire, speaker spades or banana plugs, a control knob for 4.6 and 8 Ohm speakers, an earth connector and seven pairs of gilded RCA connections.

It becomes clear that this small Leben CS-300 is no superman from its limited outlet capacity of only 12 Watt per channel, driven by a total of four small EL84 Sovtek power tubes in a push-pull configuration. Two dual triode 12AX7/5751 G.E. tubes take care of the pre-amplification. When the covers are removed from the top and bottom, a perfectly made classic hard-wired construction becomes visible, in which custom handwired transformers, Elna and Sanyo capacitors, metal film resistors, and many other quality components are used. The CS-300 turns out to be faultless in use, with nice silent transformers and no mentionable humming or rustling coming from the speakers.

Verity Finn speakers

"It's hard to find even bigger visual opposites" is what I think when I view the just unpacked Verity Finn speakers in front of me. Instead of the seventies or retro, the style is classy, super modern in design and with the newest technique and know-how. Verity Audio is, founded at the start of the nineties, a relatively new Canadian company. The company was founded by Bruno Bouchard and Julien Pelchat and from the start these gentlemen had actually only one goal: making the best speakers in the world! Of course there are more companies that claim the same thing, but Verity is willing to do what it takes to reach this goal. After five years of development, the first model named Parsifal reaches the market in 1995, and receives such a positive response that it eventually becomes a worldwide bestseller. These were the first steps on the road to success. Even today this model is still made in evaluated form, and is still one of the basics of the Verity program. Today in 2009, the brand managed to build up a very good worldwide reputation with its small but excellent collection of different models. Verity Audio is a pure high-end company, completed with the matching prices. These start at €6,000.00 per pair for the "cheapest" new Finn starter model which is described above, up to the extreme price of €103,995.00 for the most valuable model, the Lohengrin II. This means that the Finn is definitely the affordable one of the seven models of the program. Yet I must admit that when I look at the Finn I would not for one moment believe that it is a starter model.

The finishing of the project is of an extremely high quality, the test models are delivered perfectly French polished with black piano varnish. The proportions,

units used, connections and total image are simply excellent as well. Because the Finn has only been on the market for so long, there is yet little written information to be found about it. Though there are some interesting things to be said about the model. The yield and electrical impedance are 91 dB and 7.6 Ohm, which is good for tubes and other low impedance amplifiers. The measurements of the tapered coverage are 98 cm high, 23 cm wide and 34 cm long. The last two numbers are for the widest part at the bottom. However, the top side is only 17 cm wide and 23 cm long. I estimate the weight to be about 25 kilos per box. The Finn is a three-way system in which the 2.8 cm sized soft dome tweeter and the 12 cm mid-range speaker are applied to the front, and the 15 cm woofer under the flowingly formed bass port is placed on the back, as is typical for Verity. The mid-range speaker membrane and woofer are made out of some sort of paper pulp, and the speakers are provided with massive single wiring connections. The broad, tapered, massive, brass (?) cans, to which the added spikes can be attached, are also a typical Verity trademark.



Operating and listening 1 – Verity

I usually do not have two products that are so different in the listening room. Of course, the question arises if they can work together. Before investigating this, I will follow my fixed pattern. This means every test product first acclimatises for 24 hours, after that it will be connected with good standard wiring and listened to for a first impression. Experience shows that the first impression usually determines the later final judgement. It becomes clear that the Verity Finn can produce a balanced, mature output with these simple wires and rough set-up. The output-behaviour is slightly lower than average, which means that the speakers unite a bit more, and that it is important to experiment with the operation to reach a united frequency. It is striking that there should be a distance that is larger than usual between them to create an individual stereo performance. The absolute minimum is 2.5 meters, but I believe that the ideal distance is about 3 meters or more. When I am no longer seated, I experience a strong decrease in the higher frequencies of the Finn. Hence, the system sounds less sparkling and opened in that position. There are also benefits of this behaviour, in a room with stronger acoustics or positioned relatively close to walls, bothersome echoes would not appear as quickly as usual. Furthermore, the box is smooth and remarkably free of resonance in its construction, which makes its appearance very clear from top to bottom. Typical Verity is the bass reflection port placed on the rear. This asks for more attention for placement, and a sufficient space between the product and the wall. But in reality the system can, if placed correctly, bring a more homogeneous connection of low sounds, with less deformity, into the listening room. I paid extra attention to it in the testing period, but I cannot find any important disadvantages in the audio output of this Finn.



CS-300 BOTTOM

Operating and listening 1 – Leben

Now it is the Leben CS-300's turn, and the main question is: can one work with a mere 2 x 12 Watt? For starters, the CS-300 can take over the job of my much bigger, stronger and more expensive Unison Performance SE tube audio amplifier, and can try to operate the reference Master Contemporary C speakers. The Contemporary C has a yield of 89 dB and an average electrical impedance of 4 Ohm. So I turned the switch on the back of the Leben to 4 ohm to correspond with that. Now this was not bad at all, and even with a relatively hard burden, the CS-300 turned out to be able to play music right away. For this configuration the output is a bit warm and a bit slow, but at the same time quite homogeneous and open. Especially the far reach with natural sharpness and transparency makes quite an impression. The space is neatly created, 3D in limited form, and even the low sounds carry on deeper than I expected considering the low power. Besides that, these low sounds are not bombastic or excessively light in character. The volume level is probably the biggest surprise, as this minimal 2 x 12 Watt turns out to be able to produce loudness beyond average out of this speaker, which is not the easiest to operate. The sound it produces is not so loud that you cannot understand one another, but a lot louder than most of us would expect. However, the Masters seem to be too much after all. After an hour, the output starts to slowly collapse and sound warmer, less open and even slightly stressed. It is time to disconnect this mismatch, although it has given me valuable information about what this small Leben can do.



CS-300 TOP

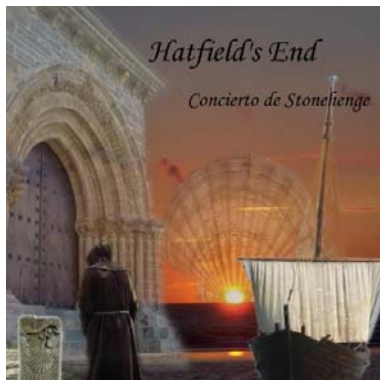
Listening 2

The goal of this second and last session was to get an optimal sound out of the test products and show all the possible potential. At first, the Masters were replaced by Verity Finn speakers, which are a lot easier to operate, and some elaborate experiments took place to find the most matching wires. After the final decisions about the right polarity, the Leben can show what it is made of again, and the differences are definitely noteworthy from the very start. Tube audio amplifiers can mainly react strongly to the connected wires and/or speakers, and this can make a difference between poor, uninspired output and sparkling, lively music experience. This time I start with an audiophile 'golden oldie'. Singer Radka Toneff and pianist Steve Dobrogosz give a magical performance in their album 'Fairytale' (Odin NJ 4003-2); beautiful emotional singing by a woman who has the voice of an angel, and a very fine, open and flowing sounding recording of a pianist who plays with heart and soul. The Leben CS-300 amplifier knows just how to play this album with the right emotional feel, the beautiful textures, colours of sounds and liveliness. Her voice along with the piano glow from within with a delightfulness, fire and passion that gives me goose bumps. We will continue with the newly released album of star pianist Keith Jarrett, bassist Gary Peacock and drummer Jack DeJohnette. It concerns a live registration of the concert in the Metropolitan Festival Hall in Tokyo in 2001, which has now just been released in 2009. It is clear right away that it is originally an analogue recording because of the rustling sound and the light colouring of the instruments. But again the glow from within is striking, which creates passion and experience in the music. Besides the always humming singing of Keith, it is also the piano that creates the whole with a delightful touch. The drums, the singing, transparently high sound of the cymbals are positively present. This creates a delightful deep music experience with a great relaxed flowing storyline. In summary, the Leben is mostly a very good and musically sounding which can play any kind of music in a desired manner with a matching pair of high-yield speakers. Yet I believe that some strong points are best used for classical music, Jazz, and other kinds of rhythmic and acoustic music. Hard rock or house music is fine, but this amplifier was not meant to be used for them with its limited ability.

Used components

Speakers	Master Contemporary C
CD player	North Star Design T192 + Extremo DAC, Accuphase DP600, PrimaLuna Prologue Eight MK II Premium
Integrated amplifier	Unison Research Performance, Accuphase E-350, PrimaLuna Prologue Two MK II Premium, Naim XS, SUPERNALIT
Audioracks	Finite Elemente Pagode Master Reference HD12, Furaud Pressand 1ST
Interlinks	Siltech Royal Signature Empress
Digital cable	North Star Design White Gold I2S
Speaker wires	Nirvana SX, Siltech Classic Anniversary 770L
Net wires	Nirvana PC, Kemp Reference, Essential Audio Tools
	Current Conductor, Siltech Royal Signature Ruby Hill II
Acoustic provision	RPG Modex Plate (4x), Acustica Applicata DAAD 4 (2x)

Of course the Verity Finn has always been the interpreter of this little David, and during the entire test period it seems to be widely applicable because of its easy qualities. Operation by a small tube amplifier such as the discussed Leben CS-300 is fine. But the (a lot more) powerful models such as the also tested Union Research Performance, Accuphase E-350 and Naim SUPERNAIT use even more power and weight. The characteristic basics of all these products turn out to be easy to find, which means they have a high solving capacity and resolution. The Finn turns out to be a broadband speaker just like the Master Contemporary C, which has the same price. The low sounds move deeply, are controlled and show real colours of sounds, definition and suppleness. The mid section adds up perfectly to this with the tonal character that is so typical for paper units. Musical and a little bit warm, but also flowing and melodious with a light sense of increasing nasality and bluntness for complex parts. The high sounds are nice and clear with the seemingly same character as the mid and low range. Verity succeeded to make an important step concerning integration compared to earlier generations. Therefore my opinion is that the Finn is even better for this aspect than one of the much more expensive models of this brand that I briefly rented years ago. I also believe that the openness, spontaneity and a certain sense of contagiousness have improved despite the lower price. The key to this total presentation is the good integration of all the parameters that create the music. Therefore, this Finn is, amongst other things, a homogeneous speaker that is pleasant to listen to. The visual appearance is definitely fine, as long as you do not stand up and have a seat somewhere between the speakers. If you do, the stereo output comes out very nice from the left and right, and one can also hear a nice limited lowness in the depth. But when Paul gets out his guitar again at the end of the afternoon and starts playing in the middle of the floor of the listening room with his legs crossed, I almost hold my breath. Because this is what it is all about: the emotion and experience of real live music. With closed eyes I listen focused to the many subtly made story lines and the crystal clear, extremely expressive guitar sound coming from Paul's instrument. It keeps changing from soft and delicate to very dynamic, and yet delivered so small and pure. Great and a perfect conclusion to this test!



CD Hatfield's End – Concierto de Stonehenge

Conclusion

It was quite a challenge to adequately test two such different products together, but at the same time apart from each other. Nevertheless, I gained a lot of respect for both and had fun. The Leben CS-300 with its strong Japanese retro design, limited strength and applicability, but also the nice finishing, faultless operation and, most importantly, the wonderful musical delight it brings when listening to music. And the Verity Finn, an easily operable and modern designed speaker system, placed on the floor, with a delicate open and civilised broad band sound and a finishing of the highest level. One can certainly combine both, although the Leben can take a speaker system with a higher yield.

Again I would like to thank importer and real musician Paul Hattink for his always infectious enthusiasm, the delivery of these musical products and especially for the beautiful guitar performance.

Text & photography: Werner Ero

PRICES:

LEBEN CS-300 € 2.500,-

VERITY FINN IN BLACK PIANO VARNISH (P/PAIR) € 6.400,-

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TEL: 00316-13672768, **WWW.HIFINE.NL**