

Cary Audio SLI-80 Integrated Amplifier

Manufacturer: Cary Audio Design, Inc., 1020 Goodworth Drive, Apex, NC 27539

919-355-0010 voice / 919-355-0013 fax, website: www.caryaudio.com

Price: \$3,000

Source: Manufacturer Loan

Reviewer: Gary Lea

As fate would have it this review is only partially complete. I must give a nod to the late, great John Steinbeck. Actually it is probably very bad karma to mention such an esteemed, prolific author in an article written by a self-admitted hack, but it is appropriate, if only in a metaphoric way. I just kept mumbling a very familiar line of his as this review unfolded. This was supposed to be part of a three-part, three-component Cary Audio review. The idea was simple. Take the Cary Audio DVD 6 player, already reviewed in these pages, hook it up to the Cary Audio SLI-80 integrated amp, and add the Q5er speaker system from Cary's subsidiary Audio Electronic Supply. Build a single-manufacturer \$7500 system and see whether it justified the price. Alas, "the best laid plans of mice and men!" As it turned out about two weeks after arrival of the speakers, word came from the Dan Lilley, of AES, that the decision had been made to not bring the speakers to market. That, as it turned out, is a real shame, as they are great-sounding speakers. Nonetheless, the show goes on, as they say. It is time to turn the critical eye to the SLI-80 integrated amp.

Anyone familiar with Dennis Had and his design philosophies will know that everything turned out of the North Carolina shop of Cary Audio is built to very exacting standards. I have yet to see anything from Cary Audio that was not both aesthetically pleasing and built to a quality level that few others can match on any scale. From the Jaguar paint finishes to the details of the switch gear, Cary Audio equipment reeks of class and quality. The SLI-80 is no exception to this rule. As a matter of fact, it combines the best of what Cary Audio is all about in one neat footprint, 7" x 17" x 16" to be exact. Not much bigger than the size of many CD decks.

Unpacking any piece of Cary equipment requires you to pack a lunch and plan on having some friends around to assist in the activity. Boxed inside a box and packed to insure that all arrives safe and sound the packaging

reflects the commitment to quality that is found in every aspect of what the company does. The SLI-80 is no lightweight as it weighs in at 42 pounds Cary audio has a firm grip on the abuse that most shipments suffer at the hands of America's finest shipping companies. Once the unit is unpacked and placed for listening one must then unpack the array of ten vacuum tubes that drive the unit.

My sample came in the standard black chassis finish with the black anodized aluminum face plate. This is the traditional Cary Audio look with gold lettering, but other colors are available; I am actually quite partial to the blue chassis finish that I saw on my last visit to the shop.

The SLI-80 is a Push Pull Ultra Linear Pure Class AB-1 integrated amp. It will produce 80 watts per channel in Ultra Linear mode, but at the flip of a very solid switch, on top of the chassis, it will move to Triode mode at a rated 40 watts per channel. Input sensitivity is rated a .45 volt for full output and the noise and hum rating is stated at -82 dB below full output. Frequency response is 19Hz to 23 kHz +/- 0.5 dB.

There are three transformers in the unit, one power transformer and two output transformers. Each of these are EI laminate and silicon-impregnated. The unit uses oil-filled coupling capacitors (copper oil filled capacitors are available as an option). The transformers and capacitors occupy the back third of the chassis with the

front two thirds being occupied by the tube array. The driver compliment consists of two 6922 input buffer preamp tubes, two 6SN7 pre driver/phase inverter tubes, two 5U4 rectifier tubes, and four 6550 output tubes. The tube sockets are ceramic with silver connector pins. When the time comes to re-tube the unit, the average cost, depending on the choice of tubes and country of origin, will run you approximately \$400.

If you are one of those audiophiles who enjoy the warm glow of tubes in your room, you will be very happy with the light produced by this array. During the entire time I have had the SLI-80, two of the 6550 output tubes have maintained a very soothing purple plasma glow to them. Usually this burns off pretty quickly, but I have been very lucky with these two tubes. What a bonus!

On the front panel the unit sports three inputs, CD, AUX1, and AUX2. There is also a 1/4" headphone jack right on the front panel. The unit is also supplied with a



compact remote volume control that also provides functions for muting. Can we get a standing ovation for the couch potato within? Now would be a good time to point out one of the few negative observations I found with this unit. The supplied remote control was the rather lightweight and had a somewhat inconsequential feel to it. I have seen and held other remotes produced by Cary Audio and they had the same look and feel of the units they were controlling. This means they were substantial in weight and feel and silky smooth in operation. This remote was a disappointment. Not that it does not work well, it does. Not that it is uncomfortable in the hand, it is. It just seems less than comparable to the rest of the component in look and feel.

The back panel is split in a left channel right channel setup with the connections arranged accordingly. All connectors are top quality and there is a 4-ohm/8-ohm speaker switch. There is also a manually adjustable bias with meter jacks for each channel.

On cold winter nights you could probably keep your hands fairly warm just standing over it. The Cary SLI-80 is handsome enough to put out on top of a nice cabinet as a show piece. The full duration of its stay with me it has set on top of our cabinet and has garnered more than a few admirable compliments, even from non audiophiles.

The full break-in period is around 100 hours for the SLI-80. Of course, few people who purchase a component like this can wait the full 100 hours to sit down and take a good long listen. The good news for those people is that the SLI-80 sounds pretty good out of the box and it only gets better as it breaks in.

I have owned a few integrated amps over the years. Marantz and Jolida are two that immediately come to mind. While they were very good units in their own right, and served me very well at the times I owned them, I always found that for critical listening, separates were the way to go. In designing integrated amps you inevitably deal with challenges of packing everything into a single chassis. Single shared power source, etc. I think I prejudiced myself against the notion of an integrated amp having the level of finesse and detail that I am used to for these very reasons.

When this unit arrived, I for some unexplained reason expected to hear a unit with spot-on midrange, rolled-off highs, little or no depth of bass, and all the dynamic punch of overcooked linguine. I just did not expect all that much. After all this was an integrated tube amp. Well, I was in for quite a little surprise. Gregg Dunn had warned me that I was in for a treat but I have always had the bent for the separates and I was not quite ready for what this little unit had to offer. Any reviewer out there who does not admit to having certain favorites and certain biases is probably not being realistic with himself. I am no different. By the same token, one who cannot admit when he is wrong is not a truly enlightened individual, is he? Time spent with the SLI-80 changed my narrow perspective. I became quite enlightened both metaphorically and physically.

Associated Equipment: Cary Audio DVD 6, VPI

HW19 MKIII and Thorens 850 turntables, Usher CP6311, Soliloquy 6.0i, Monitor Gold 10, AES Q5, and ADD C880 speakers, Kimber Monocle XL, Usher Proton speaker cables and interconnects, Blue Circle power pillows, and Monster HT 200 conditioners.

After giving this piece of art a good chance to run in I began numerous sessions of critical listening. I pulled out my standard collection of testing CDs and went to work. On Sheryl Crow's "Difficult Kind," from *The Globe Sessions* CD (A&M3145409592) there are two passages where her voice, if properly reproduced, suddenly takes on a smoothness and a sweetness that seem to suddenly be out of place in the song. It is the perfect vocalization of tremendous and soulful regret. These two passages can send chills down your spine. Played through the SLI-80, those passages made me squirm, reach for my remote, and play them time and time again, because it was just too good not to. When you can sense the aura of a singer swirling around, and you cannot only hear the faint breath but actually feel it, you know that something very magical is happening with the midrange reproduction. Many people say that tubes add warmth to the music and I won't disagree but when you hear passages like this you realize that at times warmth is the correct thing. Nowhere is that more apparent than with the SLI-80. The midrange coming from this little unit is more natural in timbre and quality, to my ears, than anything I have heard from solid state and when compared to the best of tube amps this little guy can stand on his own. What is most amazing is that it sounds lifelike and after all that is what it is all about.

From the same track, the opening has the strumming of what sounds like a very processed Fender Telecaster and there is some real sparkle within the track. If the upper tonal range of your system is overly forward, this particular part of the track will sound dry, brittle, and altogether irritating. The highs coming through the SLI-80 were extended and full without any grain. I have heard numerous amps produce more sparkling and crisp highs but often with a bit of shrillness or edge attached. The Cary does away with that unpleasant trait and just produces a very solid and smooth extension in the top end. There is nothing unusual in that for a Cary product. As a matter of fact they are usually stellar performers in those areas.

Where it got interesting was in the bottom end. I find that the one general and often universal tradeoff in tube amps is the bass, especially in lower power tube amps. I fully expected the biggest tradeoff to occur here. We are talking about an 80/40-watt stereo amp. Oftentimes they just do not have the punch to produce tight, tuneful bass notes. In comparison to most solid state amps, even ones that are lower price point units, the bass just comes up short. I am not going to tell you that the Cary SLI-80 blew away the top solid state amps in the bass reproduction, but I will say that it handled the chores with more guts than any other amp of this power that I have ever listened to. My old reference Quicksilver KY 88 amps had the ability to produce some serious bass at the same wattage. The SLI-80 was able to match them punch for punch and

that is saying something. Keb Mo's "More Than One Way Home" from the *Just Like You* CD (OKeB/Epic EK67136) contains some very deep bass lines that really drive the song. They happen, though, to be a very tuneful anchor to the track. Amplifiers that are unable to cope with the range leave you with a song that sounds more like it is laced with thumping than true tuneful low register harmony and musicality. Here is where the SLI-80 caught me way off guard, especially in the triode mode. It handled every bit of that track with speed and steadiness one would expect out of a top line 100 plus watt solid state amp.

If you have not taken a listen to the soundtrack from *The Last Samurai*, (Elektra 62932-2) you should. Composed and arranged by Hans Zimmer and performed by the Hollywood Studio Symphony, it is a masterful blend of Zen tranquility and spates of brutal samurai warring all rolled into one stellar performance. The CD provides a real gauntlet of dynamic swings and will test the speed and composure of any amplifier. The SLI-80 really showed its metal throughout the presentation. From the soft and delicate wood flute passages, through the melodic picking of June Kuramoto (from the jazz ensemble Hiroshima fame) on the Koto to the thundering Taiko drums, the SLI handled them all in stride and never faltered in handling the transients.

I presented the unit with a number of different speakers and it showed no sign of stress or trouble driving any of them. It pushed large floor standers with the same tenacity it showed smaller monitors. This is an integrated amp that can be compatible with a very large and differing group of speakers.

I ended up listening most of the time to the SLI-80 in triode mode. Not that the more powerful push-pull mode produced less quality, I just found that with the finesse of the triode mode it just sounded better on the majority of tracks that I like to listen to and produced enough oomph for the tracks that needed to be handled with authority. Many people who like to produce stronger sound pressure levels and who are into very bass-heavy music such as hip hop might find the push-pull mode more to their liking.

One of the absolute beauties of this unit is the flexibility that it offers its owner. You want party music? For electronica such as The Crystal Method's "Trip Like I Do" from the *Vegas* CD (Outpost Recordings OPRD-30003) flip the switch to push-pull and the SLI-80 serves up enough punch and sass to make you want to get up and shake your moneymaker. Just add club lighting and you are there. You want to enjoy the smooth jazz renditions of Her Highness, Queen Latifah's "California Dreaming" off her *Dana Owens Album* CD (A7M b0003435-02)? Turn down the lights, grab a snifter of Grand Centenario Anejo, flip the switch to triode, sit back in your leather chair, and you will be center stage in a smoky little jazz club close enough to reach out and touch the Queen.

There will be people who will say that this is a good deal of scratch for a minimal-feature, moderate-power integrated amplifier. I would have to argue that point.

When you compare the cost of a separate amp and preamp combo of the same quality and the cost of the extra interconnects the cost seems more like a bargain and if you are tight for space this unit eats of precious little real estate in the house. Paula gave it a high WAF! Plus in essence you are getting two different amps in one package and to shift between them you simply have to climb out of that chair, walk across the room and flip a switch.

My buddy Kevin, who just acquired his first high-end tube-based stereo, was simply amazed at how the SLI-80 reproduced the music. His comment was that the music was so much bigger than the amp. He also suggested we might want to review the unit at his place for an extended period.

I give him high marks for the effort. His comment was not lost on me though, as the SLI-80 produces quantity and quality of music that one would expect to get only from larger and much more expensive separates. With this amp, a decent front end source, and a reasonable set of speakers you could put together a system for under \$5000 that would be very satisfying for a very long time. With this amp as the anchor you could invest a bit more on a great set of speakers like the Usher CP6311s and a better front end source and you can be into a very high end system for roughly \$7,500. That is not small change to be sure. On the other hand many people cheerfully pay three to four times that to get the same level of sound quality.

You get bulletproof construction, great aesthetics, holographic imaging, and magical midrange reproduction. Coupling those points with the fact that the Cary Audio SLI-80 just simply delivers some of the most enjoyable sound you will find in that price point makes it an item you want to be sure to audition. It may not be everyone's cup of tea but this is one very versatile amp.

Indeed, the best-laid plans of engineers and audiophiles can come together. This is a great example of that phenomenon. I will miss it when it finds its way back to North Carolina!

-GL

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