

JADIS 845 SE TRIODE POWER AMPLIFIERS

THIS ASSIGNMENT BEGAN WITH A REVIEW of the unrelated Alón Circes in Issue 112. Those three-way dynamic speaker systems had a reputation for doing well with low-power single-ended amplifiers, despite being a conventional 87db—i.e., low efficiency—design. Since everyone who admires the very special single-ended triode sound has an eye out for the ideal speaker, I promised to report on this combination in a “Further Thoughts” on the Circes. Once the Jadis 845 SE’s became so elegantly ensconced here, however, they seemed to cry out for their own review. So, obeying the Law of Unintended Consequences, I will save the “Further Thoughts” for a future issue and concentrate on the amps. Still, my comments are based wholly upon the Circes, perhaps not quite the ideal partner for this particular amplifier but an extremely revealing and compatible partner nevertheless.

The reputations of both Jadis amps and single-ended triode amps are well established by now (see Technocracy, this issue, for an in-depth look at the triode phenomenon). Whenever I have heard Jadis tube electronics in other systems (this is the first time I have auditioned them in my own home), they have confirmed their reputation as suave, velvety quiet, three-dimensional, and finely focused. I have never heard a Jadis, as I have never heard the Circes, sound hard, fuzzy, or edgy except on an ugly recording—which the owners of those other systems weren’t about to inflict upon me just to prove a point! The 845 SEs are no exception. Single-ended amps, likewise, have in general become popular because of their captivating ability to remove all veils from the music, especially from the midrange and the subtle overtones without which music lacks character. I have heard the SE effect in various settings and once, very briefly, here, with E.A.R. SE amps and Alón V Mk II speakers. While they haven’t displaced higher power conventional amplifiers except among a discriminating minority (a phrase not Politically but Critically Correct!), single-ended designs continue to proliferate. The rapture and loyalty they engender among their devotees has secured their future in the High End marketplace.

The 845 SEs, as their name implies, use one 845 output tube per channel and are rated at 20 Class A watts per side. The 845 is one of those spectacular Coke-bottle tubes whose yellow-orange glow evokes the 1930s and puts you in a nostalgic mood and a room you can’t darken. (Partisans of the 845 claim it has more substantial bass response than the more common 300B, but I am in no position to agree or disagree). The output tubes may be protected by gleaming Art Deco metal grids included

with the amps, but these did not accompany my review samples, and I did not miss them. A 12AX7 input and a 6SN7 driver complete the tube complement— that’s it, three tubes per channel for 20 grand the pair; such is life in the less-is-more galaxy of luxury single-ended triodes! A typical Jadis amp in appearance, the 845 has a massive stainlesssteel chassis and huge transformers and weighs almost 90 pounds per side.

Despite its extensive acreage, the amp is laid out to minimize the signal path. This runs from the input jack in the rear to the 12AX7 an inch away, thence to the 6SN7 a couple of inches farther in, to the 845 a couple of inches ahead of that, and on to the gigantic output transformer another two inches away. The longest runs are reserved for the power supply, and the power transformer and IEC power-cord jack are at the very front (top surface) of the chassis. The output transformer of this and similar amplifiers has to be massive, I am told, because the output tube’s DC bias current runs through the transformer’s primary coils, unless the circuit filters it out, as very few circuits do. The coils must be capable of absorbing the DC without impairing the AC music signal (some think the DC actually improves the sound). The 845 SE is factory-set for speakers of four to eight ohms impedance but can be adapted for one or 16 ohms by moving internal wire connectors. And for my final tech spec, the 845 uses no negative feedback, thus positively avoiding its negative effects, which I will leave to others to attempt to explain.



I recognized the capabilities of the Jadis SE in the very first record I played, an old DG Archiv LP of Mendelssohn’s *String Symphony #8* in a version for full orchestra [2533311]. The dense, complex harmonics of bowed strings make them among the most difficult instruments to reproduce convincingly, whether at the microphone or the speaker end of the chain. One of the potential frustrations of audio for a classical concert-goer is that massed strings, the backbone of almost all classical ensembles, tend to congeal in stridency or monolithic hardness when recorded and to lose their native richness,

radiance, delicacy, and dimensional breadth. This LP in particular is hard to make sound natural, as hall (or electronic) reverberation gums up the strings.

But the Jadis amps, I discovered, disentangle the direct sound from the echo and liberate the strings from the murk. Instead of the opaque texture I was used to in this LP, I heard—at a moderate volume setting—lively yet refined and relaxed massed strings occupying a respectable width and depth of stage space. Lower strings had ample body with a trace of excess resonance. I noted that plucked bass notes were more tangible than sustained bowed notes, though both were well-defined. Woodwinds put me in mind of a ripe peach—round, colorful, sweet, and juicy. I reveled in the finely-resolved harmonics with which SE design is credited—that amiable quality that gives each instrument or voice its individual character. This effect is analogous to increasing the color depth of a computer screen, say from 64,000 colors to 16 million. The blend of intense color and rounded dimensionality produced a sense of listening through the equipment to the original concert.

I moved on to a concerto by Villa-Lobos for guitar and small orchestra, hoping the unveiling effect would carry over to the beautifully recorded solo guitar [Capitol SP 8638, LP]. It did. Incisive string sonorities surrounded a sparkling guitar without hardness or stridency. The guitar tone gave no hint of metallic clank and instead took on a gossamer lightness, though in the lower notes I detected a trace of chesty quality. Delicacy and openness prevailed, along with a most immediate presence. The SE's gave unusual point to the rhythmic interplay of solo and orchestra, appearing to align without any smearing the plucked attacks and releases of the guitar and the bowed ones of the strings. Here too the amps beautifully articulated the direct and reflected sound; I could hear the hall reflections of the guitar and the ensemble separately. (Well, if an amp with a single output tube isn't fast and precise, what is?).

In the warmth of the guitar and strings, though, I was beginning to pick up a somewhat "romantic" character in the 845 amps vis-à-vis my reference VTL push-pull KT-90 triodes: a slightly plump, rounded upper- and midbass, and a slightly glowing or lit-up upper midrange—much like an old London *ffss* recording and not equally noticeable on every disc. These effects seemed distinct from and not tied to the amps' harmonic illumination, which was audible even in recordings whose playback lacked the romantic cast. Nobody willingly listens to surface scratches, but after you've heard a lot of them, you can "read" them for coloration clues. The occasional tick or scratch on this and other LPs—not to mention the odd CD click—confirmed, with a little chestiness plus a little extra zip, the tinges of "chocolate" and "shine" I was hearing in the musical balance. Having noted this color balance, I'm reluctant to criticize it, both because it is minor and because it is so cheery, probably the least unmusical of all non-neutral balance characteristics and much preferable to its opposite: cold, thin, and dull. In the guitar recording, the amps' mildly romantic character added up to nothing worse than a special seat in the hall where the sound is particularly luscious, the seat every concert-goer craves.

This romantic "*ffss*" effect pointed me toward my next test LP, Rimsky-Korsakov's lush *Tsar Saltan Suite* [London CS 6012]. Sure enough, *ffss* in the recording met *ffss* in the amps, to produce—*ffffssss!*—not just gorgeous

symphonic sonorities but also a flashback to my first stereo system in 1962, successor to my mono systems of the decade before. The London was among my first stereo records, and I know its every nuance intimately. I hate when it sounds cool and aloof. This time its hues were deliciously mellow and luminous, and as I savored them I realized that I'd heard this sensuous character of sound before—where was it? Ah! I remembered: from my self-built Dynakit PAS-2 and Stereo 70, AR-2s with electrostatic tweeters, and AR turntable with ADC-1 cartridge. I was hearing a retro sort of sound, the sort I am nostalgic for in this age of microprocessed music. Of course, the Jadis/Circe combo is worlds better in quietness, freedom from distortion, transient quickness, dynamic range, harmonic sophistication, fine definition, and broadband response, but it was sending me a musical time capsule from a vanished era. My reference amps are less romantically colored, but also less colorful, and they provide perhaps a less sensuous experience of the music.

Even the spatial presentation of the orchestra seemed eerily reminiscent, though a good deal airier than I recall. The Stereo 70 produced about 20 watts per channel too, after new FTC rating regulations outlawed its original 35-watt spec. Over low-efficiency speakers like the ARs and the Circes, 20 watts can make a symphony orchestra appear only so big and no bigger. The Jadis amps, like the old 70, do not suppress echo but shoehorn a large ensemble into a somewhat reduced space and illuminate events in the near and middle distance more fully than those farther away. I hesitate to use the word "compressed," because, listening to these bloomy amps, any anti-musical compression is the last effect that would come to mind. As I played—not right away; see below—a variety of large- and small-ensemble recordings, I became aware that the Jadis' way of treating space with the Circes was quite similar to the way the Dynacos used to do it with those low-efficiency ARs. The 845s very accurately reproduce the original distance between the microphones and the front row of performers, putting the expected cushion of air between listener and music. But they also tend to pull in the rear corners and the back of the stage, calling in the more distant voices and thus reducing stage dimensions—the farther back, the more reduced. The 845s present perfectly a small ensemble or solo recording made in a modest space, where the performers are all relatively nearby. But with a full orchestra on a large stage, the rear row and the far corners come forward of their actual positions. What's more, when pushed toward their volume limits with a large ensemble, as in, say, *Reiner's Scheherazade*, the 845s very gracefully refuse to break up or make noise; instead, they reduce the size of the most distant images, leaving the front row nearly life size but shrinking the players in the back. You would expect images that come forward to grow larger, but this does not necessarily happen.

I confirmed this effect with Classic Records' superb LP transfer of Johnny Hodges and his orchestra [*Blues A-Plenty*, Verve MGVS-68358], one of the finest early-stereo jazz recordings. In "I Didn't Know about You," Hodges' alto sax wails up front on the left while Billy Strayhorn's piano and Jimmy Woode's bass accompany on the right. The jazz-club stage is intimately personal, and the big sax and richly detailed piano, set off by the perfectly centered and controlled room echo, are sweet, sensual, and precisely focused—the Jadis 845s slightly romantic cast in its ideal application. In this jazz

club, you and your date are the only customers. You draw up your chairs, and the trio plays for you alone. There is no sense of hole-in-the-middle, that miserable artifact of stereo technology, any more than there would be live. The whole space breathes the same air. The full band performs “Honey Hill,” where the front row is occupied, from left to right, by Hodges’ alto and Ben Webster’s tenor saxes, Roy Eldridge’s trumpet (his opening squeals will make you, and your date, jump) and Vic Dickerson’s trombone, with the rhythm section on the right side and back a bit, Sam Woodyard’s discreet drums behind the piano and bass. Via lesser amps and speakers, I’ve heard the saxes take on a projectile quality, targeting you like a Howitzer, but the Jadis knows not such aggression.

In contrast, the big Symphony Hall space in the Boston Pops *Gaité Parisienne* [Classic Records RCA LSC 1817, LP], while equally well integrated, was smaller than via high-powered conventional amplifiers. Though every bit as liquid and brightly colored as in the other records, the instruments occupied less room, especially way in the back, home of the percussion and heavy brasses. Images there tended to overlap. This phenomenon occurs not by reducing high-frequencies and creating a dead or “closed-in” balance nor, as I said, by damping the echo but rather by foreshortening and narrowing the soundstage behind the still-ample front row. In this application, the Jadis/Circe combo, though musical and appealing, did not show itself to the very best advantage.

But another orchestral recording, Debussy’s *Iberia* [Speakers Corner London CS 6013], if played at moderate—and for most listeners adequate—volume, showed off through the 845s a thrilling exhibition of finely-sculpted string and wind sonorities, while the dark, gutty glow of Leonid Kogan’s solo violin made the Lalo *Symphonie espagnole* [S35721] memorable. And I heard a powerful, immediate presentation of Milhaud’s jazzy *Création du monde* on an Everest CD [EVC 9049], where the wind-dominated chamber ensemble had striking presence; check out the flutter-tongued flute that flutters its tongue into your ear, and the vividly focused tympani. The distinct voicing of each instrument made an impression even in the most raucous “jam-session” passages, where the 845s sorted out and “chiseled” the various timbres.

Another item the 845s do right is fluid, grain-free textures. In combination with the very smooth low-level responsiveness of the Circe’s drivers, the 845s generate instrumental and vocal textures that are neither softer- nor harder-edged than life, though the dominant impression is that of mellifluous softness. This free-flowing quality combines with the 845’s deployment of space to produce, in some recordings, unexpectedly satisfying results. The 1988 Broadway cast LP of Cole Porter’s *Anything Goes* [RCA 7769-1 RC] gave me the familiar voices of New York stage favorites Patti LuPone and Greg Edelman—in “You’re the Top,” for example—smoother, finer, and more lifelike in their flow of breath through vocal cords and lips than I’d ever heard them. Though finely resolved, the voices had no etched quality but melted into the enveloping air. The same was true of the band behind them. The music poured out of the speakers like honey. No emphasis on sibilants, either. Greg Edelman sang these words in “Easy to Love,”

*So try to see your future with me,
Cause you’d be so easy to love.*

And the system added no spittiness to the underlined consonants—they were soft as silk, making these lines something of a Jadis/Circe commercial.

Anything Goes gave me a dimensional surprise too. Normally I hear the voices pretty close, LuPone left center next to Edelman right center, and the band well behind, clear but maybe a little puny. The 845s brought it all into consummate and completely stable focus, pushing the voices back a hair and bringing the band up closer behind and, for the first time, around them. Here the instruments seemed larger and the whole ensemble more integrated, the woodwinds also participating more fully. The arrangements, with perky brass interjections, made more sense. The light, foot-tapping swing of the rhythm accompaniment suggested that the 845s lack nothing in pacing and speed, even at lower frequencies.

Though many CDs sound lovely over the Jadis SEs, I have emphasized LPs because the amps’ warmth, intimacy, chiseled planes of tone, and harmonic richness are heard to most decisive advantage with LPs that share these attributes. I can testify that microprocessed home theater—movie dialogue and normal effects, not including room-shaking explosions and the like—springs forth amazingly clear, dimensional, and realistic using these amps; but that will not be their typical application. I would expect that many systems using the 845 SEs (and similar amps) are and will be LP-based systems.

I ought to mention, I suppose, that the Jadis 845s run quite cool, absorb a modest 200 watts per channel, are easy to connect, and are very reliable. And that the longer you let them settle in, undisturbed, on the isolation base or feet of your choice, the more coherent they sound. And that I haven’t said much about bass response, which, according to the specs, extends only to 40 Hz at rated power but which, aided by the slight midbass rise, never struck me as thin or missing, always as truthful, firm, and in satisfying balance with the midrange.

I will finish up by rewinding my story to the point at which I had just finished playing those first three records: Mendelssohn, guitar concerto, and *Tsar Saltan*. At that moment, I looked at the clock and discovered that these discs had absorbed over 90 minutes of my listening session—way slow! When auditioning equipment and taking notes (as opposed to just plain listening, but who has time for that?), I often just sample, playing here a track, there a track, everywhere a track-track. In 90 minutes I might sample ten LPs and CDs. But that day, without being conscious of it, I had played four complete sides in a row (the Mendelssohn covers two). Instead of picking up the stylus at the end of a band, I sat there and let the music play. I had been seduced unawares from “auditioning” to “just listening.”

Therein lies my summation. Just sitting there and listening quietly as intimate music spins around you and just for you—this, I think, is what the Jadis SEs are all about. With the sophisticated Alón Circes in a small-to-medium room, they make something of a dream team *if* you listen primarily to small groups, small choruses, solos with accompaniment, jazz, small orchestras, chamber music, and the like. If you prefer heavy rock, Mahler symphonies, or grand opera in a big room, you just might be content with the intimate stage and modest volume levels this combination offers. But you may instead wish to search for a more efficient speaker, one no less sensitive to the Jadis SE’s dense information stream (lotsa luck!) but one that the amps, like my

reference VTLs, can more completely dominate and that produces a bigger soundstage.

I find I have filled pages and pages in my notebooks with similar notes on the 845s with a wide variety of LPs and CD's, but you will be spared any further account of, say, the palpable twang of the 1926 banjo in King Oliver's "Tack Annie" [Swaggie 821, LP] the bird soaring through the foliage in "Viola Fora da Moda" from *Rio after Dark* [Chesky JR28, LP], or the many records salvaged from the sonic purgatory other amps had consigned them to. Anyway, these notes all lead to pretty much the same conclusion: the 845 SEs can uncover in a record collection unexpected dimensions of musical enjoyment.

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