

Totally Tubular

Sadowsky Audio head and cabs

By **Tom Bowlus**

AFTER 30+ YEARS spent creating some of the finest instruments on the planet, famed New York luthier to the stars Roger Sadowsky has ventured into the amp world with the SA200 all-tube head and the SA210 and SA410 bass enclosures. For his first amp, tone was paramount, and he wanted to make the best-sounding amp possible, regardless of size or weight. To assist in this task, Roger teamed up with Dutch tube-amp guru Dolf Koch.

TUBES, GLORIOUS TUBES

Above all, Roger wanted the preamp and the tone controls to sound musical. At first glance, the EQ points seem a bit odd: active bottom at 40 Hz, passive low at 60 Hz, passive mid at 800 Hz, passive high at 3 kHz, and active top at 6 kHz. The close spacing of the 40 Hz and 60 Hz frequencies seems unusual, especially in light of the broad range of 60 Hz to 3 kHz filled by just one control, centered at 800 Hz. But in practice, I found the two low-frequency knobs offered unprecedented control over the speed, punch, girth, and presentation of the lower notes. Roger felt that the bandwidth and slope of the 800 Hz mid knob allowed for the most musical tone control. The passive tone controls are “cut-only,” and the preamp is voiced such that the recommended starting point is with all the tone controls set straight up. A Clean/Fat switch rounds out the tone-shaping controls.

Another interesting aspect of the preamp is the use of three gain controls: an initial gain and volume, with a master volume. This configuration allows you to choose how hard to drive the preamp’s tube stages, with independent control of overall volume. The preamp contains a pair of 12AX7 tubes and a 6N1P driver tube (a Russian designation that’s similar to an American 6DJ8 or 6922). The power amp uses six EL34s, though the amp will also accept 6L6, KT-66, 6550, and KT88 tubes. Why EL34s? The simple answer from Dolf Koch is that they are “more musical sounding.” Do you sense a trend here?

NOW YOU’RE COOKING!

Those enamored with the sound of quality tube amplification appreciate certain

qualities: rich, full tone; complex midrange; silky-smooth highs; natural, organic lows; expressive harmonic content; an expansive sense of space; and all in all, a very musical presentation.

Upon firing up the SA200, the tone is full, warm, rich, smooth, and inviting—you know, tubes! But you also get exceptional detail, immediate response, tight lows, “unveiled” mids and highs, and an incredible sense of balance. With a bit of coaxing, it can sound thoroughly modern. But, a few minor adjustments, and you are wallowing in classic tube glory. The EQ section is not wildly powerful, but it offers sufficient tone-sculpting capability for most situations, with the distinction of not really allowing you to dial in a bad tone.

The Clean/Fat switch is more flexible than I had expected. It offers more than just a choice between tone A or tone B; used in conjunction with the gain controls and EQ, the switch allows a remarkable number of additional usable tones. With the switch set to Fat, and the gain knob cranked up, you can dial in some overdrive, though it does not get to buzzsaw levels. The range of overdriven tones seems like less of an effect and more an inherent part of the tone. Set to Clean, you can get a very tight, crisp tone, even at full volume.

A COMPLETE PACKAGE

Once he decided to enter the amp market, Roger felt that a line of cabs was in order, and he turned to Jim Bergantino for his enclosure designs. The plan was simple: one or two standard configurations, efficient designs, and killer tone. Tube amps place different demands upon the drivers, and Bergantino designed the woofers with this in mind. The result is that the lows stays tight and quick, and the full, warm tone never gets “bloomy” or out of hand. The midrange is punchy and present, but without any blatant peaks. The tweeter sounds open, airy, and precise, but still connected to the voice of the drivers. The net effect is one of sustained clarity through the midrange and highs.

The SA410 is a full-sounding cab with great punch and authority that offers a hint of vintage flavor, but with exceptional articulation and speed. The SA210 is not as full as the SA410, but it is just as punchy. It sounds more refined and elegant, compared to the



SA410’s somewhat more visceral presentation. Adding the SA210 to the SA410 opens up the upper midrange and makes the highs more expansive. This combination is very modern sounding, but with a foundation of vintage punch and warmth. The combined presentation is amazing, and does things that you wouldn’t expect from an all-tube rig. Driven fairly hard at a medium-sized but sprawling venue (without PA support for the bass), the SA200 with the SA210 and SA410 filled the room quite well, but didn’t overwhelm the stage mix. Later, I played this same venue with two SA410s, and the volume from the SA200 driving both cabinets was effortless, with loads of headroom. The two 4x10s are not quite as open, airy, and detailed-sounding as the SA410/SA210 combination, but the overall punch, girth, and authority is superior with the two SA410s.

THE BOTTOM LINE

If you noticed my overuse of the word *musical*, let me assure you, it was intentional. The SA200 is quite simply a supremely musical amplifier. The efficient cabs make the most of its 210 watts, and further assist in delivering the “best of the new and the old.” Roger’s goal was to offer the best amplified tone possible, period. Such goals are highly subjective, and personal preferences vary widely, but it is impossible to listen to these products and not appreciate that they have achieved something special. For this bass player, tube amplification just does not get better than this. ■

THE DETAILS

LIST PRICE
 SA200 \$2,800
 SA210 \$749
 SA410 \$999

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