



Cary Audio SLI-80HS integrated amplifier

Ken Micallef | Sep 24, 2019



New York City is forever being born. Lately, transnational capitalists are turning Manhattan into both an investment vehicle and playground for their platinum-level appetites. As real estate developments blot the city's skyline with competing glass-and-metal towers, mom-and-pop businesses collapse under rising rents and a lack of protection from predatory landlords—all the while such New York institutions as the White Horse Tavern, Cafe Edison, Bleecker Bob's, the Plaza Hotel, the Paris Theatre, and the Chelsea Hotel undergo massive change or disappear altogether. (Thank God for Katz's Delicatessen!)

NYC's endless churnings, vanishings, and (eventual) rebirths make me yearn for my stable southern roots: North Carolina is my home.

Coincidentally, it's also the home of Cary Audio, whose tube-powered ascendance began in the early 1990s, when New York City was still relatively middle class, and I was a young, poor audiophile. My first serious amplification chain was an [Audio Note M2](#) preamplifier and a well-used pair of Cary monoblocks. The Carys' creamy tone and saturated, syrupy sound engulfed my senses.

The ideal New York City may now be a thing of the past, yet Cary Audio seems to go from strength to strength. Take, for example, their long-standing and lauded SLI-80 Signature integrated amplifier, which has been upgraded to "Heritage Series" status as the SLI-80HS (\$4495).

Cary Audio's follow-up to the SLI-80 Signature integrated alters its forebear with a cosmetic makeover, solid-state rectification, and numerous internal upgrades. "The primary change with the SLI-80HS was to move from vacuum tube rectification to solid-state rectification," Cary Audio President Billy Wright told me in an email. "Solid-state rectification adds excellent pace and dynamics to the music. And there were internal upgrades related to wiring, resistors, caps, etc., that continue to improve the quality of sound and performance, and cosmetic changes made to the faceplate to bring the look more into line with our other, newer products. It is an effort to continue to add consistency to the product line and improve branding."

The SLI-80HS integrated amp uses two KT88 tetrode tubes per channel in a fixed-bias, push-pull, class-AB architecture. Assuming an 8 ohm load, the SLI-80HS is specified as generating 40Wpc in triode mode or 80Wpc in Ultralinear mode; that selection is made by toggling a pair of small switches on the amplifier's top plate. In front of the four KT88 tubes are two 6922 (input buffer/preamplifier) tubes and two 6SN7 (pre-driver/phase inverter) tubes. Behind the tubes stand the output transformers—mounted at an angle in the manner of earlier Cary amps and wound to their specifications by a US supplier—separated by the power transformer. Point-to-point wiring is employed throughout the SLI-80HS, as are top-flight parts, including German-made Mundorf coupling capacitors, United Chemi-Con electrolytic capacitors, Dale resistors, Eaton and C&K switches, and a Japanese-made Alps motorized volume control. Should you care to upgrade the stock SLI-80HS when ordering, a dropdown menu on Cary's website offers Hexfred rectifiers, Jensen (or higher-grade Mundorf) capacitors, WBT speaker binding posts, and a tube cage.

The handsome, steel-encased Cary measures 17" wide by 7" high by 16" deep—the height includes the amp's four rubber-composite feet—and weighs a manageable 42lb. The SLI-80HS is available with its front panel and knobs finished in either black or silver; also available is a choice of wooden side panels finished to match Klipsch's Heritage Series loudspeakers (which ties into the Cary's HS branding). My SLI-80HS review sample lacked the side panels, so I couldn't compare its finish to that of my in-house [Klipsch Heresy IIIs](#).

The SLI-80HS's front-panel controls are straightforward, offering, left to right, power on/off toggle switch (replacing a rather mushy button on the older version), a small knob for selecting inputs 1, 2, or 3, a large volume dial, a smallish balance knob, a toggle switch to choose headphones or loudspeakers, a tiny receiver window for the 1.75" by 9" remote control, and a normal-sized (¼") headphone jack.



Similarly Spartan and logically distributed, the SLI-80HS's back panel includes two pairs of speaker binding posts, those toggle switches for choosing 4 or 8 ohm taps from the output transformers, three RCA inputs marked Line 1, 2, and 3, RCA subwoofer outputs, a fuse holder for each channel, and an IEC connector receptacle.

Listening

Since adding the Kuzma Stabi R turntable and 4Point tonearm with Hana ML cartridge to my main system, I've experienced Hallelujah! moments on a regular basis. Obscene levels of solidity, refinement, grace, dynamics, power, and naturalness characterize the sound of music from my reference system—which, in addition to the above, contains a Tavish Audio Adagio phono preamp (\$1490), a Schiit Ragnarok integrated amplifier (\$1699), and DeVore O/93 loudspeakers (\$8400/pair). Whether spinning records from Kirsten Flagstad, ZZ Top, or Hank Mobley, the reproduced textures wow me. I'm reveling in pungent colors, rich tones, and deep silences.

With the Cary SLI-80HS replacing my Schiit Ragnarok, and with the Cary set for triode mode and an 8 ohm load, the reveling continued, especially while spinning jazz vocalist Cécile McLorin Salvant's live album *Dreams and Daggers* (3 LPs, Mack Avenue Records MAC1120LP). The McLorin Salvant set is free of studio trickery or any overt production aesthetic, and thus sounds practically flat in terms of frequency response, if a mite veiled. The SLI-80HS gave me a front-row seat to McLorin Salvant's superior vocal artistry and her quartet's sophisticated and swinging flow.