

Roger and the Rest

From the cable to the corner of the room: A complete audio system by Audio Note UK.

Music to the ears.

Zap – straight into the trap! We've just arrived and the music's on already. No chance of a breather after our trip, no small talk, no setting up of our photo equipment – we just have to listen (to music) straight away, with polite emphasis on the "have to"! The system's in great form ...

As soon as the first record is on the turntable, the pain begins. It's *The Pros And Cons Of Hitch Hiking* by Roger Waters, ex-bass player with Pink Floyd. I don't like Roger Waters. His sentimental pessimism, expressionless non-singing, his inflated self-importance – no, I really don't like him.



"Darling, the visitors are here – and they've got an awful lot of stuff with them!" The music room is bright and airy, acoustically well-balanced, and doesn't usually contain quite as much equipment.

The needle settles into the groove. I've quickly got rid of the album cover, someone's turning the volume control – is it OK? Yeah, yeah, fine. Meanwhile, I've calmed down again. I know that in a few minutes, when I'm allowed to speak again, I'll be ruthless. I'll slate Roger Waters and ask for better music.

A few minutes later, I have absolutely no desire to speak, let alone criticise anyone. I'm totally captivated by the music of a man who can't sing properly, isn't exactly a virtuoso on the bass, and whose pretentiousness usually annoys me intensely. What's more, I'm even starting to feel good. Although there's music by Roger Waters playing. And it keeps on playing. The track seems to last for the whole side of the record. And it gets seriously loud at times – I secretly measure about 100 decibels. From the sofa! But is it boring? Annoying? No way! I remain seated for the whole side and don't get up from the sofa until the last note has faded. Well, get up is maybe the wrong term. I actually remain fixed to my seat and can't wait to hear the next record.

Can this be true?

In the short break while someone's putting on another record, I suddenly realise that the last time I was "forced" to listen to music was also in Austria. It was at a hi-fi show in Vienna about 10 years ago. Fortunately I can't quite remember the exhibitor's name – he actually locked the door of the booth! – but I do remember the track he played: Tubular Bells by Mike Oldfield. One of the worst ever "greatest works of pop". I had to listen to side A of an over-used, heavily crackling copy at painful volume and right to the bitter end – terrible! (Complaints to www.hifi-tunes.de ...).

Now I'm back in Austria. The guy who was adjusting the volume control and pointed out that my new friend Roger Waters' LP was a

standard, non-audiophile copy is Alexander Voigt. The one who chooses the next record to put on is Gerhard Kilzer. Both these guys basically do the same job: They are the distributors for Audio Note UK (AN for short) in their respective countries – one in Germany, the other in Austria. And because you can't just do the job of AN distributor but also have to eat, sleep and breathe it, both men are exceptionally involved with "their" brand. This is obvious from the way they always refer to "we" and "us" when they talk about Audio Note, which they often do ...

Gerhard Kilzer and Alexander Voigt have met once again here in the Austrian outback in March 2008 to join forces across the border. It's not the first time and it won't be the last; they're a great team. Audio Note Germany and Audio Note Austria can perfectly demonstrate the full sonic potential of LPs and CDs played on an AN system, as if it were the audiophile Crown Jewels. Together they've set up a complex and costly hi-fi system, almost too elaborate for one man alone. Besides the synergy effect of the teamwork, there are a few new components involved that have arrived from England just in time.

HIFI TUNES members Winter, Hack & Brockmann are delighted to have been invited to this particular collaboration at the private home of a loyal and solvent(!) AN customer. Thank you for agreeing to let us take part in what was originally intended to be a private presentation.

The room we are in, which is used exclusively for listening to music, is about 320 square feet and brightly furnished, and is packed with Audio Note components including a few treasures from the highest performance "levels" as defined by AN's own level system. To differentiate the finest components in the AN hierar-

chy, you need to know your stuff. Even the most expensive components look just as unspectacular as AN's entry level products. To put it bluntly (and it's nothing new): Audio Note isn't for posers but for connoisseurs.

Here we are surrounded by an installation where every single component costs as much as a medium-sized car, some even as much as a luxury limousine. Only the CD transport CDT II is almost suspiciously cheap at less than 5000 euros. On the other hand, the retail price list that Alexander Voigt gives me shows a new cable that costs a fortune. A cable of all things. It's called SOOTTO ("so over the top") and costs – oops! It's not the total cost of the system that's supposed to impress me, if not overwhelm me – it's the performance. The music. The highest fidelity. And as my new friend Roger Waters has proved: It works! But why does the system have to be so expensive and elaborate? Well, within the exclusive universe of AN, I have a reputation for being the one who always orders the least expensive items to test for IMAGE HIFI and HIFI

TUNES, the entry level components. The one who has ignored the full potential of the AN guys just a few times too many.

So Audio Note has invited everyone here for a big concert – with a big system that represents the higher philosophy behind Audio Note, which includes the full signal chain from the interconnections to the loudspeaker drivers. A complete system made by one manufacturer, totally handmade in Europe, with some components that have been on the market unchanged for two decades. Audio Note UK has long been one of the rare companies to offer the full range of high fidelity products and provide an enormously broad portfolio that comprises not only the entry level components. Let's not be distracted by the fact that Peter Qvortrup, free spirit and big boss at Audio Note UK, defends the superiority of the valve and sometimes takes a totally different technical approach than usual (innovative, surprising, irritating, sometimes even unique). As already mentioned, it's the performance that counts.



They don't necessarily need a special platform to perform: Kageki monos with 2A3 and pure silver output transformers



Top: TT3 Reference with power supply for the IO Ltd cartridge. Below: Control device and power supplies for the three TT3 motors

We look around a bit more before the music starts again to see which equipment it was that spurred on my old pal Roger to new heights of greatness. Brand new on AN's order list, which comprises no less than 700 items, is the extraordinarily complex record-playing machine TT 3 Reference Mk II (to call it a mere turntable would not do it justice). This highly sophisticated device spins the vinyl with incredible torque and with perfect pitch: Each of the three (!) 1-bhp motors has its own power supply, housed in three separate boxes, plus a fourth box for central control of the power supplies. This makes a total of five full-size components to deal with one single record, not including the tone arm and cartridge. There could even have been six components if the turntable had arrived a day earlier. Kilzer and Voigt would then have had time to fit IO Ltd, an MC cartridge with an external DC feed, to the 1S tone arm with its pure silver wiring. The IO Ltd does not have its own permanent magnetic field and needs an external DC power supply to generate one.

We will still have the opportunity to listen to the extremely expensive IO Ltd later, however. They also have the TT 3 Reference (without Mk II), the predecessor turntable, fitted with this unique non plus ultra MC system. But with or without external DC supply: The top step up transformer S8 is responsible in both cases for transforming the tiny moving coil signals for the phono stage of the M9 preamplifier. In this über-preamp (for the corresponding über-price), the phono signal is handled by an extremely precise and essentially lossless RIAA equalization. The M9 features transformer-coupled symmetrical inputs and outputs, a volume control which is hand-built from selected resistors, plus an external power supply involving valves, of course.

The two Kageki mono power amplifiers are built just as exquisitely, as can be seen thanks to the open chassis. The 2A3 power valves deliver an unbelievable 8 watts per channel – unbelievable considering the volume level we experienced just a minute ago. The sophisticated output transformers are probably one of



From top to bottom: MC step up transformer behind the CD transport, preamplifier, D/A converter, valve power supply



Speakers' corner: The AN-E/SEC Signature with an external crossover, a blue hemp membrane and high-gloss finish

the crucial factors for the extraordinarily dynamic and open performance of the amplifiers: The transformers consist of pure silver, a material that features more and more as you move up the Audio Note level system.

This means that the AN-E/SEC Signature speakers are not quite top of the range. The crossover is housed in a separate enclosure here as well, but that's just the small enclosure.

The crossover of the top-of-the-line AN-E Sogon comes with a large enclosure containing no less than 22 kilos of pure silver, taking the price of the speakers alone into six figures ...

The speakers we have here are the less expensive AN-E SEC Signature speakers on incredibly heavy stands that were custom-built by Gerhard Kilzer. They almost seem to be



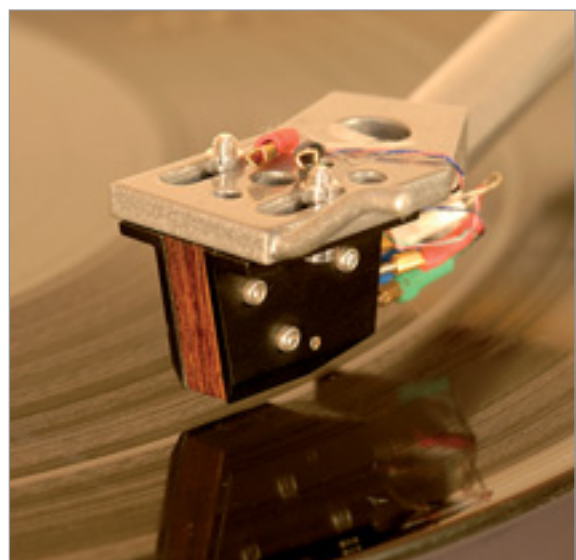
Brand new: TT3 Reference Mk II with suspended sub-chassis and bullet-proof lexan platter



As the name implies: The Audio Note TT3 Mk II has three motors – 1 bhp each!



Also plays 78s: The external control device allows any speed from 60 to 120 rpm



Terrific: MC system IO II mounted in the tonearm 1S on the new big turntable

squashed as far into the corner of the room as possible. This is exactly how they're meant to be, of course, and it works surprisingly well, to put it mildly. The speakers look as unimpressive as all of AN's speakers, although I must admit that the woofer with its blue paper cone and the shiny high-gloss finish of the enclosure hold a certain fascination for me.

The paper membranes of the woofers are made of hemp and paper and are dynamically matched – Audio Note claim to have the most stringent of standards in this field. This means that all drivers are not only checked by the usual sinusoidal or static (or other non-musical) signals and matched in pairs, but principally using dynamic signals. AN says that this procedure, although more elaborate, is also more precise as it is closer to the music the speakers have to reproduce. You only need to listen.

And now back to the performance of a decent Audio Note system. Back to Gerhard Kilzer with the next record and back to Roger Waters' best mate in the comfy chair in the sweet spot. This time it's Hector Berlioz with his *Symphony Fantastique*. Georg Solti conducting the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, recorded by Decca in 1972.

A brand new five-piece turntable transports its listeners directly to the concert hall. In less than a minute, all the technical aspects are totally irrelevant. We are completely immersed and carried away by the music. The system plays effortlessly, draws every single detail out of the vinyl, but still provides a homogenous experience for the listener. Fascinating. The magic continues with the next records – Aaron Copland's *Billy The Kid*, or Gregorian chant from the Benedictine abbey of St. Maurice & St. Maur.

This spectacular listening experience was about to get even better – the next two things were almost even more impressive. The first extra kick is the switch to the IO Ltd, the cartridge with the external DC feed, which is banned for logistic reasons to the now "old" TT3. If I may claim to be able to identify the sound of the turntables (Mk II is not just an abbreviation, but a promise!), I'm simply speechless as to how much more air and atmosphere, no, how much more music this expensive MC cartridge with its six pins can

extract! Blimey, considering how high the standard is already, this is nothing less than sensational and puts an end to my usual scepticism about cartridges in this price range. The unique technical concept seems to be the reason for the unique sound experience – at least within this highly sophisticated system.

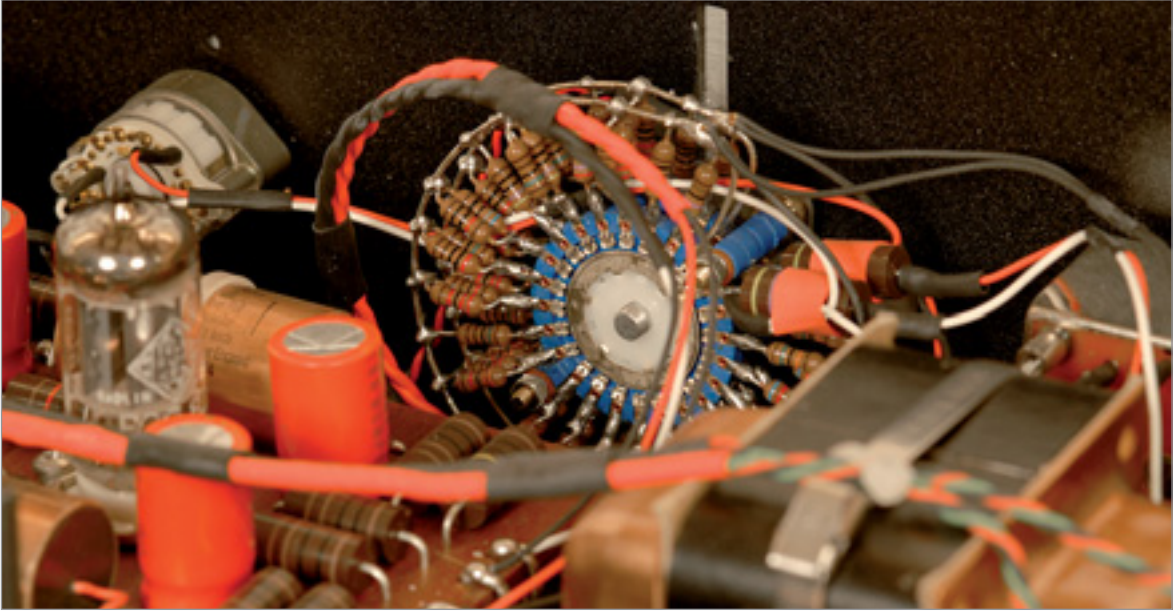
Along with the second extra kick comes the predicted crash, well, that's at least what the



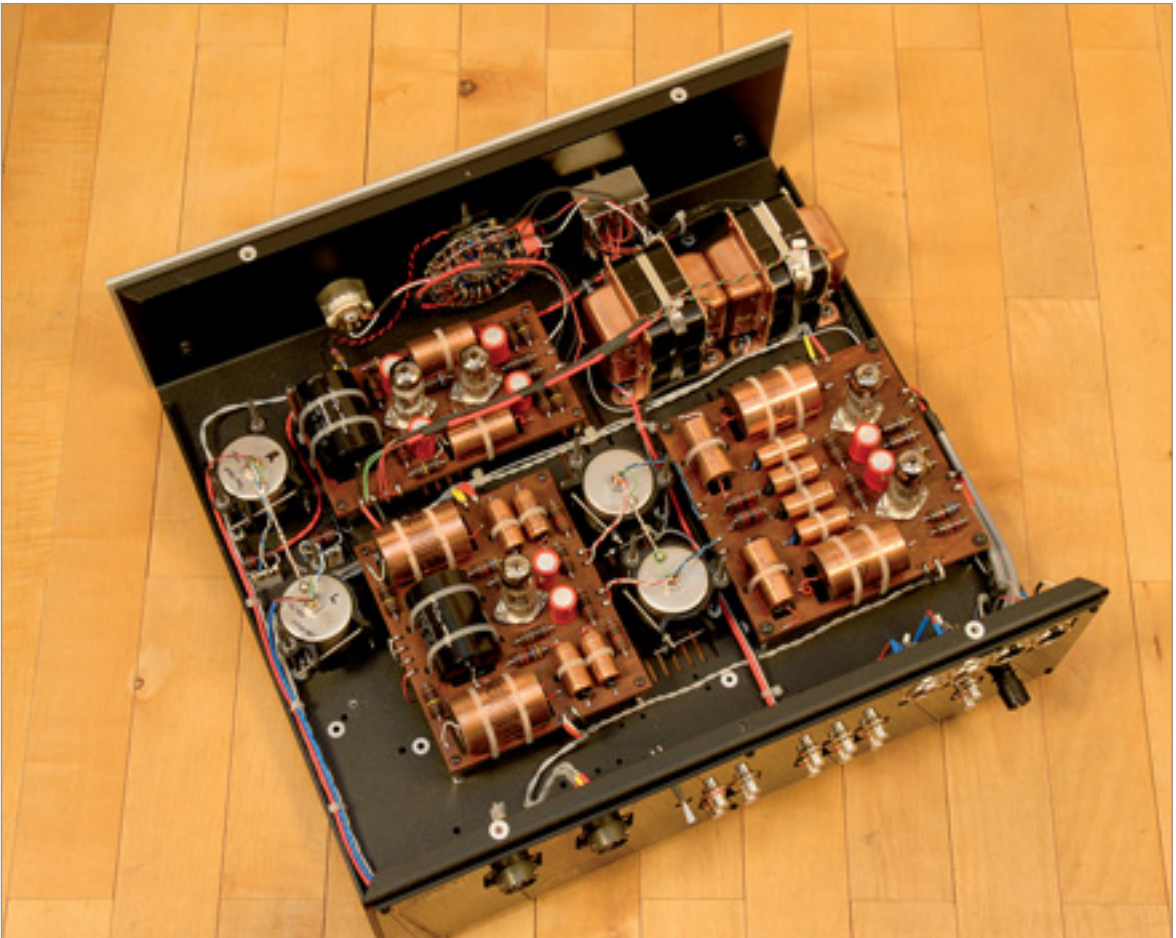
Hooked on vinyl: The six-pin system IO Ltd, the two extra pins used for external DC feed



Powerhouse: Yes, we listened briefly to the brilliant Ongaku integrated amplifier (Japanese for „music“)



Close-up: The elaborate hand-welded volume control is a good example of the quality of the M9 phono pre-amplifier but there are many other components used for this world-class preamplifier...



Audio Note is not too keen on showing the layout of its finest model, but photographer Rolf Winter couldn't resist, especially after having listened to it

die-hard analog fans would swear by the life of their vinyl collection: It's time for digital ...

They're wrong! What follows is still music, just in a different format. Loyal IMAGE HIFI readers will know that I don't really care which sound storage medium is used – as long as the quality of the reproduction is good. Therefore I don't have a problem with good old CDs. And I most certainly don't have a problem if the performance sounds utterly non-digital, like real music, as it does here thanks to the AN-CDT II transport and the AN-DAC5 SE, obviously a real gem among digital/analog converters. Okay, the DAC5 SE comes with its own valve power supply and requires twice the space, but it's definitely worth it! The DAC dispenses completely with the usual digital filters – an Audio Note speciality that I didn't really take much notice of before now – but is coupled to other components via transformers. I enjoy the time with the CDT II + DAC5 SE, and I realise that this is probably the best CD performance I've ever experienced. The sound is totally non-digital and effortless, unbelievably smooth and non-technical, dynamic and light as a feather, it's just "there". It sounds absolutely amazing. The whole system sounds amazing.

What about the rest? What about AN's entry-level products? I still like them. And AN's top-level products, like I've just experienced? I'll love them for ever more. And while the photo equipment is being set up, I'll practise my conversation skills with Roger ...

Cai Brockmann

Components of the system

Cartridges: Audio Note IO Ltd and IO II

Tonearms: Audio Note 1S/SOGON

Turntables: Audio Note TT 3 Reference and TT 3 Reference Mk II

Step up transformer: Audio Note S 8

CD transport: Audio Note CDT II

D/A converter: Audio Note DAC 5 SE

Preamplifier: Audio Note M 9 Phono

Mono amplifiers: Audio Note Kageki

Integrated amplifier: Audio Note Ongaku

Speakers: Audio Note E/SEC Signature

Speaker cables: Audio Note SOGON

Interconnects: Audio Note SOOTTO

Stands: Audio Note Series E speaker stands (custom-made by Gerhard Kilzer)

Contact:

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