

Audio Note Jinro integrated amplifier

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It's asked all the time, wherever audiophiles gather to grumble: "Everybody knows about Ferrari, Rolex, and Leica. But why hasn't anyone heard of . . ."

The last word is up for grabs: Wilson? Levinson? Linn? Maybe. But for me, whenever I'm in pissing-and-moaning mode, the choice is easy: Why hasn't the average consumer heard of the Audio Note Ongaku?

After all, the Ongaku was, for a while, the most expensive amplifier you could buy: £30,000 in 1988, the year of its release. Just as important, the Ongaku was good—in many ways, the best I've ever heard. Other audiophiles appear to have been similarly impressed. Once upon a time, Gordon Rankin and Don Garber, of Wavelength Audio and Fi, respectively, created a smaller but similarly wonderful-sounding amp dubbed the Baby Ongaku. There's even a guy in Canada who's built and sold a few (reportedly quite good) Ongaku copies.

The Audio Note Ongaku has long been the product to beat among people who prize the immediacy, palpability, and musicality of the finest single-ended triode (SET) amplifiers. And last year, the challenge of competing with Audio Note was taken up by yet another company: Audio Note. Close on the heels of their own redesign of the classic Ongaku integrated amplifier, which is now priced at \$121,500, the English manufacturer introduced two amps that employ the same circuit, implemented with humbler parts. The least expensive of the two is the new Audio Note Jinro, which sells for \$26,500.

Description

The original Ongaku was created by the late Hiroyasu Kondo, founder of Audio Note Japan, and was sold by Audio Note UK as part of a business relationship so complex—and, in the end, so controversial—that the full story defies a fair telling in less than a thousand words. Suffice it to say, that first version of the Audio Note Ongaku is a thing of the past. (Though there remains the Kondo Ongaku, built in Kanagawa, Japan, by the company founded by Hiroyasu Kondo.)

Still, a number of key elements remain today: enormous output transformers (wound with silver wire) that are intended to resist saturation and thus extend low-frequency response; a reasonably simple, tube-rectified power supply; star ground design, with a solid-copper chassis plate that doubles as a ground plane; silver wiring throughout; and, of course, one 211 (aka VT-4-C) directly heated triode tube per channel. One could add that the Jinro operates in pure class-A, but that goes without saying: In a single-ended output section, the only way to get the job done is for an output tube to conduct current at all times.

The Ongaku and Jinro of 2011 retain the original amp in their DNA, but credit for the new circuit goes to Audio Note's chief designer, Andy Grove. Distinctions abound: Whereas the first Ongaku integrated amplifier used four small-signal tubes, the Jinro and its dearer brethren use only two: After traveling through an Elna source-selector switch and stepped volume control with a nimbus of 44 individual resistors, the input signal for each channel is amplified first by half of a 5814 dual triode, then by half of a 5687 dual triode. As Grove explains, using two different tubes for voltage gain helps to balance the sound—"so you don't get too much of an accumulation of character."

The Jinro's driver stage is also a departure from that of Kondo-san's early design. Whereas the first Ongaku used a cathode follower to drive the output tube, Andy Grove opted for a 1:1 bifilar-wound transformer, designed and built in-house. That, he says, eliminates the slowness of the old approach, and gives the input stage a far more linear load to drive.

From there, the Jinro design appears close to that of Kondo's original Ongaku, with a simple voltage-doubler power supply—complete with an enormous, high-inductance filter choke—and an equally simple output section, built around the legendary 211 triode tube. The output transformers are also made in-house (a transformer that can handle a 20k ohm plate in a full-range single-ended amplifier is not exactly an off-the-shelf item), and the parts throughout the Jinro are in keeping with what Audio Note refers to as a Level Three product: Beyschlag resistors, copper wiring, and Audio Note's copper-foil-in-oil capacitors in the signal path, plus German-made Beyschlag Centralab capacitors in the power supply (although I did notice four fancy-schmancy Black Gate capacitors) and steel cores for all transformers and coils. By contrast, the Ongaku gets silver hookup wire throughout, tantalum resistors, and silver-foil-in-oil signal caps, as well as transformers made with nickel-alloy cores and hand-extruded Italian silver wire—plus a lot more of those pricey Black Gate caps.

As with all of the Kondo or Kondo-derived designs I've seen from Audio Note over the years, my review sample of the Jinro was completely handmade, and quite well, at that. The proprietary power-supply choke and drive-stage transformers were obviously labors of love—the sorts of thing one sees less and less these days, in any field of endeavor. Parts are fastened to the chassis rigidly and ruggedly, and while there exist some separate boards for certain parts, they aren't PCBs: Everything in the Jinro is hand-wired, point to point. My only complaint is that I preferred the chassis design of the older Ongaku-type amplifiers, with the separate faceplate and the more structured front end; this new design—which

trades all of that for a one-piece top that's bent, apparently on a press brake, to create an angled surface for the two control knobs—seems distinctly less luxurious.

The Jinro rests on six feet: When you weigh 85 lbs and stand only 11" tall—but a full 26" long!—four feet just won't do.



Installation and setup

In fact, the size and weight of the Audio Note Jinro combine to create a big problem of little consequence: Where does a 85-lb, 26"-long amplifier sit?

Anywhere it likes, I suppose—or, put another way, any location to which one can carry it without opening old wounds. So it was with my review sample of the Jinro, which was delivered to me by Dave Cope of Triode & Co., who works for Audio Note as one of the manufacturer's US representatives. Dave brought the big Audio Note amp in the back of his Volvo station wagon, and he and I carried it inside my house together, as befits any home furnishing too long and too heavy to cuddle in the arms of one man.

I love my home and I love my furniture—and I especially love audio gear that accommodates rather than confounds those things. But in this case, reason prevailed. And because there were clearly good reasons for the Jinro's weight and size—no space is wasted inside its sheet-metal chassis, and its extraordinary weight is accounted for not by a stupid-thick faceplate but by the necessary metal content within all those transformers—I happily let the Jinro sleep on the hardwood floor, next to instead of atop my Box Furniture D3S rack.

Luckily for me, long speaker cables are a normal part of my reference-system setup, and my 20' pair of tube-happy Auditorium 23 speaker cables (stranded copper sheathed in fabric and terminated with gold-plated banana plugs) seemed perfectly happy with these tubes. Interconnects were a mix of Audio Note AN-Vx silver Litz—enduringly wonderful stuff that I bought over a decade ago and still love—and Shindo Silver. The power cord that came with the Jinro seemed sufficiently hefty that I didn't try any accessory AC cords. My analog sources were my Thorens TD 124 and Garrard 301 turntables with various tonearms and pickup heads, aided in their task by the phono sections of my Shindo Masseto preamp and a borrowed Shindo Vosne-Romanee preamp, and by a borrowed LFD Phono LE phono preamp, set for moving-magnet gain and impedance—all with a variety of step-up transformers. Digital sources were my Sony SCD-777 SACD/CD player and my Apple iMac-iTunes installation driving a variety of USB D/A converters (but mostly a borrowed Furutech GT40).

For the most part, of course, I used the Audio Note Jinro with my own Audio Note AN-E SPe H/E loudspeakers: a reasonable enough pairing, I should think. In fact, as you'll see in a moment, the two worked together quite well. I was mildly disappointed not to be able to say the same of the combination of the Jinro and my own Quad ESLs: The sound of that system flattered neither product. Given the Quads' wiggly impedance curve and the Audio Note's utter lack of feedback, local or global, I was not surprised.

During its time in my home, the Audio Note Jinro behaved flawlessly: no hum, no crackle noises, no service interruptions. And the curtains never once caught on fire.

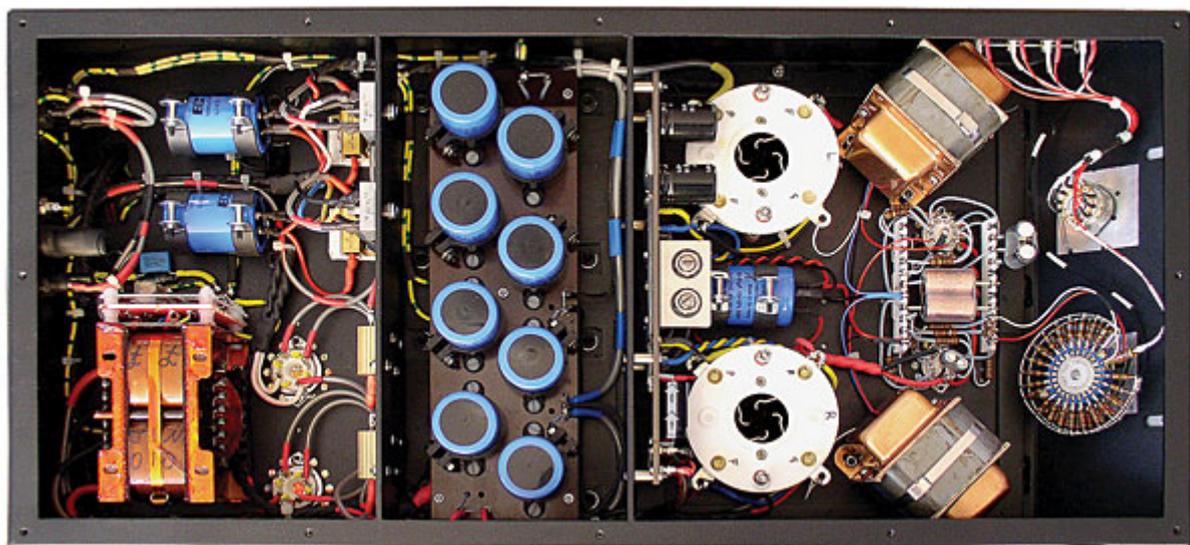
Listening

I loved the Audio Note Jinro. Its overall sound was very subtly sweet, with a midrange that was a bit soft—timbrally, but not temporally—with an abundance of that often-noted-yet-never-explained "SET sound" that allows solo voices and instruments to stand musically and spatially proud of the rest of the mix. The Jinro played melodies with unsurpassed flow and momentum, including those in Elgar's *Sospiri*, recorded by Paul Goodwin and the English Chamber Orchestra (AIFF file ripped from CD, Harmonia Mundi HMU 907258), and allowed even the most up-tempo music—the Replacements' *Sorry Ma, Forgot to Take Out the Trash* (LP, Twin Tone TTR 8123) comes to mind—to sound nearly as propulsive as through, say, a Naim Nait. Yet the Jinro distinguished itself by allowing notes a realistically generous amount of natural decay—again, without the slightest sense of rhythmic lagging.

To some observers, I suppose one or another of those qualities is attributable to one or another departure from perfectly flat frequency response: a point of view to which anyone is entitled, wrong though it seems to me. That said, it struck me that the Jinro worked with my Audio Note AN-Es to produce the most timbrally realistic performance I've heard from those speakers. The brass instruments in Sir Adrian Boult and the London Symphony Orchestra's great-sounding recording of Vaughan Williams's *Job* (LP, EMI ASD 2673) sounded just plain right; and in the recording by Nicole Henriot-Schweitzer, Charles Munch, and the Boston Symphony Orchestra of Ravel's *Piano Concerto in G* (LP, RCA Living Stereo/Classic LSC-2271), the piano had all the sparkle and purr one could hope for, without the thinness or the downright mechanical quality with which lesser gear imbue it—especially in the second-movement waltz. Similarly, the opening brass and the energetically bowed cellos in Holst's *A Fugal Overture*, performed by Sir Adrian Boult and the London Philharmonic Orchestra (LP, Lyrita SRCS 37), were gutsy and richly textured through the Jinro-AN-E combination, but not overly so.

The Jinro also seemed to pass along deeper bass information than my reference preamp and amp, adding a bit of oomph to the sounds of certain lower-pitched instruments. The bass drum toward the

end of Scene I of Vaughan Williams's *Job* was more powerful than usual; ditto the right- and left-hand timpani throughout XTC's "Sacrificial Bonfire," from a new reissue of *Skylarking* (45rpm LP, Ape APELP044D). The title track of Miles Davis's *Bitches Brew: 40th Anniversary* (LP/CD, Columbia/Legacy 88697 702742) was very damn scary, with an extra sense of menace to the otherworldly, broken-machine-like bass notes. And I was surprised at how huge and deep Bob Cranshaw's double bass sounded in "Yesterdays," from *Sonny Meets Hawk* (LP, RCA Living Stereo/Classic LSP-2712, and one of Classic's finest reissues), by Sonny Rollins and Coleman Hawkins (plus my esteemed neighbor Paul Bley on piano). On the other hand, the Jinro didn't have the same sense of scale as my Shindo combination of Masseto preamp and Corton-Charlemagne monoblocks, the latter sounding altogether bigger.



The Audio Note and Shindo electronics presented musical and sonic textures somewhat differently. The Jinro favored (drew my attention to might be more accurate) textures of a finer sort, such as the rosy air-sheen that hangs around in the milliseconds following a violin note, or the shimmer of a ride cymbal under the hands of a good drummer. My Shindo gear, by contrast, seems to favor coarser, stringier sounds—for example, maximizing the hugely physical quality of the cellos and double basses that open Sir Georg Solti and the London Symphony's very Wagnerian version of Mahler's *Symphony 2* (LP, Decca/Speakers Corner 325/6), or the fullback manner in which the same instruments make their entrance in the second movement.

Conclusions

Do single-ended triode amplifiers sound wonderful because they're uniquely true to the music, or do they sound wonderful because they falsify and misshape the music, however appealingly? In short: Do single-ended amplifiers sound wonderful because they're right or because they're wrong?

The question never ceases to fascinate me, but only because I love a good question; the part of my brain that writes the endings to things looks past the answer, because I don't really care: Absent proof that it causes cancer, impoverishes my family, or leads to demonic infestation, I like what I like. I think everyone ought to feel that way, but that's none of my business. Hell, if everyone liked Hank Williams 78s, there wouldn't be enough left for me.

The notion of a domestic audio amplifier that costs as much as a Subaru Forester, yet whose maker would have us know represents tremendously good value for the money, challenges us, and is precisely the sort of thing that pisses off a lot of middle-aged men—a group not known for its ability to resist

being pissed off about matters less serious than cancer, poverty, and demonic infestation. Yet the big question remains: Do I think the Audio Note Jinro is a good value? In long: Do I see \$26,500 worth of parts and/or design ingenuity in the Audio Note Jinro? And—do I hear \$26,500 worth of sound when I listen to the Audio Note Jinro? The respective answers, of course, are No and Yes, I think so.

So I return to the Jinro's sweet tone, remarkable spatial qualities, and superior way of letting notes flow—arguably among the prime reasons for anyone to buy a \$26,500 single-ended integrated amplifier in the first place. The Audio Note was beautifully, enchantingly involving; and, in concert with Audio Note's AN-E speakers, it sounded clear and clean and pretty much correct. While it's not the only amplifier to do so—certain other Shindos come to mind, not to mention various Lamms and maybe a few other products—the Jinro exists as an appealing alternative for those who can appreciate and afford that sort of thing: a wonderful, wonderful amplifier.

Audio Note Jinro integrated amplifier Specifications

Sidebar 1: Specifications

Description: Tubed integrated amplifier. Tube complement: two 5R4WGB, two 211, one ECC82 (or 5814a), one 7044 (or 5687). Inputs: 4 line-level. Input impedance: 100k ohms. Line input sensitivity: 200mV at maximum output. Frequency response: 20Hz–20kHz, –1.0dB. Signal/noise: 75dB at 2mV, broadband. Output power: 18Wpc into 8 ohms at 5% THD (tube-dependent).

Dimensions: 12" (300mm) W by 11" (280mm) H by 26" (660mm) D. Weight: 85 lbs (38.5 kg).

Serial Number Of Unit Reviewed: JIN-010.