

Chris Redmond tells of the beginning of his journey ,

Audio Note Quest Silver monoblock amplifiers

January, 2007

It was only late last year when I remember melting into the recliner with a glass of Irish cream liqueur, a packet of chocolate raisins and an obscenely contented smile on my ugly mush, thinking how great it was to be finally off the upgrade ladder/roundabout and able to simply relax, forget about the equipment and enjoy the music.

The Audio Asylum forums were visited far less frequently, I rarely bought any of the audio rags, and in actual fact was spending considerable time delving through the music review sections of previously read magazines, finding recommended artists/albums to look up on Ebay.

Yes, I was still waiting for a valve output APL Audio modified SACD1000 to be sent my way from across the pond, but this was more the icing on the cake so to speak as I'd even started to ignore and listen through the CD replay inadequacies of the Toshiba SD-900E, which had been promoted to the main source component since reluctantly letting my beloved Wadia/Audio Note DAC4.1x combination go their separate ways.

An accelerated Darwinian process of 'survival of the fittest' meant the present system had sonically evolved from the level of a knuckle-scraping Neanderthal to one of Amazonian stature (the system is definitely female – very temperamental), with it's own dedicated ring main, various mains treatments and Kimber's finest KS-1030 silver cabling throughout, so despite the DVD player being such an obvious 'weakest link' that Ann Robinson would dismiss it without even a cursory 'Hello', never mind a hissed 'Goodbye!', the performance was nonetheless still capable of keeping me away from the TV (and gym...) for many an hour.



However, it wasn't long before some increasingly anticipated bad news arrived from Alex Peychev of APL in regard to the SACD1000. For reasons beyond his control – hang your head in shame Philips – Alex had to reluctantly concede that completion of his mods would now be put off indefinitely. Faced with my system's 'icing' being put on ice so to speak, suddenly those bearable Toshiba inadequacies started to cause an uncomfortable shifting in the listening chair, and like the peas in the princess' bed they became much harder to ignore.

Inevitably, I made the mistake of letting that thin wedge of upgraditis poke itself into my subconscious where it spent the next few days burrowing deeper and deeper until I just HAD to replace the Audio Note M2 preamp with an M3; this was something I could do without altering the system balance, and I could fund the purchase by selling off the rare-as-hen's-teeth E.A.R 519 monoblocks which made little appreciable difference when used to bi-amp my Revels.

Sounds so simple, but used Audio Note M3s were proving hard to find and somewhere during my search I went off on a tangent and purchased a used LAMM LL2, basically because the price was right and four reviews I read proclaimed it to be the class leader or thereabouts depending on taste.

The M2 was a stellar performer at it's price and considerably beyond, but the LAMM was a couple of notches above price wise, was itself a valve design and just HAD to be an 'upgrade' unless four reviewers were involved in a conspiracy to deprive me of my trusty M2 that is.

Eventually that LAMM took up residence on my equipment rack and did ye old 'veil-lifting' trick, with resolution a notch above the M2 as I'd expected given the almost fourfold increase in price.



In fact, I was quite pleased with myself.....until a phone call informing me a used Audio Note M3 was now available – cue sound of forehead striking doorframe repeatedly, cue bank balance going into the red, cue arrival of Audio Note M3 for face off with LAMM LL2, and finally cue the LAMM LL2 being shipped to a happy recipient in Spain after the aforementioned face off.

Now didn't I do well resisting the temptation to shoehorn the predictable 'LAMM to the slaughter' quip into it's comparison with the M3?

DOH!

So there you have a fairly lengthy and some may say irrelevant preamble to the Quest Silver review, but I've included it because it demonstrates how I slid from being relatively content with one carefully tailored system to now having two; the first being my original system now relegated to HT duties even though it is by all accounts still a very good rig, while a second almost completely Audio Note system has proved to be a total revelation despite already having heard and been impressed by other Audio Note systems around the country.

You see, the 'old' hotchpotch living room system is like the long term girlfriend you thought you knew intimately and were ready to settle down with, while the bedroom system is the soul-mate you never knew existed but upon making her acquaintance instantly realised was 'the one'.

In my earlier review of the AN-E SPe HE, the over-riding impression was, and still is one of a 'rightness' of presentation which transcends any simple categorization of warm/neutral/dark or whatever, making any attempt to describe it concisely seem quite clumsy and amateurish.

That's my excuse anyway and I'm sticking to it.

I suspect it's mainly due to the seamless integration of the drivers, although I'm certain virtually every loudspeaker manufacturer on the planet would be able to show graphs proving that their drivers were also perfectly integrated so perhaps it's the paper bass/mid and silk dome tweeter combination which results in the sonic whole being greater than the sum of it's parts; for the tweeter lets think Art Garfunkel and the for the midrange think Paul Simon.....

Moving on swiftly, I was actually up a tree lopping branches off when a phone-call from my girlfriend informed me of the arrival of a "bloody massive" parcel which turned out to be an apt description of the Audio Note Quest Silver's double skinned package.

If she'd tried to move the parcel herself I'm sure she'd have added "bloody heavy" to the message as each amp alone weighs in at 20kg, but as it was, the postman did the unloading himself.

Inside the parcel, carefully separated were both amps along with the separately boxed compliment of six valves, these being two 6SN7WGTA, two 5U4G and of course two of the directly heated triode 300Bs.

All valves had small labels attached which corresponded to labels on their bases which made assembly a doddle even though no instruction manual was included with my samples, but if I'd done a web search earlier I'd have found the downloadable version here. Audio Note states that the valves should last for 6000 hours of operation, so it'll be some years before the procedure will need repeating under normal use.

Before proceeding with my listening impressions, a brief run through of what makes the Quest Silver amps a Level 3 product to match the AN-E SPe HE's they'll be used with for this review:

Pure Class A operation.

Zero negative feedback.

Single ended output stage.

Valve rectification.

Directly heated triode.

Level 3 materials and component quality include Hi B output transformer cores, Audio Note copper and silver wiring, 1W Tantalum resistors and Audio Note copper foil capacitors.

The eventual installation of the Audio Note Quest Silver Monoblocks proved to be an almost 'road to Damascus' experience, in that no matter how highly I rated the AN-E/Sugden A21SE pairing – peerless at the price in my experience – the extra cost involved for good SET valve amplification was most definitely worth putting that holiday or plasma screen off for another year or two as the M3/Quest Silver combination raised the level of involvement yet another notch to somewhere approaching some kind of 'Audio Nirvana', which is the kind of cliché I was previously confident I'd never use in any review of mine, only to find it's actually one of the better clichés I've called upon lately but that's what Quests have reduced me to...

Part TWO

Chris Redmond is back to relate his quest in audio in this conclusion of

The Audio Note Quest Silver monoblock amplifiers Review

February, 2007

A few years ago while using a pair of 'valve like' solid state Mitchell Engineering Alecto monoblocks, I was keen to try out the real thing, and so made numerous requests for information and recommendations of valve amplification at online forums in order to make a shortlist.

Of relevance to my current review in particular is the following snippet of information which I've cut 'n' pasted here for your perusal. It's from a very amiable guy who offered his first hand experience of the Audio Note Quests compared to the EAR 509s I was enquiring about at the time.

It'll give you all a brief respite from my own ramblings, but acknowledgements to 'Lobo' and the Audio Asylum are in order before reading on, and I quote;

"If you listen to solo female voice with guitar, the Audio Note would give you an exceptional seduce and pure voice like your beloved one whispering closely to your ears and draw you more into music. The 509 on the other hand, would give you a more live feel, with the explosive pace, dynamic and better rhythm of the guitar and you know you are in the good show. As I said before, a combination of both would be perfect from my view.....the Audio Note Quests are very good 300B but I always dream of owning the Ongaku one day because I heard it. The Ongaku is the BEST SET which you will forget bass slam or other hifi parameters when you listen to it . Therefore I doubt I will put extra money on any modification like Border Patrol to my Quests. Alternatively I am thinking to buy a pair of those SILVER output from Audio note UK to replace the stock pairs in Quests and may give me a small slice of Ongaku sound."

Five years have passed since that text was written, and what I would humbly suggest to Lobo after gaining first hand experience of the Quests is that when the speakers are Audio Note's own 98dB sensitive AN-Es, the bass produced is sufficient to not leave me hankering after the E.A.R 509s which would, in fact, be a definite overkill.

This was highlighted when I was loaned a compilation 2CD set of classic rock tracks titled DAD Rocks! to download onto my personal MP3 player, and inevitably it found its way onto the Audio Note system.

In line with Audio Note's philosophy of "comparison by contrast", the differing qualities of bass reproduction between tracks was effortlessly highlighted and I'll confess to quickly skipping through the individual track intro's of whole album before settling down to serious evaluation, just marveling at how palpably real these oft heard classics now were.

The comforting hiss of analogue recorded masters preceded some of the most recognisable bass lines known to man from the likes of Deep Purple to Black Sabbath, Hawkwind, Whitesnake, Rainbow, Thin Lizzy and Billy Idol among others, and make no mistake that my ears were left ringing with the volume of the M3 set just a tad past 12.00. Coincidentally, it was 12:00 midnight when the slightly miffed face of my girlfriend appeared around the side of the door to ask if I wanted a cup of tea before bed, but in consideration of the neighbours I hastened to mention that I had moved on to some more sedate jazz an hour earlier, followed by Eva Cassidy who was born and raised to be heard on an AN SET audio system.

Indeed, it was Eva Cassidy's Live at Blues Alley that was the deciding factor in me first turning to an Audio Note DAC, rather than Sony's finest SACD for my musical pleasure player all those years ago, and it shouldn't be too long now before I am sampling (not over/upsampling!!) the delights of an AN transport and DAC which will finally complete a full Audio Note system review.

For now, my source is a quite engaging Myryad MXC6000 CD player, possessing a highly detailed, refined presentation which seems to compliment the AN system quite nicely. With fourteen individually designed power supplies, 24-bit/192kHz Delta-Sigma DACs, and DC-coupled, individually trimmed audio outputs, it is most definitely a league or two above the Toshiba SD-900E which, at the end of the day, is a DVD player with aspirations of superior audio performance.

Before carrying on, it may be of some interest to point out that because the review system is upstairs in the bedroom, away from the TV and home cinema, there was no dedicated equipment rack available to use.

Therefore, in the time-honoured tradition of Audio Note never seeming to use anything other than a foldaway decorator's table to exhibit and demonstrate their wares at various shows around the UK, I had placed the amps on either side of the CD player on a wooden coffee table (see pics) with the M3 preamp sitting underneath on a piece of MDF, which itself rested on the carpeted wooden floor.

I mention this because I did initially have very obvious and distracting problems with microphonic 'ringing', the source of which was quickly identified to be the M3.

Placing three of Russ Andrews' isolation oak cones under the M3 eliminated the ringing totally which, to be honest, was a pleasant surprise as I'd inserted them purely because they just happened to be within easy reach while I was wondering if I would have to buy another rack.

Of course, sitting the M3 more or less directly onto a wooden floor between speakers was asking for trouble, but through exaggeration, it did at least clearly demonstrate the effects of microphonics to me, and also how effective very simple devices were at dealing with those effects – or at least those which were clearly audible.

No doubt even better isolation would be more beneficial, although this wouldn't necessarily require a megabucks equipment rack, and of course you could always opt for the aforementioned decorator's table which has the benefit of being useful for when the wife decides you've spent enough time sitting on your backside listening to music - it's time for you to paper the lounge!

Microphonics a thing of the past then - I mean past, I was now experiencing a connection to musicians and their performances which sometimes really was like being transported back to another era, and despite the 'limitations' on paper of the Quest Silvers in terms of ultimate power, the music nonetheless continued to flow in such an effortless, unstrained manner that I again found myself regretting not having made the leap of faith to SETs much earlier in me and my system's development.

Without having heard SETs from another manufacturer in my home environment, it is of course impossible to say whether the quality I'm enjoying now is attributable to Audio Note or to SETs in general, but when things are this good, I've no motivation or need to experiment although, of course, I have my suspicions (which is why I haven't as yet tried to procure SET amplification from any other manufacturer for review....)

Similarly, for years now I've always used Kimber interconnects and speaker cables because I've never detected any shortcomings in what they do, and every upgrade I've made from one Kimber cable to another has yielded a clear increase in performance over its predecessor.

For the purpose of this review however, Audio Note supplied me with a full compliment of their Lexus LX interconnect and speaker cable which demonstrated that Audio Note's total system synergy isn't just confined to their components.

Despite being restricted to high purity copper construction when Audio Note's preference is almost always to use silver as a conductor whenever possible, the Lexus possessed such a beautifully balanced character, that it was a few hours before it dawned on me to install my own reference Kimber KS-3035 speaker cables and KS-1030 interconnects at many times the price of the Lexus.

Already being in possession of the high purity silver Kimber Select cabling, I was duty bound to utilize them in the AN system and immediately there were gains in the low level detail and ambience which was similar to the kind of improvement I'd experienced when moving up from an Audio Note DAC3.1x to a DAC4.1x, which used more silver internally.

With the DACs, there's also an increase in weight, separation and presence that comes from additional upgrades to the power supplies, but I used the comparison in preference to saying another veil had been lifted. You see what I mean now about the 'Audio Nirvana' inclusion?

So while the AN Lexus seem to be about as good as copper gets in my experience in terms of musicality and balance, the Quests, M3 and AN-E SPE HEs nonetheless love the finest silver conductors, which is hardly surprising considering their pedigree, which also has me wondering what AN's own silver wires would be capable of, especially in an AN system?

Then again, why should I waste time wondering about such scenarios when the present reality is so good? As they say, a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush - even though it might poop on your wrist.

This Quest review can hopefully be considered something of a precursor to a review of the almost mythical all-Audio Note system, providing I can persuade an extremely busy Mr. Qvortrup to send an AN CDT transport/AN DAC combination my way, but I believe the Myryad CD player used for the bulk of this review has at least demonstrated that it isn't absolutely necessary to have an AN source to enjoy the delights of an AN system; although after owning two AN DACs previously, I'd say it would definitely help.....

I could write another two thousand words before nightfall; but none would really add any more insight into what I've been experiencing this past few weeks, and let's be honest, you really do have to audition for yourself to appreciate exactly what your own experiences would be in your own listening environment. I would however suggest that any system utilizing the AN-E's in particular would not suffer from the usual room related excuses - I mean problems - as other designs so often used to explain poor sound.

Reviews are useful for whetting the appetite, piquing an interest and drawing up shortlists, but if, as a result of reading a review, you are tempted to listen to a component/system you wouldn't normally have given the time of day, reviews can be invaluable.

Life is short, system building can be frustrating, costly and ultimately unrewarding, yet get it right and your life is enhanced by music from across the ages, whenever you have the time and inclination to pry open a CD case or coax a vinyl disc from it's cover.

The system approach is one which I believe has the most direct path to where we all want to be; but reviews by necessity are component-based, which invariably means many of us tend to wander off on a tangent at some point, and in addition to straying from the right path, it's even possible to lose sight of where we wanted to get to in the first place as our point of reference alters.

Stay tuned then and perhaps one day the final piece of the jigsaw will be delivered to my front door in the shape of an AN DAC, by a red-faced postman who by now must dread the AN logo embossed on the side of any parcel sitting in the back of his van.

Maybe I should invite him in one day for a listen, whereupon he might just forget about his slipped disc for a few hours?

Specifications:

Type: Single-ended triode monoblock amplifier

Maximum Output: 9 watts RMS per channel into 4 or 8 ohms

Input Sensitivity: 250mV for full output

Input Impedance: 100k Ohm

Channel Balance: +/- 0.3dB

Valves: 1 x 6SN7WGTA, 1 x 5U4G, 1 X 300B

Power Consumption: 135 watts

Weight: 44lb

Dimensions: 77 H x 81 W x 197 D (inches)