





Integrated amplifier Audio Note (UK) Jinro

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Audio Note (UK) often gets mystified, but hidden behind the legend there is hard work carried out by highly ambitious enthusiasts who have turned the company into Europe's largest tube-based full-range manufacturer.

Britain's Got Talent

Talking about the Jinro integrated amplifier should start with mentioning its big brother, the Ongaku - the secret dream and scary nightmare of every proficient audiophile. No matter how much money you have invested in your system, no matter how many hundredweights of amps you have dragged into your equipment support, just one encounter with the Ongaku, one of the most legendary tube amplifiers in hi-fi history, can ruin everything. If you don't have to think twice about an almost six-figure expenditure, you are welcome to stop reading already here (and hopefully won't save a trade magazine subscription in the future). For the rank and file in Hi-Fi, on the other hand, who put a few bucks aside every month in order to compensate themselves for their deprivations with the proverbial very last amplifier, I have to proclaim a hot insider tip on the following pages.

The Jinro from Audio Note (UK) and the top model Ongaku are like two peas in a pod. The only difference is that the Jinro uses copper instead of silver within the discrete assemblies, inside the transformers and the capacitors. This is really good news, especially for those rationalists among us hi-fi enthusiasts who don't believe in the sound of cables and who consider the increased conductivity of silver compared to copper to be technically negligible. They get an integrated amplifier identical to the Ongaku at about a quarter of the price! However, you don't have to take my word for granted that the Ongaku still sounds better. Especially since my credibility is doubtful anyway; after all, I even believe I can hear tonal differences between power cables. Either way, Audio Note (UK) classifies the Jinro in their product hierarchy as a level-three component, if you will, the sanity class of the English manufacturer, whose classification range comprises a total of six levels. In principle, there are also minus-one and minus-two level components - but not provenient from Audio Note (UK), as usually solid-state devices are filed under this category. British humour and a healthy sense of identity perfectly pair up in this statement. The product portfolio starts with the entry-level Zero and ranges up to the happy-go-lucky Level Five. As far as I know, Level Six is only to be found in the in-house development department or is made upon exigent requests, provided the corresponding parts and







components are available. Level One units in particular are not to be underestimated, since the sonic value is highest there, as above that the prices increase in progressively larger steps by having the sound quality correlating in comparatively smaller steps. Once I had the pleasure of listening to the Jinro in direct comparison with a Tomei that was basically identical in structure, but equipped with Level Four components. While the Jinro was playing, I was

convinced that it couldn't get any better. A misperception that the Tomei soon disclosed subtly but clearly. The better is and remains the worse enemy of the good.

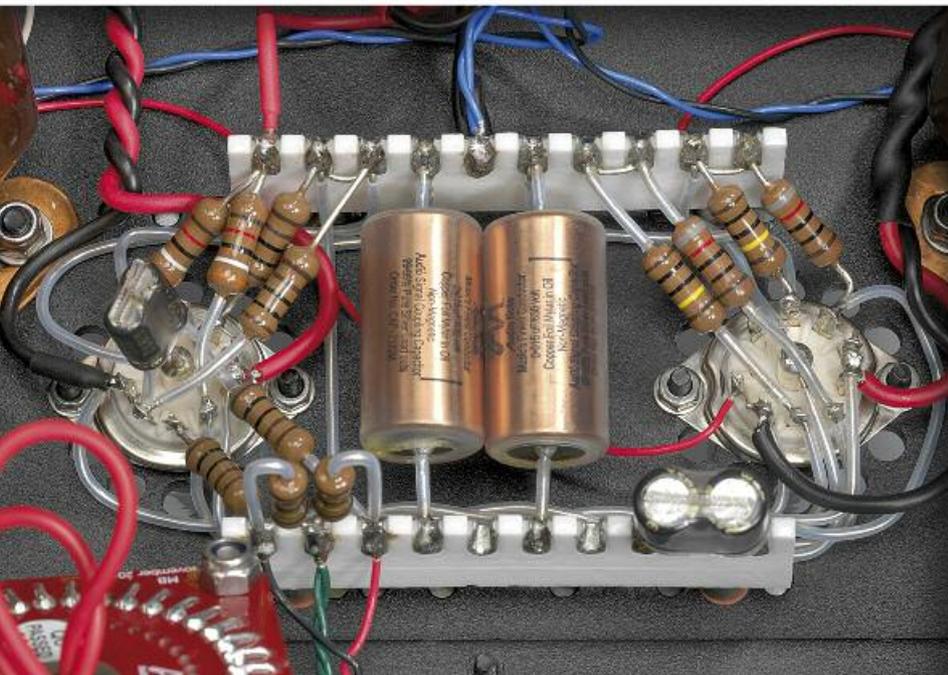
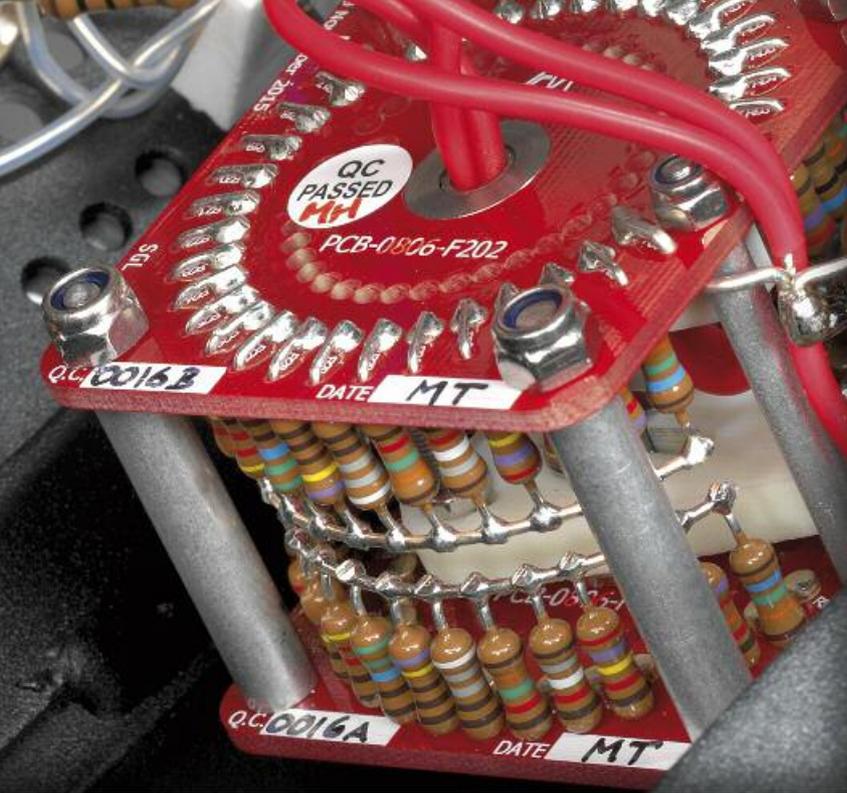
From a technical point of view, the Jinro, like basically all Audio Note (UK) amplifiers, is not a spectacular piece of gear, but extremely clever designed precisely because of its reduced complexity. At this point it cannot be stressed often enough: Designing



tube electronics the way head developer Andy Grove is wonted to do requires a deep understanding of the substance and excellently matched materials. To refer to this man as a component eliminator certainly falls far short, although there is something to it. Wherever feasible, he shortens circuitry in order to improve it substantially. This applies to the Meishu Tonmeister recently reviewed here (image hifi 3/2020) as well as to the Jinro and its closest relatives. In light of this conception, Andy Grove has, in my view, even managed to emancipate Audio Note (UK) from the Ja-

In all its glory, free-wired from input (left) to output (right): After a high-quality source selector and a tap-change potentiometer configured of individual resistors, the music signal meets a minimalist preamplifier section made of two copper foil capacitors and a handful of resistors. Processed by two adjacent bifilar interstage transformers, it finally encounters the 211 power triodes. In the centre, above the power supply filtering, the two output transformers are located, while at the back the mains transformer with rectifiers are to be found

panese paragon and to give the British manufactory an individual face of its own despite many persisting parallels. A good example of this is the input stage of the Ongaku (and thus also of the Jinro and Tomei), which in its Japanese archetype was conceived as a cathode follower with four double triodes. Of course, there is nothing wrong with that in best possible conditions, but it makes the input stage more susceptible to the load of the output section, i.e. the speakers. The more complex this load or the lower the impedance of the loudspeaker gets, the more the sound or better the temper of the amplifier is prone to change, the performance will become "slower". Without further ado, Andy Grove replaced the two double triodes with bifilar 1:1 transformers with iron core and copper windings, which now allow the input and driver sections to work largely unaffected by the load of the speaker. Furthermore, Grove uses two different tube types in the two-stage input gain section, namely double triodes of type 5814a - more commonly known as ECC82 -



and 7044, whose sonic signatures are supposed to neutralise each other in order to achieve as little tube-typical sound as possible. Needless to say, that the interstage transformers are wound in-house and optimised for their intended purpose.

The input signal from one of the four line inputs equipped with RCA sockets only has to pass through an unavoidable and, of course, very high-quality selector switch and a volume potentiometer featuring 44 substeps built up with hand-soldered resistors before it reaches the two tubes. These are embedded in a minimalistic discrete circuitry consisting of two Audio Note copper foil capacitors and about a dozen Beyschlag resistors of German manufacture, to which the aforementioned interstage transformers are directly connected, stabilising the signal for the power tubes. Along with the 845 triodes, the 211 type end tubes range among my favourite tubes because they deliver stable and ample power and are capable of sounding superbly neutral and homogeneous when built into in the right amplifier. But mastering them is obviously not an easy task: The power triode 211 operates at dangerously high voltages, which is why the copper windings of the output transformers in the Jinro show up with an insulation layer to withstand the high voltage. The output transformers, which of course are manufactured by Audio Note (UK), account for a large

Top left: The 44 substep level control built out of individual resistors is soldered by hand in a Sisyphean task and then put through its paces

Top right: A circuitry tweak that ensures stable conditions between preamp and power amp: bifilar 1:1 interchange transformers with copper windings and iron core

Center: A narrow circuit board accommodates for the discrete power amplifier section. Here, too, only high-quality components can be seen alongside proprietary Audio Note (UK) components. The two suppression potentiometers are factory-adjusted

Bottom left: Two short soldering strips are sufficient to take care of the extremely compact input stage, which is located directly between the input and driver tubes

Bottom right: Electrolytic capacitors are found in the Jinro exclusively in the voltage sieving section. They are made by Fischer and Tausche in Germany



At the heart of the power supply is a double C-core transformer made of a special silicon steel alloy. It has been continuously improved over decades of material research and can only be found in this quality in amplifiers from Audio Note (UK)

portion of the Jinro's enormous weight of almost 40 kilos and are nominally somewhat oversized, but certainly not following the motto "the more, the better". According to Andy Grove, the difficulty in designing such specific transformers is to find a sonic compromise between stability in the low frequencies and fine resolution in the high frequencies. In the end, this can only be optimised in an experimental way, Grove says, and - yes, it's always the same old story, but this seems to be one of the keys to Audio Note's (UK) enigma - it extremely depends on the quality of the materials used.

When it comes to sourcing and researching materials, the people from Partridge Green, the home of Audio Note (UK), located in the county of West Sussex, cultivate a meticulous pedantry that is otherwise only known from the tea kitchen of Buckingham Palace. If something simply cannot be manufactured in-house or can be procured on the competitive and wickedly expensive NOS market, suppliers are shackled with the narrowest tolerances and driven to despair by the in-house quality control department down to the

last decimal place. The search for a manufacturer of simple iron cores alone, into which Andy Grove granted a brief insight, gives an idea of how third-party manufacturers who do not come from the high-end audio sector sometimes react somewhat uncomprehending. It really is no bed of roses to be confronted with the quality criteria that Audio Note (UK) applies to its own components and products.

The staff that company founder Peter Qvortrup has gathered around him comprises a whole string of top-class specialists. Development is carried out in almost every direction and in impressive high production depth. Digital signal processing, tube technology,

field coil loudspeakers - Audio Note (UK) is out for everything, except semiconductors. And all items have their own sonic properties, if you credit Andy Grove, which means that everything, every component, the wax in which transformers are soaked, the carrier material of the circuit boards, different types of resistors whose differences cannot be measured but must be heard, every uncontrolled material resonance, has an effect on the sound. So it's very much clear that everything can and must be optimised. Sounds like a lot of work to get through, and it probably is, but the British tube manufacturer still cultivates a congenial nonchalance - after all, it's all about the enjoyment of music.

So, finally, there's my buzzword. The Jinro has meanwhile reached its operation temperature, while resting on a thick wooden board that finds contact to the parquet floor via Still-points - since it doesn't fit in my rack crosswise either. The Feickert Firebird is spinning *Alles in Allem* (Potomak/Indigo, LP 195991, D 2020, LP), the latest album by Einstürzende Neubauten released in spring 2020, about which so much has already been written that I can't think of anything substantial in addition. You don't have to listen to the Neubauten under pain anymore, that is true, but this is old hat. They already discovered that silence is sexy twenty years ago. It didn't make new Neubauten out of them back then and they haven't become that on *Alles in Allem* either. Instead, Einstürzende Neubauten are probably the most consistent band besides AC/DC: Every album since the noisy debut *Kollaps* leaves the attentive listener amazed at a cosmos of sound aloof from the mainstream. In the driving rhythm of opener "Ten Grand Goldie", direct references to the 1985 masterpiece *Halber Mensch* can be spotted, but you have to be prepared to perceive them through a different, denser, albeit less drastic structure. The Neubauten of 2020 no longer tend to detonate as they used to, but smoulder in a dark and menacing way,

Teammates

Turntable: Dr. Feickert Analogue Firebird **Tonearm:** Mørch DP-8 **Cartridges:** Lyra Kleos SL, Clearaudio Da Vinci, Ortofon 2M Black, Audio-Technica 50ANV and 33PTG
Phono preamp: MFE Tube One SE (integrated) **CD player:** Revox C 221 **D/A converter:** MFE Tube DAC **Integrated amplifier:** Genuin Straight **Loudspeakers:** SteinMusic Masterclass SP 1.1, Guerilla Audio 08/15 and Indian **Cables:** Musical Wire, SteinMusic, Audiophil **Accessories:** SteinMusic, Audiophil



Details such as the screwed-on and completely unlabelled connector terminal with four line-level inputs show the loving craftsmanship. The sole hard-switching power switch on the back of the 64-centimetre deep Jinro is not exactly practical, but reflects the company's philosophy of the shortest possible routing

giving their songs space and surface instead of piling up sounds. The Jinro guides me safely through the pitfall-laden underwood of the title track, carving out a vast quiet space around the melody-led harmonium and Blixa Bargeld's declaiming voice. In order to find out why this seemingly simple piece captivates me so much, I immediately step out to compare it with a really cheap Class D amplifier and my beloved Genuin Straight. It's astonishing and at the same time frightening that listening to music can as well get satisfying through a Chinese no-name amplifier for a hundred euros. No, I don't think I have anything wrong with my ears. All the essentials of the track are there, in the first impression though much flatter, rather more hollow and striking, while the slightly dirty, ambiguous tone of the harmonium has disappeared, leaving the melody seemingly less embedded or anchored in the whole arrangement, so that it could also have originated from a harmonica. Nevertheless, my high-end alter ego is shocked - experiment successfully completed. As expected, my own hybrid amplifier Straight copes much better with Alles in Allem, the open space is retrieved and the tonal coloratura is invulnerable again, but nowhere near as satiated as with the Jinro. The Straight designs a perfect working hypothesis, for which I appreciate it beyond measure, while subjectively being perhaps even more agile or tighter than the Jinro, but swiftness isn't everything. The Jinro brings out all the details of the harmonium, lets it fade away far back in the room, Bargeld's lyrics seem more powerful,

fuller, somehow more alive. "Am Landwehrkanal (At the Landwehr Canal)" has become my favourite piece. A popular ballad in the style of Weill's "Seeräuber Jenny (Buccaneer Jenny)" incorporating accordion and string ensemble. Blixa Bargeld's voice shapes a fine melody, and the Jinro accentuates all the nuances of phrasing, all those mannerisms in a performance that is ominous despite the swaying sing-along. Once again, as always when it comes to Audio Note (UK), I am faced with a dilemma: I am supposed to evaluate the technical aspects of the performance, but they almost wilfully elude me by fading completely into the background. To be honest, it's easier for me to review any kind of solid-state amplifier, because it will give me material, aspects in which it excels and others with shortcomings, it will let itself be classified in the usual structure of quality and price. The Jinro by Audio Note (UK), however, is different, it

offers no exposure at all, it doesn't need to pull, push or press the music, the music moves through it without bumping into the electronics, and then unfolds, quite simply, quite naturally, quite weightlessly. The Neubauten album is a perfect example of this, it floats and oscillates, it's quiet, very quiet and then terribly loud, none of which seems to cause the Jinro the slightest exertion.

During the test period, the German distributor sent me an additional really tangible information, as well as a 4242E power tube duo that Audio Note (UK) is having manufactured to order. I don't want to withhold both from you. Firstly, we unfortunately have to consider the price given below as a provisional one. Depending on how, when and where Britain sets out to enjoy its supposed new freedom in the future, and how Peter Qvortrup will react to it, it may be subject to change. Secondly, you are about to ask yourself, and apparently rightly so, whether you can afford an extra 1200 euros for replacement tubes on top of such a costly amplifier, or not. But this question is put the wrong way. Rather, the question should be formulated like this: Can you afford to do without? I'll tell you: No.

The brand-new 4242E tubes were given 24 hours to acclimatise and burn in, while I listened to the soundtrack works of Nick Cave and Warren Ellis on YouTube from time to time. Highly recommended! The following day, the tubes literally opened up. Where before there had been a hitherto imperceptible blank space, like there were a few fragments missing on the waves of the

Thames in a 10,000-piece jigsaw puzzle of Big Ben, now a full picture is revealed, completed down to the last detail. This swap of tubes does not elevate the Jinro to a higher class, but it does refine it in many subareas, rounding off the performance in a final and perfect way. Those who are solely after the status gain by owning a tube amplifier from Audio Note (UK) surely can do without them, but those who aspire listening to music through the Jinro are in need of this twosome. After all, the power tubes make direct contact with the music signal - the worst imaginable place to make savings.

The aforementioned sonic blank that the tube upgrade was able to fill is also the one that remains in my listening room after finishing the review. In my daily interaction with ever new test objects, it is generally difficult for me to clearly state my preferences. In conjunction with a volatile weakness in making decisions, I sometimes like one amplifier because it's so powerful, then sometimes the other because it's so subtle sounding. Most of the time I am secretly happy when they soon leave again and a new nominee is about to knock at my door. In this sense, too, the Jinro is unfortunately somewhat different. If I would have to commit to an amplifier now and in this moment until a lightning strike do us part: Yes, the Jinro would be the one to choose.

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Functional principle: integrated single-

ended tube amplifier **Tube complement:** 2x 5R4WGB, 2x 211 (4242E), 5814a (ECC82), 7044 **Inputs:** 4x Line (RCA) **Outputs:** loudspeaker **Input impedance:** 100 kOhms (Line)

Input sensitivity: 450 mV **Power rating:** 2x 20 watts at 4 or 8 ohms **Finishes:** Aluminum natural or black anodized **Dimensions (W/H/D):** 30.5/30.5/64 cm **Weight:** 38 kg **Warranty period:** 2 years **Price:** 24,900 euros

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