

I Made the Decision in Just Half an Hour on the Purchase of Audio Note Zero 3 Loudspeakers

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For those who know me well have always seen me criticizing expensive audio brands (in particular for those products above HK\$70K), as at times, I do speak highly of the mid-to-low range price products. Don't be mistaken of me being the "Sour Grapes". Unpopular brands or lower cost products are not necessarily of lesser values. For people who bear this thinking, I can only laugh it off.

One cannot deny that we all have our own personal taste, however, objective views should still be maintained. To take an example, have we ever crowned Miss Hong Kong a cripple? The mid-to-low frequency of audio systems is too dead -- thus can it be made a measuring standard? Under many different performances with many different audio systems in ideal environments, you'll over years learn to appreciate some unpopular brands. At times, they even out-rate popular ones. I thus always make my judgements on equipment quality rather than anything else, (Burmester is one of the examples). To become a professional Hi-Fi critic, one's view should always be open and objective. To become a professional, one will be of benefit if having a natural gift for Hi-Fi.

Today, I wrote in praise of Audio Note, which has always been neglected in famous U.S. audio magazines, now being recently published. Haven't I once again open up myself for criticism by those loyal U.S. magazine followers? In the Hi Fi industry, these are rarely manufactures who are diverse in producing full range of Hi Fi systems. However, whatever particular range is produced are usually of the finest products, like the Audio Note made in England, Japan or Germany. To compare with many other types of English products that only create musical effect, Audio Note is different. Through Audio Note, a musician's own feeling can be totally exposed whilst the musical instrument effect can be fully exhibited thus the audience can gradually be melted in the music. In this respect, audio Note may be the best out of many within England.

In England, a lot of loudspeakers are of a 2-way design as the crossover can easily produce the kind of smooth and natural feeling (even on the sound stage as I feel). This is exactly what Audio Note can do too. One may say the 24dB / per octave crossover has the clearest sound effect; in point of fact, it is quite complicated to manufacture to produce the best natural sound effect. For Audio Note Zero 2, it may only have used the 6dB / per octave crossover. Its high sensitivity originally came from the Quasi Horn design.

AUDIO NOTE ZERO 3 --- THE SUCCESSOR OF THE PROMINENT HIGH SENSITIVITY AUDIO NOTE ZERO 2

Audio Note used to be thought like a bashful girl yet with ample love and feelings who spoke with merely a pair of eyes. The Zero 2 floor-standing loudspeaker is designed based on the horn loading theory. Listening to Zero 2 seems to make you visualize a skilled stage actor casting a splendid performance on a grand stage. For spectators sitting at the back rows can see his every single movement, feeling and expression explicitly. Zero 2 is seen to be feverish. To further pursue, no doubt The Elephant Holdings Ltd. (HK sole agent) has Zero 3, the enhanced model, made feverishly galvanized.

Both Zero 2 and 3 woofers are made of paper fiber. Many agree that it is the best material. The high frequency is about 1/4" bigger, made with the 1" soft dome, the same as the AN-J. Needless to say, this is designed for a better output capacity. For hi-fi supporters, they are well aware that the high frequency will be at the weakest point if the loudspeaker is in its consistent high input, (however, Dynaudio is the exception), despite the fact that the loudspeaker has the crossover protection (e.g. the high pass networks). Therefore, to ensure all is well balanced, perhaps we can tune up the crossover network and use a bigger tweeter to enhance the high frequency to achieve a better output capacity. When Zero 3 is made affordably bigger for a better mid-to-low frequency to achieve more energy and texture. What Zero 3 has but not in Zero 2 is the Germany made An-SPa pure silver

connecting cable in the enclosures. It possesses Zero 2's characteristic, but with better performance as the high frequency can output freely while the low frequency crispy solid. Speaking about dainty and flexibility, they are of the same. One may say Zero 2 has out-priced its value; Zero 3 has its worthiness. In fact, Zero 3 was only being tested for a few days. My experience has already told me Zero 3 has the potential that rival products of similar prices cannot match. If you have tried the M6 pre amplifier with Zero 3, you should be stunned by its potential! Some may have purposely chosen Zero 3 to combine together with the top Audio Note model system. What is the result - stay tuned please.

ZERO 3 EMERGING AS LEADER WITHIN ZERO SERIES

From the music standpoint, a good hi fi system plays the role to express emotion. In the meantime, it enhances the musical instruments with radiant beauty. Audio Note possesses both, in particular, the loudspeakers. To fully demonstrate Zero 3, Mr. Yu of Elephant Holdings Ltd. had matched a pair of AN-SPz with AN-Vx for performance testing. I was stunned by the performance when the full Zero series was tested in the sound room. I was not over-exaggerating. Should Zero 3 be lack of endurance or capacity itself, it would have not performed despite the help from AN-SPz and AN-Vx.

I thought the latest Bonfiglio string section was just recorded as another hit piece of music. Through Zero 3, every single instrument was played luminously lively. I could see the violins and the bows waltzing across the stage fiddling with high notes from the left to the low notes on the right. The harmonica translated via Bonfiglio was far better than any other English brands I'd heard lately. It was played so magically that almost lulled me into thinking that I was listening to the violin not the harmonica. Its tone was sweet and soft. The high frequency extension was unlimited. (You may wonder what high frequency extension is -- there's no means of harshness). Quoted by Robert Ray, (the Publisher of Hi Fi Review), the light tone effect produced from the harmonica was just the same as the strings played in the concert.

The character of Zero 3 mid-to-high frequency is slightly different from the horn, however, the energy capacity is similar. We cannot deny the help from AN-SPz as it is durably strong. Zero 3 high frequency is crispy solid. This comes from the help of the pure silver AN-SPa cable in the enclosures.

You may find the crystal sound of chime in the 'Lullaye' of the Art of the Ballad, Mapleshade, has fully embraced the space. The high frequency extension is definitely naturally durable. The sound of chime is so unreal to make you feel you're actually grabbing it. In fact, Zero 3 high frequency is so clear and solid that it gives you an enthusiasm of delight. Like the 'Ci of Autumn Wind' played by Louis Chen, you can clearly distinguish the harmonic and the notes of Zheng. The two combined but yet separate. The Zheng itself is tenderly soft, however, through Zero 3, it brings out the softness yet in a crispy tone.

Zero 3 mid-to-low frequency comes like an earthquake. I didn't feel much about its capacity the first time when I tested it few days ago. When I played the 'Singking' of 'The Titanic' this time, I felt the sofa wobbling. I am serious! When 76 trombones was played, I could hear the drumbeat thick and tough but feel it flexible and condense that no other loudspeakers of the similar prose could compare. I was surprised with the effect. On the whole, Audio Note can completely demonstrate the effect of percussion, strings, even violins and in particular, the percussion as the full Zero system is very capacity capable. Audio Note is so outstanding in displaying the undulation of the melody, the rise and fall of the mood and the breath of the music. The only drawback of the Zero system may be in the piano not being able to fully discover its own charisma. However, we cannot really put the blame on the Zero amplifiers or the CD system. Firstly, it is already much worth of the price in its own kind. Secondly, Zero is only several watts. We cannot hope for a thundering type of capacity. You may say may criticism is harsh. It is due to the experiences that I have had all these years (including the comparatively expensive Audio Note). The fans of the Audio Note or the Zero system may not see eye to eye with me. However, I'd want to be honest for the comments made based on my own experiences. The 'pros and cons' illustrated above can justify your personal judgement.

I TEST ZERO 3 AT HOME AND MADE MY DECISION ON THE PURCHASE IN JUST HALF AN HOUR!

At home, I paired up Audio Note M6 with Conqueror 300B valve amplifier coupled with the hit Marantz SA1 CD player to connect with Audio Note AN-SPx for high frequency and AN-SPz for mid-to-low. I

also picked XLO Limited Edition, Gutwire Power Clef and XLO type 10A as signal and power cable. This was, of course, a superb combination as compared with a full Zero system.

As I mentioned above, I could feel the music and grasp the essence of the music in Zero 2. You may think this is what we should expect when speaking of love and appreciation from a good hi fi system. Zero 3 have expanded the perspective of the grand stage sound track. It has emphasized the characteristic, the position and the fullest of each musical instrument. It embraces the air with music. I could see the music travelling; I could feel it dancing. Every note was transmitted in high quality with the just-right density. I could even see the microphone touring on the stage to translate every piece of music distinctly. Have you ever played Track 8, 'Send in the Clowns', of 'The Art of the Ballad', Mapleshade? You can be sure that the microphone was positioned right next to the piano, the sound effect has spanned across the space between the two loudspeakers. You can even spot the bouncing keys. The detailed effect of every tone and wave has completely exhibited within the sound stage. Zero 3 has totally revealed the anatomy of the piano from metal to timber and placed its dignity right in front of you. The notes played from left-hand keys are so dense that you may think the effect comes from a grand piano. The notes played from right-hand keys are so transparently solid that you find the effect flawless. Within the 4 walls, the space is blended in with music. This is beyond my expectation. Apart from Zero 3, PMC MB1 is also worth mentioning. Its coloration and solidity are even better than Zero 3. However, the price of PMC MB1 is a few times higher! When playing 'Dynamic Piano', we used Linn CD12 (much more expensive than Marantz) and Klimax 500. The dynamic contrast was even stronger. Alternatively we used SA1 to match with Conqueror (it only has a few watts per channel). Zero 3 could still afford to output sufficient pressure when playing Carol Rosenberger's. Every note was played superbly between her magic fingers. Perhaps I should have used 'struck' instead of 'played'. Audio Note, by all means, can give us a good chance to taste the flavor of an expensive grand piano.

One of Zero 3's strength is to be able to pronounce itself sensationally. The Chinese opera music, 'The Sadden Azalea', sung by Ms C.N Chow has impressively stimulated my feelings and I wonder if love is really so rosy romantic. In fact, the whole Zero series has this capability. This is no doubt about it.

To speak about sound effect, the mid-to-high frequency of the 300B tube amplifier is somehow dainty under the Zero 3 environment. On the whole, the sound effect is clear and fresh, however, the mid-to-low frequency is less solid as proved by the Sunfire solid state power amplifier. Even playing Chinese musical instruments including triangles, strings, drums, Zero 3 can also demonstrate its distinct sharpness. As I also wanted to test the sweetness of the sound effect with the 300B tube amplifier, otherwise, I would have used a more powerful power amplifier to achieve a wealthier mid-to-low frequency. In fact, should I used the Harminic Tech power cord, the situation would have already improved. This is called mix-and-match technique.

When listening to 'Stimela' in Burmester CD3, Zero 3 has the same ability as Dynaudio Contour 1.8 Mk II to analyze the sound effect. However, Zero 3 can produce the kind of softness and liveliness whilst Dynaudio produces the solidity of the base reflex. The former emphasizes vigor; the latter Strengthens the pressure. To interpret Hugh Masekela, Zero 3 produces a soft and moist base. The trumpet timbre is crystal clear, at the same time, splendid. The texture is such elastic. The heat of the song is just intoxicating. The sound level can produce with such a big contrast from each instrument played. For one moment it is as powerful as a full orchestra; for next it's so quiet just like being submerged into the deep sea. This mid-to-low frequency paper cone has outgrown itself. When matched with M6 or Conqueror, the background noise is distinctly low.

If you have ever played the 'Scheherazade' of the RR Sound, you'll be stunned by the sound capacity absorbed in the sound stage! You can tell the right far end the existence of the timpani, the mouth organs and the strings incorporated with the sweet triangle and drums together with the violin solo. They have all superbly exposed themselves. Reference Recordings' outstanding recording technique is to everyone's astonishment.

Many say that Audio Note loudspeakers cannot be driven by mega-watt amplifiers due to the fact that the sensitivity is as high as 93dB. Once, Zero 2 was driven by Luxman L509s, the sound effect was no harsh. Now for Zero 3, I've tried it with Bruce Moore Dual Mono pre amplifier and Sunfire five-

channel power amplifier (I bridged four channels to two), together with Arcam CD23 as source, AN-SP speaker cable for high frequency and SP-SPx for low. How would you agree to this conventional match?

As soon as the system was composite, the kind of elastic texture of the sound effect soon extraordinarily released from Zero 3. The low frequency was thick but controllable. The lowest tone pressure was crystal clear -- especially for the vocal. It made no difference if it was violin or vocal, loud or quiet, the dynamic contrast was just so distinct. I knew I would love it even more if with a bigger power output. For just half an hour, I decided to purchase Zero 3.

I don't mean that the low frequency of Conqueror is not up to standard. It can by all means perform well if a better power cord is used or if Zero 3 is positioned near the back wall (this meant to be designed that way). Moreover, for many years, Conqueror was already a lot better than another French brand when it came to enhancing the beauty of 300B. The last but not the least, in a smaller room even when the listening point is within 5 feet from Zero 3, with its toe-in, you can still feel the sound effect embracing the whole stage yet not coming from the enclosures. However, one point is worth mentioning, i.e., the ideal listening point is expected to be narrower. In summary, I highly recommend Zero 3 loudspeakers. Should you not be getting one, at least, try it after all. You'll soon find that many of the loudspeakers are 'sophistically made! Zero 3 is singing.