

Audio Note AN-E SEC Silver Loudspeaker

Stereo Times, 24 February 2003

Constantine Soo

Technical Information

Specifications

Type: 2-way bass reflex

Drivers: One 1-inch dome tweeter

One 8-inch Alnico-magnet woofer

Efficiency: 94.5 dB/watt/m, with reflected impedance and mirror image of Audio Note's own single-ended amplifiers

Size: 31.5"H x 14.1"W x 11D (80 x 36 x 28 cm)

Weight: 40.78 pounds (18.5 kg)

Recommend Amplifier Power: 8 to 80 Wpc

Finish: Lacquered Madrone (other custom finishes available with lacquer option)

Price: \$19,500 per pair

Company:

Audio Note (UK) Ltd

Website: <http://www.audionote.co.uk/>



Prologue

Nearing the completion of this review, my wife and I paid a short visit to the residence of Audio Note's U.S. Distributor, Ray Lombardi, in Southern California's Simi Valley. 380 miles from my home, Simi Valley is several thousand feet above sea level on the far side of a mountain range that the southbound I-5 runs through from the plains beneath, endowing the town with some degree of freedom from the cold and thick fog as spring arrives. Atop this picturesque town of noted firemen and policemen population, Ray's residence occupies the best lot in his community and his listening room has a window to the open country outside.

Ray has a pair of the \$19,500, top-of-the-line AN-E SEC Silver in lacquered piano black, positioned well into the listening area with slight toe-in. His system consisted of Audio Note's latest \$40,000 dual-mono M-10 line stage with two much larger power supplies for the 2 channels, a pair of the \$22,000 "Shinri," 10 Wpc, 300B monoblocks and a \$25,000 Transrotor "Tourbillon" turntable fitted with a \$6,000 Clearaudio Master TQI tonearm and \$3,950 AN-lo II cartridge. Cables were the Audio Note Sogon throughout, and five Argent Lens guarded the AN-E SEC Silver in concave from the left of one speaker to the right of the other. I was treated to several of Ray's 45-rpm special-release collections, including Louis Armstrong's "St. James Infirmary," Simon and Garfunkel's "The Boxer" and "Cecilia." Those recordings were in plain but thick jackets.

As a non-contact medium proponent, I was surprised at the demonstrated dynamics of this vinyl and vacuum tube-based system. Its agility, swiftness and most of all, an excellent bottom-end, one that I did not know could be developed by such a system, along with its ability to conjure up a most spectacular soundstaging feast and delicious tonalities, simply astounded me.

The loudspeaker used, the AN-E SEC Silver loudspeaker, is the subject of this review. It is a biwireable, 2-way vented design featuring a 1-inch dome tweeter and an 8-inch woofer, with the flare port at the lower rear. According to Audio Note's proprietor, Peter Qvortrup, the AN speaker evolved out of the classic Snell A/II, the sound of which he admires and trusts to such extent that he uses several pairs of the speaker as reference to reinforce behavioral consistency in his full-range AN-E's.

Being well-aware of Audio Note's longstanding reputation as a manufacturer of some of the world's best and most exotic vacuum tube amplifiers, I remain curious at the British company's loudspeakers, as AN had never presented the product line as a major offering. As the SEC Silver expands upon the AN-E/D, readers are encouraged to read the review for a broader perspective.

Audio Note's products have exceptionally long model life as Peter undertakes continuous refinement of a proven design with progressively strategic and thorough incorporation of superior parts. This concept is evident in the M3 Preamplifier, which is available in the progressively augmented M5, M6, M8 and the recently introduced M10 versions of that basic platform. In addition, AN adheres to the exclusive "Comparison by Contrast" design concept, which aims at reducing audiophilia boredom by creating products that not only excel at differentiating natures of various hardware and software, but will also spotlight the differences as well.

AN-E SEC Silver

Ascension of Audio Note's \$2,700 "Entry Level" AN-E/D loudspeaker to the "Level 5" AN-E SEC Silver represents progressive elevations of the base AN-E. The \$2,950 "Level 1" AN-E/L replaces the internal, 99.99% pure copper AN-D single conductor speaker cable in the AN-E/D with the 99.99% pure copper litz screened double conductor cable. The \$3,350 "Level 2" AN-E/SP involves drive units matching plus incorporation of the 99.99% 15 strand silver litz single conductor cable, while the \$3,850 "Level 3" AN-E/SPx improves upon the SP with the double conductor SPx. The \$7,500 "Level 4" AN-E SE provides customers with drive units matched with the tightest tolerance.

Finally, at the supreme "Level 5," there is the \$13,500 AN-E SE Silver that takes the AN-E SE and equips it with silver wired voice coils, silver tuning capacitors and inductors. Then, the AN-E SEC Silver tops it all off with ALNICO woofer magnet. My wife started to jitter in witness of all the silver, and I am keeping an updated list of the jewelry and silverware in the house. The one overriding potential of having all these premium parts in a speaker is the speaker's anticipated superior ability in converting electrical signals as delivered by the speaker cable into mechanical energy at the highest level of fidelity.

Each AN-E SEC Silver is a product of extensive labor. According to Peter, a master technician spends hours matching a crossover to each AN-E SEC Silver driver meticulously and painstakingly in order to achieve a variance of no more than 0.1dB in a stereo pair, which must also be within a remarkable 0.2dB variance from the reference SEC speaker curve. The AN-E SEC Silver's exterior is largely identical to the base AN-E/D, which is essentially a large, wooden box, except that the review pair was finished at no extra charge in the optional Madrone over gloss lacquer that encapsulates the entire cabinet, covering the surfaces over joints seamlessly. In finishing the optional Madrone lacquered cabinet, a skilled craftsman applied 8 layers of hand polished polyester piano lacquer to the speaker. For the same money, I wouldn't have any other finish.

When one compares the \$19,500 AN-E SEC Silver to other similarly priced, well-respected competitors, such as the B&W Nautilus Signature 800, Martin-Logan Prodigy, Sound Lab A1+, Tannoy Churchill, Wilson WATT System 7, etc, the modest size of the AN cannot be overstated. These other speaker systems sport large, visually stunning appearances, with numerous drivers in the B&W, a large concentric tweeter/bass driver in the Tannoy and a large radiating area in the case of the Sound Lab ESL panel.

Generally speaking, it takes an immense cabinet or an active subwoofer to generate and sustain bottom-octave output, and a considerable number of drivers to achieve a full range presentation at realistic volumes. I have always believed that the more accurately a speaker can reproduce the sound of an 1812 cannon in its complexities and might, the more capable the same speaker will be in reproducing the delicate tones of music instruments. My Klipschorn, with its horn tweeter and midrange and 15-inch bass driver in a folded horn system, for example, excels at delivering the dynamics of an event, while my 4-way 7-speaker Genesis VI with its servo subwoofer system is incomparable in the presentation of an extended spectrum.

According to an email from Peter, AN favors 2-way designs because

"getting two drivers to work together so the overtones when present are distinct and join coherently to the fundamental is extraordinarily difficult and getting three drivers to do this is virtually impossible."

Peter Qvortrup's position is that his loudspeakers are musical instruments dedicated to music playback, and are not to be abused with sound effects reproduction.

Review System Setup

The two 10-inch high, sand-filled steel speaker stands that AN supplied with the AN-E SEC Silver were identical to the ones used in the AN-E Review, except that bottom spikes were removed and the miniature, speaker-coupling upward spikes were replaced by Blu-Tack. The stand elevated the AN-E SEC Silver's to the point where my ears were parallel to the midpoint between tweeter and woofer.

According to Joe Cutrufelli of JC Audio, one of AN's Northern California dealers, in his visit to Peter Qvortrup's England residence he noticed the AN-E SEC Silvers were placed at corners for bass reinforcement. JC demonstrated a similar arrangement with a pair of AN-E SEC Silver in his house for me, and I heard unprecedented bottom-end resolution from the AN-E SEC Silver with a stable center image. However, after trying the same setup in my system, I ultimately deemed the placement a departure from personal preference in soundstaging, dimensionality and spatiality.

I found the AN-E SEC Silver's soundstaging to vary with playback of in-studio, jazz recordings and those of orchestral pieces performed in larger spaces. While I considered classical music to be best served with the AN speaker 48 inches away from the back wall and 14 inches from side walls, the realization of a symphony's tremendous scale and atmosphere in this setup was inadvertently unfavorable to the preferably intimate, livelier dynamics of jazz music. Experimentation with toe-in angles did not yield mutually inclusive results.

Thus, my final permanent positioning of the AN-E SEC Silver was approximately 9 more inches into the room, 14 inches more from side walls and then 10 feet away from the listening position with only slight toe-in. This closer proximity of the AN-E SEC Silver accorded exceptional focus to jazz music without over-dampening spatial cues in classical pieces.

Audition

Deutsche Grammophon's first SACD, a 1977 reading of Beethoven Symphony No. 9 [DG SACD 471 640-2] was arguably captured at the height of Maestro Herbert von Karajan's artistic brilliance at the time of the recording. Here, re-mastered in DSD, the Maestro and the Berlin Philharmonic sounded more energetic than the same partnership's fuller-sounding, more insightful 1984 digital version. While the DG SACD sounded less opulent than pure DSD SACDs, such as Michael Tilson Thomas and San Francisco Symphony's Mahler Symphony No. 1 [San Francisco Symphony 821936-0002-2], the DG SACD nevertheless exhibits unprecedented tonal abundance and dynamic contrasts superior to the CD.

With the M3/Klimax Twin hybrid amplification system, the AN-E SEC Silver's liberation of the DG SACD's top-end was infused with a seemingly limitless upward extension sans brittleness. Portrayal of vocals and instruments was rich in harmonics and reverberations even at demanding volumes, and the AN speaker's voicing of the SACD's mid to high frequencies was dense in resolution and uncompressed in dynamics. Rich instrumental harmonics would seemingly always find their way to the AN regardless of playback levels, consistently culminating in a finesse unmatched by my others speakers, with the especially noteworthy absence of ringing and screeching. While my \$9,500 Genesis VI's ribbon tweeter exhibited a highly resolute top-end, it also unleashed minute, occasional treble edginess and a less complex harmonics impression, contributing to artificiality inescapable in the presence of the AN-E SEC Silver.

In that regard, the AN-E SEC Silver's mid to top-end sonics were the most resolute among any speakers I had on hand, presenting an experience no less than revelatory.

In rendering bottom-end octaves, AN's singular 8-inch woofer was out of league among the likes of the trio of Genesis' 400 Wpc, active subwoofers. Therefore, heavy bass content, such as double bass information sounded less impacting and less substantial from the AN. Yet, the Linn-driven AN-E SEC Silver demonstrated expertly responsive transients, which accorded the speaker's vented, ALNICO-equipped woofer system with a tonal vibrancy that speaks volume about the realness of instruments. Double bass had an unprecedented liveliness of being both incisive and lingering throughout passages, and snare drums were inclusive of massiveness with discernible presence amidst activities onstage, casting addictive spells on its listener.

The AN-E SEC Silver's presentation at once fell into place with the WE300B-equipped Loth-X JI300 integrated amplifier in the loop, as the AN attained a top-to-bottom spectral fullness, producing the most layered soundstaging and evocative instrument tonalities I've ever experienced. Whereas the M3/Klimix Twin tube and solid-state hybrid system was victorious in garnering the most resolute top and bottom end to my experience, the integrated Loth-X was more refined in harmonics and texturing than the M3/KT combo, with less emphasis in dynamics and spatiality. Nevertheless, there was an exceeding flamboyance in sonic coherency that not only conveyed a lifelike event, but also vanquished the drivers of the AN-E SEC Silver into a most refined and unified entity. In that sense, the AN-E SEC Silver attained characteristics of instruments like no other speakers have.

Although Peter Qvortrup associates soundstaging characteristic with improper spectral emphasis and adamantly ventures to rid his products of the abnormality, the AN-E SEC Silver had such broad coverage and exacting recovery of the frequency spectrum that good recordings were never deprived of their dimensionality.

Take The Stokowski Sound [Telarc CD-80129], for example, the Loth-X driven AN-E SEC Silver cunningly laid out the orchestra in "Bach: Toccata & Fugue in d minor" in a most satisfying, orderly manner; one that did justice to Maestro Leopold Stokowski's transcription of the original organ version. The tonal fullness of the AN accorded the Cincinnati Pops with an immensity unfound in the mannerisms of other speakers, one that communicates not merely localization of instrument groups, but also an unimpeded being of them, contributing to an utmost palpability. Telarc's renowned, sonorous textures were also undeniably a crucial factor.

The AN-E SEC Silver's rendition of jazz was insightful with either M3/KT or JI300 amplification. Take Audioquest's BluesQuest [AQ-SACD1052] SACD sampler, for example, which contained 12 highly accessible blue tunes of exemplary sound that ought to make the sampler a bestseller. The M3/KT coupled AN-E SEC Silver possessed a rolling force of such fundamental nature that bass and guitar beats, as well as organ rhythms, propelled the performances in a most lively and satisfactory manner. More importantly, the Klimax Twin's expeditious transients and definitive tonalities were instrumental in endowing the captured events with a most indispensable presence.

The Western Electric 300B equipped Loth-X JI300 integrated amplifier admittedly induced less of those pulsating factors from the AN-E SEC Silver than the M3/KT combo. Yet, the Loth-X coupled AN speaker nevertheless exhibited rhythm of such continuity and a sound of such liquidity, that no other speakers in my possession driven by any other amplification could claim equivalence.

As good as the AN-E SEC Silver was in rendition of classical and jazz, it was phenomenal in portraying the pipe organ in the CD, Cantate Domino [Proprius PRCD 7762]. Rather than reproduce in full force the formidable magnitude of the organ, a task best tackled by the Genesis VI's trio of active subwoofers or that fabled column of bass drivers in Genesis 1.1, the Loth-X driven AN-E SEC Silver made the pipe organ an extraordinarily expressive instrument from the organist's fingers. As incapable as the AN was in generating and sustaining the scale and bottom-octaves of the pipe organ, the speaker was otherwise exemplary in portraying the instrument in every other area, such as the dynamic contrasts, harmonics complexity, transients response and volume capability.

Via the M3/KT combo, the AN-E SEC Silver's rendition of this CD was incredibly forceful and yet still managed to retain tremendous tonal delicacy and incisiveness, in addition to a much appreciated weight and zeal. Their profound conveyance of an advocacy of the tubed M3's tonal abundance and the Klimax Twin's tonal delicacy/incisiveness and power was most efficacious and persuasive albeit a less articulate and commanding punch when compared to the Genesis active subwoofers.

It was during passages with this CD that I realized I could no more relate my past Mass attendance experiences to the sound of the AN-E SEC Silver than a video of identical events. For being part of a live event removes me from the rejuvenating magic of the AN-E SEC Silver in the comfort and control of my home, and video feeds inundates my senses with everything but the spirit of the performance.

47 Laboratory's 4706 Gaincard S Dual Mono Integrated Amplifier represented an attempt to remove as much electronics from the signal path as possible. The AN-E SEC Silver's ability in conveying the Gaincard S's resultant subtleties and texturing surpassed all speakers at my residence. Whether the 47 Lab was delineating a tidal orchestral passage, a sublime piano lamentation or lively jazz, the AN speaker constantly injected vastly varying sonic landscapes in vividness that no other speaker could. In this regard, the AN-E SEC Silver was like a perfect sheet of paper reacting intensely to a drop of color working its way through the fibers in a beautiful metamorphosis.

One enhanced form of the AN-E SEC Silver came to be when I supplemented its bottom-end output with the Genesis' trio of active subwoofers, crossing at the 20 Hz threshold and standing approximately 2 feet away from the side of each AN. With judicious output levels on the Genesis, the overall presentation of the AN/Genesis system was one of tremendous impact at my normal listening volumes. The solid bottom-end foundation accorded by the Genesis subwoofers not only made the AN a stunning, full-range champion. But it also added extra dimensionality on instruments such as double-bass, cello and piano. Yet, nothing is perfect, and circumstance did arise when a slightly higher cut-off frequency on the Genesis, stemming from greediness on my part, spoiled the overall presentation with incoherent top-to-bottom tonality.

Summary

One of the many vital tasks the Ultimate Loudspeaker must achieve is to convert all electrical signals into mechanical energy to the fullest extent. High-End loudspeaker manufacturers around the world have ventured boldly and courageously to create such a loudspeaker with every resources and intrinsic innovation at their disposal, from cabinet designs to transducer developments.

Despite the greatly varying approaches and techniques utilized, it will entice a multi-industries collaboration to recreate the ultimate listening experience in accordance to your room's acoustics using specified electronics. Furthermore, for the loudspeaker created under such immense undertaking to be appreciated continuously, the process will have to repeat itself as soon as we move, upgrade or just change for the sake of it, unless all of us are to use the same electronics in rooms of identical dimensions everywhere we live. Otherwise, efforts of loudspeaker manufacturers will always be at the risk of being misjudged, and there will never be a universally recognized candidate for the Ultimate Loudspeaker.

With that put aside, while I don't consider the Audio Note AN-E SEC Silver to be the perfect loudspeaker, it is a supreme embodiment of AN's "Comparison By Contrast" philosophy, signifies a noble pursuit in the creation of a transducer dedicated to minimum loss in signal transfer and signal to energy conversion. As soon as the music began to play, the AN-E SEC Silver Madrone's unassuming simplistic 2-way design became immediately welcomed, as its incredibly complex and rich tonalities and full-range mannerism expanded the musical horizon within the confines of my walls.

Therefore, even though the AN speakers do not have the superimposing dimensions and looks of most world-class contenders at similar prices, the AN-E SEC Silver Madrone's combined attributes of tonal complexity, high efficiency, relentless resolution, the ability to relinquish high and uncompressed decibels and its beautifully lacquered finish make it a musically significant and wonderfully unique loudspeaker against more imposing contenders in medium-sized rooms. The AN-E SEC Silver is a convincing testimony to the argument that speakers reign supreme in a sound system.

As much as the AN-E SEC Silver's efficiency will accord its owner, the fun and option of using either a solid-state powerhouse or a delicate vacuum tube amplification, the AN speaker's resolving power endows illustrious glory to elite amplification. These aspects of the AN-E SEC Silver ought to assure its listener of its distinction and value among other top contenders continuously, and is thereby such an antithesis to boredom that its owner can be repeatedly assured of his or her investment.

Last not least, the revelatory nature of the Audio Note AN-E SEC Silver loudspeaker mandates careful consideration by prospective owners of their own sonic priorities and the finesse of their own systems, as the AN's resolute nature may turn relentless if the upstream electronics impart inferiority. Therefore, the SEC Silver must not be tackled unless you are supremely confident of the superiority and uniformity of your own system as it will sound adversely analytical if an inferiority potential exists.

Epilogue

It takes a bold, disciplined, intelligent and piercing mind to carry out Audio Note's idealistic crusade so thoroughly, apart from a financially strong foundation on which to sustain such operation. Also taking into account Audio Note's impressive accomplishment in inventorying, this exhibited level of business planning and management is a rarity in the high-end audio industry. Being the only known high-end audio company devoted to such unique operation on a scale so encompassing, Audio Note is not for the opportunistic or the incongruous. Finally, Peter Qvortrup's overriding insistence in his speakers' ability to reproduce instrument tonalities accurately reflects a respectable and stern commitment to home music reproduction.

As musically competent as the \$2,795 basic AN/E-D already is, the SEC Silver represents not merely the fully modified and upgraded reincarnation of it, but a thorough embodiment of the finest in a 2-way design. If the work of a composer is an art by virtue of its enduring emotional advocacy, and the crowning entrées of a gourmet chef constitutes an art for the elevation of one of human's most essential endeavors, then a designer and manufacturer's labor in creating a maximum fidelity transducer must also be considered an artistic activity if his fruition conjures up a peerless musical experience.

If we can appreciate Junji Kimura of 47 Laboratory's concentration and dedication at perfecting the Redbook CD playback, then we can understand the steadfast passion of Audio Note's Peter Qvortrup in pushing the envelope of his AN-E speaker.