

HIFICRITIC

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DESIGNING OUT THE ROOM

The very complex and radical BeoLab 90 might well be a major step in room-proofing loudspeakers

REQUEST THE BEAST

An SSD audiophile server/DAC/pre-amp, conceived in the USA and built in Switzerland.

BOWERS & WILKINS 803 D3

Andrew Everard reports on an all-new model that joins a re-invented flagship speaker range

A NEW WORLD ORDER?

Julian Musgrave's polemic suggests that the very nature of change in high end audio has changed.

NAIM NAP 300 DR

Chris Binns tries one of Naim's recently revised power amplifiers

MUSIC & MORE

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Audio Note Keron Balanced
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Bowers & Wilkins 803 D3
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Chord Mojo
Ophidian Mambo
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Ophidian Mojo
G9 Audio NERO MkII





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I think we at *HIFICRITIC* may well have a little local difficulty, which probably comes down to our various and sometimes very different lifestyle choices. I recently purchased a Naim *NAC S1*, as I've always used Naim's top pre-amp. Now that it's installed I'm well pleased with the sound quality, but find myself a trifle discombobulated by a couple of its features.

When I looked back at MC's review I found that he described the fact that the *NAC S1* has eight line-level inputs of various kinds, but failed to mention that only five of the eight are actually available at any one time. My previous *NAC 552* (and its '52 predecessor) had six inputs and even then I found myself struggling (and could happily have used seven). I then discovered that the new pre-amp didn't have any form of 'record out' option (the '552 had three!), which is a feature that I occasionally find useful too (admittedly usually when reviewing amps without remote control!).

The third demerit concerned the handset, which MC described as: "a superbly engineered, illuminated milled alloy remote control". Although I like the button illumination, I would have described it as pretentious, too heavy and too bulky. My ultimate handset is the dinky little device used to control Apple TV. It measures just 120x30x5mm (LxWxD), weighs next to nothing, and has just seven buttons (arguably only five are really needed for a pre-amp).

Don't get me wrong. I'm not in the least unhappy with the new pre-amp. It sounds quite lovely, but its arrival does mean that I'll have to make some adjustments to my lifestyle. I reckon I can live with the lack of 'rec out'; I may well be able to find a way round the handset problem too; and the acquisition of a couple of leads will probably sort out the input limitations.

However, the latter has drawn attention to a point that I've been pondering since I reviewed the excellent Audio Music *R-T1* two-box valve pre-amplifier (distributed by LW Audio) for another magazine a year or two back. That device certainly sounded very good indeed, but because it had just three line inputs it was quite impractical from my point of view.

But not from everybody else's perspectives it would seem. A couple of our contributors tend to use just one input on their pre-amps, at least partly I believe because they have a dedicated 'music room' which is separate from the rest of the house. One even told me that a single connected input is the route to the finest sound quality, which may indeed be the case, but is it real-world relevant?

Now that tone controls have lost their audiophile credibility, the only real point of having a pre-amp (or one that's built into an integrated amplifier) is to change volume and switch between inputs. I guess we'd all like to be able to have a separate music room in our lives, but to omit one of these functions purely for audiophile reasons does seem uncomfortably close to suffering from an OCD.

Paul Messenger
 Editor

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Audio Note Keron Balanced

KEVIN FISKE REVIEWS A VALVE AMPLIFIER THAT'S ACTUALLY THE MOST COSTLY HIFICRITIC HAS YET TRIED IN TERMS OF POUNDS PER WATT

“The KBs provoked essentially the same reaction in every single audio-aware visitor to my listening room: slow head-shaking wonder at the unforced, uncompressed dynamics; the ability to convey complex tonality and inner-detail; and a wide grin resulting from being tickled by an irresistible groove”

If ever there was an illustration of how, despite all that the audio industry collectively claims to know, that it actually understands not very much at all, it is that the essential musical reproduction pillars of timing, timbre and dynamics appear to remain so elusive.

Disagree? Then consider this: how many amplifier makers can you name that absolutely nail all three of that audio holy trinity? We might point to a few honourable exceptions noted for their aptitude in one of these critical areas, and still fewer able to make a reasonable fist of two of the three, but in the main the industry is awash with mediocre amplifiers. Its designers and manufacturers betray no hint that they either appreciate or care that together these three elements are the primary keys to musical veracity, or that they have any idea how to consistently deliver them through their products. Why is this and what might it suggest about the way much of the audio industry designs, measures, and listens (or doesn't listen) to its products? (I plan to return to this theme in a later article.)

In a perfect world every audiophile would get to spend some time with a pair of Audio Note (UK)'s *Keron Balanced* monoblocks. Listening to them would also be mandatory for every designer and manufacturer with high-end aspirations. The *KBs* really are that much of a benchmark: hear them and they set most everything else in context. In fact I consider them to be the apogee of what can be achieved from a *300B* output tube; they stand as an exemplar for all amplification, if timing, timbre and dynamics matter at all.

I am not alone. The *KBs* provoked essentially the same reaction in every single audio-aware visitor to my listening room: slow head-shaking wonder at the unforced, uncompressed dynamics; the ability to convey complex tonality and inner-detail; and a wide grin resulting from being tickled by an irresistible groove.

The flipside of all this is that the *KBs* require a particular environment in which to show off their capabilities – indeed even to function at all. No amplifier can magic timing out of a signal wherein none exists, similarly it cannot manufacture timbre and dynamics – it can only mask them to a lesser or greater degree. The *KBs* are no different. Put rubbish

in and that's what you get out, no matter that you could buy a small fleet of compact hatchback cars for what they cost.

Then there is the matter of speakers. Having an output of between 12 and 24 Watts depending upon how it is measured means the *KBs* need a higher-efficiency benign load. I used my own 94dB/8ohms Audio Note *Es*, and thus paired the *KBs* delivered sufficient grunt to drive my 21 x 12.5ft listening room to satisfying pressure levels. I'd have loved to have heard the *KBs* through some well-executed horns, even though I've yet to encounter any that I could physically live with in my listening room. (The problem with horns, actually one of the problems with horns, is that physics is particularly cruel to them. You want genuine full range? Then your horns will be larger than very large things. Better have a barn as listening room.)

And finally of course, the *KBs* need a receptive audience. If the listener is insensitive to timing, timbre and dynamics – as the discussion threads on audio forums show that many audiophiles apparently are – then all this is academic anyway.

The *KBs* have an RRP of £74,520 for a stereo pair. So far, so alarming. Undo the 16 Allen headed screws that fasten the lid to each chassis and peer inside to see what the purchase price has actually bought. It's obvious that the answer is rather a lot of air and not that many components. So far even more alarming, if, that is, buyers are foolish enough to equate component density with value for money. Describing what we see before us makes it sound complicated, but the design is actually the nearest anyone has yet got in a high-end audio amplifier to a straight wire with gain.

The *KBs* are balanced monoblocks. There are no single-ended inputs, and each uses a paralleled pair of *300Bs* as output valves, a *VT25/10Y* as the driver, and a *5U4G* rectifier. The triodes are directly heated and no feedback is used anywhere. The interesting part from a design perspective is that they are fully transformer-coupled with no capacitors in the signal path; in fact the only passive components between the sonic input and output are a pair of Audio Note tantalum resistors. The capacitors used in the *KBs*' muscular power supply are all the increasingly rare Black Gates of various types. Circuit wiring is all



point-to-point: silver for the entire signal path, and silver again for the power supply, except for the mains transformer and choke windings.

All the transformers – input, interstage, output and mains, as well as the choke – are designed, modelled and wound in-house at Audio Note's factory at Partridge Green in Sussex, where hand assembly and testing of the *KBs* and most other Audio Note UK products takes place.

Building this esoteric set of components into the capacious chassis normally used for its *Meishu* integrated amplifier – and remember the *KBs* are monoblocks so there are two of them – enables Audio Note to space the elements wide apart for the absolute minimum of co-interference, and also to route the interconnect wiring for minimum hum. That the design is successful in this regard was evident as soon as I introduced the *KBs* into my system. Audio Note does not quote a signal-to-noise ratio (in fact it doesn't quote any measurements at all apart from physical dimensions of the *KBs*) but they are subjectively among the quietest all-tube amplifiers that I have heard.

Spend long enough in a room full of audiophiles and you'll inevitably hear the assertion that single ended triode amplification can sound glorious in the midband, but has rolled off highs and a rolled-off, flabby bottom end. There are plenty of SET amplifiers that perpetuate this stereotype, but as the *KBs* demonstrate, well executed SET amplification exhibits none of these sonic traits. Of course, we still

have to accept that they'll probably measure poorly, but so what? Life is too short. And anyway, there is so much hardware that boasts stellar measurements but actually sounds mediocre (and sometimes simply execrable) that we can be excused for concluding that measurements are evidently not a reliable guide to sonic quality.

The *KBs* don't roll off the higher frequencies; nor do they exhibit a limited and soft bottom end. Their bandwidth is subjectively as wide as that of any quality amplifier, and their grip at the lower frequency extremes is beyond reproach: tight enough not to sound waffly or blousy, yet not so tight as to sound dry and artificial.

The speed with which the *KBs* respond to inputs is quite remarkable. People talk about 'fast' amplification, and more often than not what they refer to is how quickly the leading edges of notes are delivered. But there is more to speed than that. Without the accompanying dynamics and texture – not to mention linearity – it is nothing. Reviewer Fred Crowder writing in *Dagogo* about the *KBs* during 2010, noted their remarkable ability to reveal the texture of percussion among other qualities, and he was absolutely correct.

I have eclectic tastes, but as someone whose musical weaning included an undoubted over-exposure to prog rock, I have heard more than enough self-indulgent drum solos to last me a lifetime. Even so, the *KBs*' ability to show all the different tensions, textures and dynamic responses



Manufacturer's Specification

Make	Audio Note (UK)
Model	Kegon Balanced
Power output	22W
Type	single-ended triode mono amplifier
Feedback	zero
Design	fully transformer coupled
Transformers	in-house designed and silver wound transformers
Resistors	Audio Note™ tantalum resistors
Power supply capacitors	Black Gate™ WKz and NH types
Decoupling capacitors	Black Gate™ N-type
Valves	2x300B, VT25/10Y, 5U4G
Size (WxHxD)	460 x 220 x 530mm (each)
Weight	26kg (each)
Price	£37,260 each (£74,520/pair)

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of every drum and cymbal in a recorded drum kit is truly remarkable. They honour and pass on the integrity of recorded information so that even the most awful drum solos sound less like a skeleton falling down a flight of stairs, and more like a worthy musical event (depending upon the soloist). What this shows is that there is more to the perception of speed than the initial wallop. It is also about how the amplifiers pass on the subsequent multiple and much more subtle recorded detail as the struck drum and those around it resonate in sympathy. Many amplifiers are deficient in this regard compared to the *KBs*.

I've singled out percussion in order to illustrate how refined and transparent the *KBs* are, but take any acoustic instrument of your choosing, including human voice, and you'll hear similarly remarkable and deeply satisfying layers of harmonic complexity and dynamic contrast through the *KBs*. These amplifiers do not robe all material in a cuddly glow; in fact to a listener accustomed to a lush sound they can actually come across as rather austere at first. However, when detail is present at the input, what you hear is quite breath-taking subtlety and beauty, yet without any hint of coloration or (to use a photographic analogy) Vaseline smeared on the lens.

Poor amplification first makes me mentally tired, and then physically restless. Then, if I sit for long enough, I might develop 'My Hi-fi Headache'. I think part of this reaction is down to the damage done to phase and timing that leaves our brains struggling to reconstruct in real time the linear musical event we expect to hear. There is no doubt too that over-aggressive speakers built to wow with detail can also bring about such a reaction, but that's an issue for another day. In my system the *KBs* were not only utterly un-fatiguing, but pushed buttons in my brain that made many listening sessions almost totally immersive and emotional experiences. It's only when you get the opportunity to hear amplification in such a league as the *KBs* that you realise just how limited your previous personal references were.

Listening to the *KBs* for extended periods – one time a straight 12 hours stretch as I scabbled to meet a day-job writing deadline – also left me struck by the sheer density of the sound they produce; listening sessions were satisfying in much the same way as a gourmet meal is compared to a light snack. Several times I found myself music-ed out, so as to speak, and still processing and thinking about music I had heard earlier hours afterwards.

The technical accomplishment required to achieve such performance should not be underestimated. In a completely transformer-coupled design such as this, each transformer not only has to work

across the same very wide bandwidth, but must also be completely neutral – effectively invisible – by not introducing phase, linearity or low level abnormalities that can be amplified by the following stage or stages. This requirement is made even harder by the fact that core sizes, designs and the signal levels being passed are all necessarily different.

Of that audio 'holy trinity', dynamics is the one that I prize above the others. Think back to the last live acoustic musical event you attended and contrast it with what you hear in your listening room. I don't care how many gazillion watts you have to play with at home, your system still won't deliver the air movement and dynamic intensity you feel with your whole body when you're in the same room as an unamplified acoustic instrument. This is not just a matter of ultimate volume. It's also about the ease with which air pressure peaks build and decay, and also about the contrast between loud and soft, and softer, and still softer.

Singing 'from the diaphragm' enables a valleys rugby prop to tenderly whisper a lullaby to his newborn child, or lift off the roof with *Land Of My Fathers*; both sounds are created with ease and both make the hairs on the back of your neck stand on end. The *KBs*, despite their modest on-paper power rating, are similarly arresting, sounding loose-limbed and swaggeringly relaxed, while at the same time spanning a remarkable dynamic range. The sonic images they conjure up between the speakers are not of the detailed but flat cardboard variety that so many solid state amplifiers seem to produce, but virtually tactile multi-dimensional entities.

Conclusions

How does one sum up Audio Note UK's *Kegon Balanced* monoblocks? Leave aside their cost for a moment and consider their performance. Paired with appropriate speakers they're an electro-mechanical tour-de-force, with the ability to deliver the most astonishingly convincing sounds. The *KBs* are unquestionably the most linear amplifiers I have heard; their ability to transfer the three audio pillars of timing, timbre and dynamics faithfully is beyond reproach. In my experience it simply doesn't get better than this.

Then there's the mystery element I've not mentioned until now – musicality. Of course, one can't have musicality unless the three pillars are present, but technical excellence on its own doesn't always deliver it. Yet the *KBs* are musical with a capital M, and are able to trigger pleasure receptors in the brain that generally only fire when confronted with real live music.

What value should we put on that?

Subjective Sounds

PAUL MESSENGER

HIFICRITIC

AUDIO AND MUSIC JOURNAL

BECAUSE HIFICRITIC IS FUNDED BY ITS READERS THE SUBSCRIPTION COST IS NECESSARILY HIGHER THAN FOR MAGAZINES SUBSIDISED BY ADVERTISING REVENUE, THOUGH CERTAINLY NOT AS HIGH AS PROFESSIONAL SPECIALIST JOURNALS.

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Martin Colloms, Publisher

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It says Thöress on the fascia, with an *umlaut* over the 'ö', hardening it but suggesting the British spelling should be Thoeress. However you want it, this German brand is named after founder and principal Reinhardt Thöress, and is based in Aachen, on the Western border of that country.

I'd not encountered the brand before, but it was brought to my attention by Greg Drygala, our Jazz music reviewer of Polish extraction who runs an import operation called G Point Audio. Since we only live about 30 miles apart, Drygala does have a habit of dumping stuff for me to try, and so it was with the Thöress equipment: a phono stage (which I love); an integrated amplifier (which I never got to try) and a pair of speakers (which I also got to like a lot, even though they were unusually ugly and were actually labelled *Genuin Schallwandler* rather than Thöress).

I therefore wrote to Reinhardt Thöress to find out more about the speakers. It turns out that Genuin Audio is a German distributor, and the speaker was originally intended to be badged and sold that way. Plans have changed, however, and what used to be a *Genuin Schallwandler* will now become a *THÖ 1D8*. At around £6,000/pair they're never going to be cheap (or indeed pretty), but these speakers are amongst the best all round performers I've encountered.

I'm not able to give the *1D8*s a full review right now, as they have gone off to do a show somewhere. However I did spend some weeks listening to them, and also took the trouble to make my usual measurements. As I recall, the *1D8* combined a 200mm main driver (from established German maker LPG) with a 25mm Morel soft dome tweeter, within a rather bulky but quite low mass floorstanding enclosure. The bass/mid driver was apparently 'double transmission line loaded', with an exit through the speaker's base.

Measurements under far-field in-room conditions reveal an unusual combination of a generous sensitivity (around 93dB) alongside a reasonably decent amplifier load that stays above 6ohms at low frequencies, and 4.5ohms above 1kHz. The bad news is that the bass and lower midrange (below 500Hz) is distinctly uneven, and the low bass (below 45Hz) is largely absent (indicating quarter-wave rather than TL line loading perhaps?); the good news is that the output is much smoother and flatter above 500Hz.

What this means in practice is that the *1D8* has a sensitivity that's sufficiently high to give the speaker real dynamic expression and grip, yet it manages to do so alongside decent bass extension and an unusually good overall balance. In fact I'd go so far as to state that it has many of the advantages of a speaker system based on a single full range drive unit, yet manages to avoid most of the pitfalls of that breed. It is, in short, an excellent allrounder (which makes its rather unprepossessing appearance all the more galling).

My system is set up to make loudspeaker listening and comparisons relatively easy, but I was also very taken by the performance of a very elaborate valve-based Thöress phono stage, known as an *Enhancer* (*Entzerrer* in German). I never got around to exploring the numerous equalisation options, which I'll try when it returns, but even with all three set to RIAA it sounded truly excellent, which is the main reason I want it back! (The bad news is a pricetag equivalent to around £6,500.) What is certain is that the Thöress brand is capable of delivering a very serious standard of performance indeed.