

Breakthrough of ZERO - Audio Note's ZERO Series

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The saying that musicality plus slim design characterized traditional British amplifiers are totally agreed by hifi enthusiasts. Linn, Meridian and Musical Fidelity are good examples of this breed. Audio Note, a highly acclaimed company renowned for its impeccable musicality has joined the league launching its slim size ZERO series.

As far as I know, currently there is no other products similar to the ZERO series. The ZERO series includes 5 components namely CDT ZERO CD transport, DAC ZERO tube DAC, M ZERO tube pre amplifier and ZERO mono block tube power amplifier. Albeit other companies may have similar series, they may not have a unified appearance. Even they have a unified appearance, they may not be so handy and delicate. If they could be so delicate, definitely they do not possess the tubes of the ZEROs. Every component of the ZERO series is tube related except the CDT ZERO. One could imagine that ZERO series must be flooded with warmth and richness. The ZEROs could also be considered to be one of the best beginners' tube gear for those who are pursuing sweet dreams of tube or those who have a tight budget to spend.

The most affordable Audio Note equipment

I could never imagine that listening to Audio Note at such a bargain price, the average price of each component is only several thousand quid! Consider buying the complete series is only some twenty thousand quid which is not pricey. In terms of Audio Note's price tag, it is a real bargain! Don't get me wrong, the guys from Audio Note will not sacrifice the sound quality in the exchange of an affordable price. As we all know that Audio Note's cable are highly accoladed by hifi enthusiasts on its second to none musicality. Frankly speaking, I am a big fan of Audio Note's cable. That said, it is natural for me to use the whole set of Audio Note's cable including AN-V to link up the DAC and pre amplifier, AN-Vx to link up the pre and power amplifiers. AN-L is also used to hook up the speaker. It is almost an all Audio Note system except for loudspeaker. Seems like the guru from Audio Note need to design a speaker to match with the ZERO system. This time I use Focus Audio's 6TII to complete the listening test. Firing up the system, there exist synergy between the ZEROs and Focus Audio. The sound is warm and rich but free from overwhelming and colouration.

As an overall assessment, the pre and power compos surprise me in terms of their prices. I have taken for granted that musicality is a must from this system. Looking at CDT ZERO per se, there is nothing worth mentioning. Nevertheless, when linking it to DAC ZERO it will be another story.

According to the specification, DAC ZERO is the only DAC in the market utilize 24bit/96Khz Delta Sigma chip with tube. There has been a plethora of discussions on 24bit/96Khz Delta Sigma chip in here and elsewhere. In a word, the strength lies in the detail of music it could deliver. Accompanying the new 24bit/96Khz Delta Sigma chip does not imply giving up its tube usage tradition. Thus, at the output stage a 6111WA has been utilized. 6111WA is a slim ballpen shape 1 inch tall, a Class A output double triode (equivalent to 12AU7). It has the advantage of tube sound and the life span of transistor (about 100,000 hours or eleven years). Users do not have to worry about tube replacement therefore the tube does not require a socket and could directly print on the PCB board. This method also avoid interface signal loss.

Pre & power tube amplifiers

M ZERO preamplifier also use a 6111WA tube in its line stage. Its design is minimalist and without any gimmicks. The pre amp has a balance switch for left and right channels, 4 sets of inputs and one set of tape output. In addition, two sets of output are given for the purpose of biamping.

Despite ZERO series has a unified size with 218mm (W)x110mm(H), its CDT and pre amp's depth is only 294mm, just like a female shoe box. Looking at its power amp with 356mm in depth, comparing with its CD transport and pre amp, it looks like a male and a female shoebox. In each ZERO there is two ECL82, a triode/pentode with Class A output equivalent to 6BM8.

Each ZERO has a rated 8W output, but do not led down by its low power. In fact it could drive the Focus Audio without any difficulties. The sound is swift and bouncy but not fatiguing. However, if part with an easy load loud speaker such as B & W's DM308, it would sound more vivid but not as rich as Focus Audio. So it is a dilemma for potential users. Based on my experience, despite small powered amplifiers in general lack of punch and slam, they could release more detail than the bigger brothers. For those who are familiar with Audio Note's products should know that even the top model of Audio Note could only deliver 8W to 10W but applauded by users for its superb musicality.

The beauty of the ZERO series lies in its musicality and the eye-catching appearance. When I first build up the ZERO's block, it looks spectacular! Those silver boxes lying tidily side by side as if a set of elegant silverware. Apart from its sound quality, it is delightful to own a systemized but non-stereotype ZERO series. In terms of sound quality, there are several aspects which are worth mentioning.

Pre- & power amplifiers are extremely musical

Firing up the overall system and the components independently once again proved that Audio Note's strength lies in tube amplification. The system is not only characterized by its sweetness alone, more importantly is the musicality it could deliver. No matter it is Celibidache play Bruckner (EMI#72435669025) or Essential Carreras (Philips#432 692-2) the system could provide seamless musicality. More importantly no matter it is brass, woodwind, strings, percussion or Carreras' vocal, Audio Note could honestly reproduce the very nature of every piece of music. We should not take for granted that all hi fi products could honestly reproduce the very nature of every piece of music. Even the so called high end products are only selling their own nature instead of the characteristics of each kind of musical instrument, not to mention some low price products. I understand that to reproduce the texture and dynamics of a real musical instrument nearly impossible. Nevertheless, the reproduction should be at least near to the sound of the original musical instrument. Some 80% of hi fi products available in the market could not do this. Fortunately the ZERO series has inherited the heritage of Audio Note's traditional pursuance of sonic excellence. Thus M ZERO and ZEROs are extremely musical. This strongly supported that Audio Note has a niche in tube amplification and it is hard to find a contender at this price range.

Comparing with the amplifier, the CDT ZERO is less impressive. It is not a negative comment on the CD transport, the product has done its job but may not stand up among its competitors. In order to squeeze a little bit more from CDT, it should be partnered with DAC ZERO's 24bit/96Khz DAC. Due to special relationship between CDT ZERO and DAC ZERO, so I would like to give some suggestions to those who are interested in the ZERO series. Firstly is either buying the whole set of ZERO's product, or buying the transport and DAC. Alternatively, one could also consider buying the DAC alone or the pre amplifiers and power amplifiers. If I have to make a conclusion, the musicality of the pre and power amplifiers are exceptional compare with its DAC. Nevertheless, the musicality of the DAC is better than its transport. So the choice is all up to you guys. In terms of cables AN-Vx would perfectly match with the ZEROs but AN-V would also be fine. The best loudspeaker cable to part with the ZEROs was AN-L. For loudspeaker matching, BBC's LS3/5A, Focus Audio FS68 or ProAc Response 1SC and etc would match the appearance of the ZEROs. When partnering with LS3/5A, vocals and violins would be very smooth and attractive while FS68 would be very emotive. However, 1SC would sound more rational, it could get a good tonal balance in each and every musical component. In addition, I would recommend those who would like to buy the ZEROs to use Hi-Fi Tips underneath the ZERO DAC and power amplifiers. It would sound more analytical and have a better contour. For CDT and ZERO pre amplifier it is optional whether to use them or not.

For those who have recently bought a new flat should contemplate installing such an eye catching, musical and slim hi fi system. But the most fascinating thing is to spend only \$10,000 something to possess Audio Note's equipment. The ZEROs had proved to be a formidable gear to other products at this price level.