

Music Maestro pleases

BRITISH HIGH-END SPECIALIST AUDIO NOTE HAS COMPLETELY REDESIGNED ITS 25-YEAR-OLD MEISHU INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER. NOW CHRISTENED THE TONMEISTER, WILL IT BE THE MASTER OF MUSIC ITS NAME SUGGESTS? CHRIS FRANKLAND FINDS OUT



To those not in the know, the juxtaposition of a British brand name, Audio Note, with a Japanese product name, Meishu, may seem a little odd, but the nomenclature dates back to the brand's distant origins at Audio Note Japan under Hiroyasu Kondo.

The further addition of the German word 'Tonmeister' to the name jars a little, but I am prepared to welcome it on several grounds.

Firstly, it is a term (literally translated as 'sound master') most often found in job descriptions in the music and recording industry: it describes an individual with the extensive knowledge of all aspects of sound recording in order to achieve the best performance and interpretation of a work. There's even the odd hi-fi company with its own tonmeister on board,

its use here reflects the lengths to which Audio Note goes to find the perfect components in every stage of its amplifiers, from resistors to the transformers it winds in-house at its Partridge Green base in Sussex. Furthermore, founder Peter Qvortrup is someone with not just an amazing vinyl collection, but also a love for, and an encyclopaedic knowledge of, music – which is at the very heart of everything Audio Note does.

The Japanese connection goes back to 1989, when Qvortrup bought the rights to produce and sell Kondo's Ongaku amplifier, which fitted in well with the valve designs he already had from his Audio Innovations venture. Audio Note's first product was the Oto PP integrated amp. That was 25 years ago, followed in 1993 by the Meishu, which has remained in the Audio Note line-up, more or less unchanged, until now – well, apart from the fact that the 6X4R rectifier was changed to a 6X5 and the phono stage simplified and improved.

I have been using the original Meishu for some time in my home system and was well attuned to its sound – so naturally, when I heard it had undergone a ground-up revamp, I jumped at the chance to listen to a sample.

The Meishu, old and new, is a pure Class A design with zero feedback and a single-ended output stage, using one directly-heated 300B triode valve per channel to produce a power output of 8W per channel into 4 or 8ohm loads. The new Tonmeister, like the old model, takes advantage of

Audio Note's custom-made 1W magnetic tantalum resistors, foil and electrolytic capacitors and in-house designed and wound transformers, as well as a custom-made volume control potentiometer.

On the Audio Note website, the main changes are described as a new power supply with only one mains transformer, 5U4 rectifier valve and one choke, plus input and driver stages that are "very similar to that found in the Jinro, Tomei and Ongaku, with a 12AU7 [low-gain preamp valve] and 5687 [medium-gain double-triode valve] driving an in-house designed and manufactured inter-stage transformer for the best energy transfer, evenness and authority". Audio Note adds that "this is the most important, fundamental upgrade over the original design".

Simplified power supply

Keen to find out more, I contacted Audio Note in-house design guru Darko Greguras. He explains that the in-house designed and manufactured inter-stage transformer is the key element and has allowed them to simplify the power supply and use just one mains transformer, rectifier valve and choke, all of which allows these elements to "work more harmoniously".

He explains that the inter-stage transformer minimises the energy loss and provides the most efficient coupling of one stage to the next while maximising the voltage swing and gain of each valve in the circuit. The result, he says, is that the new PSU arrangement is "much better 'tuned' with the rest of the design, allowing it to trace the signal far more closely, coherently and rhythmically".

Of the input and driver stages, Greguras confirms they are similar to those in the Jinro, Tomei and Ongaku and says that, by comparison with the old Meishu's very traditional anode follower driver stage with parallel 5687s driving 300Bs, which has "lots of charm", the new design has "less sound of its own, with better dynamic balance top to bottom and better immediacy".

REVIEW

Capping it all off are brand new output transformers manufactured in-house and designed by Audio Note's transformer expert Andy Grove.

The Meishu 300B Tonmeister Phono as tested here retails for £9950, while the Line version sells for £7950. But that's just the start: stepping up the range are the Tonmeister Silver spec models, which offer improved component quality, IHIB inter-stage and output transformers, 1W Nicrome non-magnetic resistors, a mix of AN standard and Kaisei capacitors and copper signal capacitors. They'll cost you £10,500 for the Line Silver and £12,200 for the Phono Silver version.

At the top of the range are the Silver Signature models. These offer an even higher level of component quality, SHIB inter-stage and output transformers, 2W non-magnetic Nicrome resistors, AN-VX interconnect cable in critical positions, a mix of AN standard, Kaisei and Kaisei Non Polar capacitors, improved circuit board quality and AN36-step attenuators. Those demanding only the best Tonmeister performance will have to find £16,500 for the Line Silver Signature and £19,900 for the Phono Silver Signature.

In the metal

Some may regard the soaring prices for high-spec AN products as a bit steep. However, having interviewed Qvortrup at length for HIFICRITIC [Vol 10 No1], I know that the company has identified critical improvements when metallurgy is taken into account throughout the design: the use of silver not copper, attention to core material properties in all transformers, non-magnetic resistors, resistors with lead-out wires in a specific silver alloy because they sound better. Yes, sound better: all critical changes in components in Audio Note products, Qvortrup told me, are backed up not just by the science, but also by extensive listening tests.

So enough theory, it was for me to some listening. At the front end was my trusty Audio Note TT3 turntable with PSU3 power supply, AN Arm II and Io1 cartridge. Speakers on hand to evaluate the new amp were the Klipsch Forte III and Audio Note's own AN-J LX Hemp. Both the old and new Meishus were fitted with standard Audio Note 300B valves.

Finish and build quality were first class on this product, but anyone contemplating lifting it would do well to seek help, weighing in as it does just shy of 30kg. It is a substantial beast.

One of my favourite guitarists, Jonathan Butler, was first on the platter, and I was immediately struck by how the tone, note shape and dynamics of his guitar were so much better conveyed by the Tonmeister. His play ebbed and flowed with a new fluidity, while drum and percussion were more

syncopated and snappier, more rhythmic, more layered with better fine cymbal and hi-hat detail. All with an openness of sound stage and rock-solid image that was uncannily well balanced across the whole frequency spectrum. Bass lines were solid, tight, rhythmic and compelling.

Girl Talk is one of my favourite Ben Sidran tracks, and the Tonmeister's performance on this convinced me further of how much better it was than the old Meishu – and bear in mind that my own Meishu is a Phono Silver, not the 'cooking' version. Sidran's vocals were more open and expressive, percussion was subtle and more detailed and the whole track just moved along more convincingly with a bass line that was solid and tuneful. I left it playing to hear the wonderful drum play by Steve Gadd on the next track and was blown away by the Tonmeister's dynamics, detail, layering and sheer life and syncopation.

Hungry for some vocals I called on John Mellencamp's *Hurts So Good*. On this track his voice was more open, better defined and more articulate on the Tonmeister, while drums were sharper, snappier and faster.

Linda Ronstadt was up next and on her fantastic cover of *That'll Be The Day* the character and power in her voice was, if you'll forgive the play on words, masterfully conveyed by the Tonmeister. Her voice has tremendous power and when she really pushes a note, it simply soars on the new Meishu. The wood blocks and hand claps on this track were also much more sharply and convincingly conveyed.

I could go on but I think a clear pattern is forming and a clear conclusion emerging: the Meishu 300B Tonmeister Phono turned in an astonishing performance. It thoroughly trounced the old Meishu Phono Silver and brought new detail, layering, meaning and dynamics to music I knew well. It rates the highest accolade and therefore I unhesitatingly put it forward for Audio Excellence status.

HIFICRITIC
AUDIO EXCELLENCE

Specifications

Audio Note Meishu 300B Tonmeister Phono

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|--------------------|---|
| Type | Integrated amplifier |
| Price | £9950 |
| Input impedance | 100kohms, line 47kohms, phono |
| Input sensitivity | 240mV for full output |
| Power output | 8 watts RMS per channel into 4 or 8ohms |
| Channel balance | 0.3dB |
| Valves used | 1 x 5U4G 2 x 300B 1 x 5687 1 x ECC82 1 x ECC88 1 x ECC83 |
| Weight | 29.5kg |
| Dimensions (WxHxD) | 460x220x530mm |

audionote.co.uk

