

Audio Note Vindicator Silver & M2 Phono

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Heads up, this hi-fi editor is biased: The Audio Note M2 Phono I own myself, and I already bought it some time ago... and I love it. The German distributor provided the 2A3 power amplifier Vindicator Silver for testing - for me as a 2A3 maniac this definitely is the obligatory choice. Hopefully nobody will expect a test of the objective type from me now!

More than ten years ago I bought a used Audio Note M2 Phono, at that time the input and output jacks were still located on the left side of the housing, which I found a bit inconvenient. I couldn't place another component right adjacent to it without straining the bending radii of the cables too much and I also wanted to have the cables - just like today - hidden on the back of the device. Anyway, this preamp was magnificent sounding and especially its lows embossed that typical "Audio Note punch" on my whole system. Connoisseurs of the brand know what I'm talking about, but more on this later.

However, eventually the M2 had to pay tribute to the apparently and acoustically not very squeamish handling of its previous owner and I was a bit worried about its general operational safety as well, but at this point I don't want to get lost in boring details. So instead of sending the unit to Audio Note for service, I decided to save the money and invest in a new unit. The M2 Phono therefore found a new home and I became the proud owner of a brand new Audio Note (UK) M1 Phono.

It played for many years as a constant in my system and subjectively it was almost on par with my old M2 Phono - because of having been a good 15 years younger and technically in accordance to the company's latest technological developments. But only almost. And as curiosity was about to kill the cat, I wanted to know at some point - this "some point" being end of 2019 - how my old love, the M2, would sound in today's incarnation, and I finally allowed myself a listen. I would have been better off leaving that alone, because a little while later I found myself as its new owner, acquired from Stefan Wörmer, the new Audio Note (UK) distributor in Germany, which in the course relieved my bank account by 4,650 euros. To set the scene - I was so perplexed by the sonic quantum leap compared to my old M2 that I just couldn't help myself and even after a few months of experience with "the new one" I can say that it's worth every cent.



The M2 Phono is assigned to the second level within Audio Notes' internal hierarchy (the so-called Level system ranging from zero to Six). Nevertheless, within a Level a single device still comprises different variants, which differ in their component qualities, among other things. Above the M2 Phono tested here, there ranges another variant with the affix "Balanced", which features a 5814a instead of the 6SN7 valve in the line stage, as well as output transformers and balanced outputs. Of course, in terms of price, this one then is to be found much higher up in the food chain...

Fortunately, Audio Note doesn't seem to be very keen on fashion frills, so the fundamental and proven enclosure design of the M2 series hasn't changed for decades. It looks like a big, black shoebox, merely made of metal and acrylic like my black version, with knobs on the front, inputs on the back, while the inside is mainly adorned by tubes in conjunction with a tube power supply. That's exactly how it's supposed to be. For my personal taste, even the gold-colored control knobs are still too much of a decoration, so I have to ask Stefan Wörmer if black knobs are available as well... more like in the steampunk art of style. Once again I'm wandering off the point. By the way, there's no remote control. And this is a good thing, as I don't like them at all and no tube amp should get tangled up in such newfangled gadgets! The M2 Phono provides three line inputs - CD, Tuner and Aux - added by a Tape input and a Tape output. Furthermore, it comes equipped with two outputs for one respectively two power amplifiers.

There is one point, however, where Audio Note abandons its own path of virtue, at least optionally: On the back, there is a toggle switch marked "Feedback" for each channel, which activates a slight feedback, or better, negative feedback loop if necessary, by lowering the signal by six decibels. In practice, I have never noticed any sonic differences between the two modes, except that the signal becomes correspondingly quieter when activated. In any case, I always leave the feedback function off.



No question, the M2 Phono is very well crafted, just as it is supposed to be for a component of such a price tag. Housing stability, deburred edges, spotlessly clean soldering inside, reasonable cable routing, everything just suits here. Anyway, in terms of circuitry Audio Note hasn't invented the wheel anew: The line stage uses a 6SN7, while an ECC83 and a 6DJ8 (ECC88) form the Phono MM section. The highlight of this amplifier certainly is its tube power supply, which uses a 6X5 as rectifier and an ECL82 composite tube as stabilizer, meaning that a triode and a pentode system share the same glass bulb.



Above; M2 Phono Line Stage

And there is one more thing that I must state on the 6SN7, the precursor of the miniature double triodes with nine-pin socket like the ECC81, ECC82 and ECC83: With one triode system per channel of this widely used double triode, a line stage can thus be realized due to the high gain factor. As such, the phase is inverted by 180 degrees. When I bought the M2 Phono, I was aware of this specificity as well as the fact that it did not really match my Sun Audio Uchida 2A3 power amplifier: It doesn't invert the phase and its three-stage design results in the overall gain being too high for the M2. I therefore made a small modification to my 2A3 and connected the input and driver stages without further ado in parallel. This reduced the overall gain of my power amplifier and it inverted the phase now as well, making it now fit perfectly. And all of that just to be able to integrate the Audio Note M2 Phono into my system. This little anecdote shows: An old flame never dies!



Above; M2 Phono RIAA Stage



Above; M2 Phono PSU

Evidently, Audio Note also has appropriate power amplifiers on offer, such as the Vindicator Silver featuring the 2A3 power triode. By the way, we're now ascending to Audio Note's "Level 3". The "Silver" in the amp's name by no means indicates the color of its enclosure, but identifies the device as the middle variant of the three stereo power amplifiers Vindicator, Vindicator Silver and Vindicator Silver Signature. In comparison to the entry-level model, the Silver version tested here comes up with special tantalum resistors, copper foil capacitors and IHIB-C core output transformers - IHIB stands for improved high permeability grain oriented electrical steel - all of course from Audio Note's own production, just as the British manufacturer excels through an extraordinarily high vertical range of manufacture and understandably offers little insight into the technical details of what is being put on the boil here.



Incidentally, I actually wanted to order the Paladin 45 power amp for testing first, but with its almost two watts of output power it already appears to be a very special representative of its guild and its operation requires the use of loudspeakers with an efficiency as from about 96 decibels per watt and meter.

Stefan Wörmer persuaded me to test the Vindicator Silver equipped with the 2A3. After about one and a half decades of personal experience with 2A3 amplifiers, rest assured that these three and a half watts definitely are sufficient in conjunction with an efficiency of 92 decibels per watt and meter to make you happy even when listening to rock music at very high volumes - in my case we're talking about a listening room with 50 square meters of space - which then opens up a much wider spectrum of suitable loudspeakers.

Many years ago, the "normal" Vindicator enriched my home for a few weeks as a guest on loan, so it's not completely unknown to me. In principle, future owners should think about the positioning of this power amplifier first. With a depth of about 45 centimeters, this whopper might be quite a challenge for most equipment stands on which it is intended to be placed. The Audio Note Vindicator Silver currently changes hands for 5,100 euros and as with the M2 Phono we don't need to further discuss the quality of manufacturing nor that of the components, everything is just right here. Period. When focussing on the circuitry, we are dealing with a very minimalistic two-stage design: The input, respectively the driver stage is, made up by a single 6SL7 double triode, quite a decent NOS type after all. Each of the two triode systems accommodated in this small tube is responsible for one channel. It very much makes the Sovtek 2A3's stand out, which, being a late Russian replica, every one still can buy just around the corner.

If one though is heading for the 2A3 in a reputable New Old Stock quality, then these valuables are nowadays only available from very few selected dealers, who, by the way, do explicitly not float with the current... And, a matched pair of the 2A3 in the Single Plate version is almost impossible to be found, and if yes, the opportunity seizes up from a thousand euros. Of course I tried out some of my 2A3 Single Plate types throughout the listening test and it speaks for the quality of the Vindicator Silver that the sonic differences between the Sovteks, my "normal" old 2A3s and their Single Plate versions - provenient from RCA Cunningham and Ken-Rad among others - became very obvious. However, I don't intend to anticipate. At this point, I would like to take the opportunity to clear up an old myth concerning a very special 2A3, the Raytheon 2A3H. There are also National Union or Goliath labeled types for which the same applies: This tube must not be used as a replacement type in a 2A3 amplifier! It's the only indirectly heated 2A3 on the market and it, according to the specification, requires 2.8 amperes of heating current instead of 2.5 amperes. Its use in a 2A3 configuration would result in a significant underheating and the tube would inevitably be doomed to die very quickly. Instead, please put all of your 2A3Hs up for sale, I can put them to good use...



The power supply, which is located at the rear of the chassis, consists of a relatively large mains transformer, which like the output transformers is hidden under a hood garnished with ventilation slots, and the 5R4GY rectifier tube. This NOS tube originates from GE and is squeezed between the mains transformer and the output transformers in a quite down-to-earth manner. I would have loved to see if someone had given it a greater visibility on the chassis! On the back of the unit, next to the power plug and the on/off switch, the loudspeaker connectors for four and eight ohms are located, while a pair of RCA sockets take care of the input signals.

This part of the review I really would like to have avoided: the listening test. Instead, I would rather prefer to simply express a graduated recommendation as to whether and for whom it is worthwhile to give it a listen on one's own. After all, only a negligible percentage of readers will be able to share and understand my personal selection of music. But I know for sure that I won't get away with this either with you or with the editor-in-chief. So let's kick off with it!

The Audio Note combo takes you on a journey to rediscover your own record collection and once again I dug up one of the best blues rock songs ever: AC/DC's "Ride on" (Dirty Deeds Done Dirt Cheap, Atlantic Records, 1976). If you listen to one and the same song seven or eight times in a row like I did, or better, if you rather enjoy it, then this amp can't go far wrong. The unbelievable coolness and at the same time haunting melancholy that marks up Bon Scott's way of singing here, I have probably never heard so consciously before. A great singer who died in a somewhat obscure way at the age of only 33, as if he wanted to fulfill all the clichés of a typical rock star. It's a crying shame not only for him as a person, but for all the rock fans, when one is made aware how many great songs have been withheld from both the music and fan world. Well, there is nothing to object to Brian Johnson, but Scott's ease has never been achieved by him. And all of these thoughts come to my mind when listening to "Ride on".

Drums and guitar chords sound incredibly powerful and energetic, while all tones remain sustained for a really long time in the large room. In these instrumental passages, the aforementioned "Audio Note punch" becomes particularly obvious: Individual tones - even the harmonics of guitar chords - are so palpable as if they had been given an extra dose of energy on their way into my ear; large drums sound dark, substantial, powerful and yet precise and fast. The Audio Note siblings manage to combine rather contradictory characteristics: speed and high resolution are paired with pressure and warmth. There aren't many audio components that dare to perform in such a way, and I well believe that these character traits mainly derive from the Vindicator's excellent tube power supplies and its exceptionally good output transformers.

By the way, drummer Phil Rudd plays a small ride-cymbal in this track, which is quite unusual for him, and which, as far as I remember, sounds rather glazingly-dull and dried-out over most of the stereos, whereas the Audio Note amplifiers let the patterns open up in rather golden, warm and shiny timbres, almost gravitating towards red gold. Magnificent!

Of course I have listened to a lot more music, but I am not willing to describe it in such deep detail. And I won't get lost in banalities like "bass, mids or treble", because when I come across such vocabulary in association with hi-fi gear elsewhere, I always get the itch. However, I would like to mention that the Vindicator seems to put an acoustic magnifying glass on the used power tube like hardly any other 2A3 amplifier I know. Oh yes, you may experience music very well with the built-in Sovteks, that's for sure. But how much lightness and resolution this power amp is able to engender with old 2A3 Single Plates from RCA Cunningham or Ken-Rad is indeed remarkable and allows further conclusions about the excellent qualities of this machine. With an average piece of gear, you probably wouldn't rather notice any difference in the use of different power tubes... In any case, this Audio Note tandem invites you to indulge yourself and draws your attention exclusively to the music.

Statement

I like the British: I love British humor, I love the novels of Douglas Adams and I love hi-fi equipment from Audio Note. But while in Adams' science fiction epic "The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy" the Ultimate Question of Life is answered by the supercomputer Deep Thought after seven and a half million years with simply "42", the M2 Phono and the Vindicator Silver provide a much more plausible answer after only a few minutes of listening: "Listen to Music!"

LISTENING EQUIPMENT

Turntable Rega Planar 8
Cartridge Clearaudio Charisma V2
Loudspeaker Odeon Rigoletto 2020
Accessories Reson LSK speaker cable,
Audio Note AN-S Pure Silver Interconnect,
AudioQuest PowerQuest 3 power bar
Furniture Hi-Fi Racks Ltd, Rega Wall Bracket for Rega Planar 8

MANUFACTURER'S SPECIFICATIONS

Audio Note Vindicator Silver

Type:	Power amplifier
Mains input:	220/240V AC/50Hz
Line inputs:	1 x Line (RCA)
Input impedance:	100kOhms
Input sensitivity:	250mV
Channel balance:	+/- 0,3dB
Speaker output impedance:	4 - 8 Ohms
Power rating:	2 x 3,5 Watts
Valve complement:	1 x 6SL7GT, 2 x 2A3, 1 x 5R4GY
Circuitry:	Single Ended, Class A
Housing colour:	Black or Aluminium
Fascia:	Black (Acrylic) or Aluminium
Dimensions (W x D x H):	205 mm x 500 mm x 195 mm
Weight:	20,0kg
Max. power consumption:	270VA
Price:	5100 Euros

Audio Note M2 Phono

Type:	Preamplifier with MM Phono
Mains input:	220/240V AC/50Hz
Inputs:	3 x Line 1x Tape (In and Out) 1 x MM Phono
Input impedance:	100kOhm Line 47kOhm Phono
Input sensitivity:	126mV for 1V output voltage
Amplification @1kHz:	23dB Line, without feedback 17dB Line, with feedback 60dB Phono, without feedback 54dB Phono, with feedback
Output impedance:	5kOhms, without feedback 2,5kOhms, with feedback
Valve complement:	1x 6SN7WGTA, 1x 6DJ8, 1x ECC83, 1x 6X5, 1x ECL82
Housing colour:	Black
Fascia:	Black (Acrylic) or Aluminium
Dimensions (W x D x H):	295 mm x 450 mm x 140 mm
Weight:	7kg
Max. power consumption:	55W
Price:	4650 Euros

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