

M10 is to blame!

By River Chan

Starting from zero, the pre amp lineages of Audio Note ends up with number 10 but with number 4 omitted. Reciting them in a sequence of M Zero, M1, M2, M3, M5, M6, M7¹, M8, M9 and M10, the product line in fact provides more than 10 models owing to the rhapsodies and branching off of existing lineages. For instance, the M2 branches off with 5 different models: namely, M2 Line, M2 Line Balanced, M2 Phono, M2 Phono Balanced and M2 RIAA. For another instance, whilst all M3, M5, M6 and M8 series provide Line, Phono and RIAA versions, M8 in particular offers us a top-end version, i.e. the M8 Line Signature, which will be featured in the following cover story.

Next upgrade: M10

Judged by the above numbering, M9 should be the next higher model above M8. Should M9 pre amp be the next upgrade for an M8 user? No, if according to the above subtitle! How come? Are we a bit out of our minds? How dare! First, let's take a look at the attribution and lineage of Audio Note product lists! Audio Note M9 series consists of only one single model, M9 Phono, which had been spotlighted in "[Let's Discuss Heroes](#)"² in issue no. 257. Strictly speaking, it is not a pure line pre amp. Due to the fact that its design has been biased towards a top-notch phono stage targeting for a small group of vinylphiles, in other words, we'd better call M9 Phono "a top-notch phono stage with subsidiary line amp function". It seems to make more sense for M8 Line Pre Amp users to regard M10 Line as the next higher model of the same attribution, i.e. a pure line pre amp.

What's more important is Audio Note M8 Line Signature has never meant to be a regular model. Its creation owes a lot to the allegations against M10 Line pre amp. In this sense, who has triggered off the creation of M8 Line Signature? M10 is to blame!

Responding to requests

By tracing back the lineage from Audio Note homepage, all the details of Audio Note M8 Line, Phono and RIAA have been mentioned, except M8 Line Signature. A deliberate move? It might

¹ Audio Note M7, however, has already been discontinued and was no longer available.

² [Let's Discuss Heroes](#) is the monthly spotlight of Hi Fi Review magazine featuring a group of Hi Fi gurus in town, including Sam Ho, River Chan, Zhong Yi and Thomas Wang. It was named after a famous episode "In A Plum Garden, Cao Cao Discusses Heroes" in the Chinese historical novel, "Romance of the Three Kingdoms", which was written by Luó Guànzōng in the 14th century CE.

be. In fact, it has been said the creation of special M8 Line Signature results from the complaints of some regional users who could afford the top-end but more pricey M10. What they could not withstand was its bulky three chassis lying in their listening room. To them, the sheer bulkiness of M10 acts like a wet blanket which has spoiled their high ecstasy to possess.

Although Peter Qvortrup, the strong leader of Audio Note (UK), might not have carried out a general survey on the public, he has listened to these allegations, gathered local dealers' advices and responded to them with the launch of Audio Note M8 Line Signature. We have to thank god the launch is not a provisional nor a transitional "pocket-it-first" measure but rather a truly thoughtful decision of Peter to develop a new model which has the direct lineage from the noble M10's circuit but, of course, in a more compact topology.

Multiple transformations

The remaining question is: how to transform the three chassis of M10 or, in other words, turn the single chassis of regular M8 Line into a two chassis topology? Answer: the schematics primarily borrows from the extended portions of the M10's power supply.

For a long time, what M10 impresses us most is her stunning double-chassis mono block power supply topology. Such dual boxed topology should be the first of its kind in the market. Audio Note acclaims that both its current and voltage performances surpass what a battery-powered supply could achieve. Frankly, pre amps with three chassis are not uncommon in the audio market. It is unusual, however, for a tube amp manufacturer to put so much effort on and pay so much attention to the scale and specifications for its power supply. In this sense, M8 Line Signature could be regarded as a simplified version of an M10 since the configuration in fact comprises a mini M10's "Galahad" supply in which one pair of power supply cables have been connected to the external chassis of the Line Stage.

In the power supply chassis of M8, the topology starts to isolate the left and right channels electrically with her two step-down mains transformers, following with two gigantic ELNA filtering capacitors and two double C-Core choke coils serving as symmetric power supply for each of the channels. Each channel features with a Raytheon JAN-5651WA diode as DC regulator; Philips JAN 6X5WGT as full-wave power rectifier; and Ei Yugoslavia ECL-82 triode/pentode as stabilizer and A.F. amplifier. However, what would be more eye-catching than the two mysterious capacitance boxes engraved with Audio Note's logos on their golden tags and those home-made oil filled mylar copper foil capacitors with pure silver AN leads! Other audiophile-grade components include tantalum film resistors and Black Gate capacitors. Another tactic comprises treated plywood circuit boards for enhancing sound quality and controlling resonances within the unit.

Pure Silver (Umbilical Cables)

All internal hook-up wires of M8 predominate with silver. In fact, starting at the back of the IEC sockets to the fuse housing, then to the step-down transformers, the home-made Sogon mains cables have been implemented inside the power supply unit. For the external connection to the Line Stage chassis, two 10-foot long Sogon LX96 umbilical cables have been used. This implies how flexible for the placements of the M8's chassis in our domestic listening room would be. To place the chassis far apart? Or play a game of hide-and-seek? It's all up to you!

Sonic charisma with silver

Comparing with the power supply, the relative simplicity of the M8's line stage circuit is actually in disguise with her distinctively high-quality components! One pair of output transformers for each channel is, among which, the most spectacular phenomena. These custom-made twins are patented products made of Audio Note™ Super Perma 55% nickel double C-cores wired with 99.99% pure silver. The prestige and exclusiveness of these AN's secret recipe just resembles: to serve me with the most delicious well-marbled Tajima Japanese Kobe beef. For the input circuit of M8 Line Signature, the most renowned AN's single-ended non-negative-feedback topology has been installed in which a pair of silver wired phase splitter transformers are connected to the XLR inputs. These tiny transformers have been shielded with two separate mu-metal screening cans on the left side of the inside photo as shown.

Moreover, on the plywood circuit board right below them are four shiny filtering caps which closely replicate the two of similar looks we have discussed above. The former are in fact the more exotic AN's custom made oil filled mylar 4N pure silver foil caps dressed up with sturdy copper armours.

Zooming at the mother board again, one Philips JAN 6189W dual triodes and a Telefunken 6463 dual triodes both using each triode for one channel are responsible for the input and buffer stages respectively. The plywood board of the amplification circuit, targeting for better sound quality and resonance control, seems to be even thicker than those used in the power supply. By abandoning more common PCB, parts and components, Audio Note has got an eye for every little single detail in the circuits. The tour de force of the M8 Line Signature's schematics could undoubtedly raise anyone's eye brows!

Façade: Simple but elegant

The operation of M8 Line Signature is as simple as his elder brother M10. The centre knob on the front panel is the classy rotary switch specified for input selection made by Tokyo Ko-On. On its left and right are the Audio Note™ 22-stepped attenuators hand-built with tantalum resistors, designated for volume control and channel balancing. With no nonsense, no extra

signal path and no excessive signal loss, all knobs have given us a solid, quality feel when turning.

On her back panel, except the two military grade power inputs for the umbilical cables we've mentioned above, the M8 Line Signature offers 5 sets of RCA inputs, 1 set of XLR input, and 2 sets of output, either in XLR or RCA, well-prepared for any dual power amps configuration.

Some might criticize the conservative, old-fashioned look of the Audio Note pre amps. Some big spenders might even request for a more spectacular extravaganza! It's true all the knobs, tags and façade of an M8 might not belong to anything of extravagance. Nevertheless, I would say that the tiny name tag and the red engraved letters behind it have caught our eye with her astonishing gracefulness and noblesse.

As the saying goes, the height of an English Gentleman is "good manners". Unnecessarily high profile, excessive show-off and extravagant appearance all serve as the means to spoil the traditional English etiquette. It has ever been said that when in the past a gentleman bought new clothes, he might deliberately make some touch-ups so as to deteriorate their new look in case the novum might lead to some kind of embarrassments to his friends and colleagues. For the M8 Line Signature, the height of such traditional English etiquette applies. "Good manners" is an internal asset, always in low profile and pleasant to engage to. What M8 Line Signature deliberately embarrasses the competitors would be her stunning sonic performance but not an exaggerated appearance.

Authorized Dealer: Elephant Holdings (HK)