

KEN MICALLEF

Audio Note Meishu Phono 300B Tonmeister

INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER

My first high-end component was an Audio Note M2 preamplifier, which I bought from former Audio Note distributor/current *Stereophile* contributor Michael Trei. (Senior Contributing Editor Herb Reichert was Michael's partner in that 1990s-era Audio Note venture.) Herb can regale you with tales of motoring across the Soviet Union in an unheated Mercedes, trunk full of Audio Note components and American dollars, but that's a story for another review (most likely to be written by Herb).

The Audio Note M2 preamplifier was one of the most transparent audio products I'd ever heard, its single 6SN7 tube *extremely* sensitive to tube rolling. I spent countless hours researching RCA 5692s, Mullard ECC32s, RCA VT231s, and Sylvania 6SN7s and trying them out in the M2, each new, used, or new-old-stock tube producing stark differences in resolution, tone, soundstage, bass extension, and immediacy.

NOS tubes were cheap in the 1990s. I had boxes of them, especially of versions of the 6SN7 triode used in the M2. One frigid night, I rescued boxes of ancient radio tubes from an abandoned building on the corner of Mott and Houston in Soho, now a fashionable district with exorbitant rents, barely a 10-minute walk from Fi, Don Garber's fabled shop at 30 Watts Street. How times and real estate values have changed.

I've covered Audio Note rooms at several recent hi-fi shows.



After one recent show, Audio Note owner/CEO Peter Qvortrup asked me if I'd like to review one of their most recently introduced products, the Audio Note Meishu Phono 300B Tonmeister. After a quick consultation with Editor Jim Austin, I said yes.

Heavy-duty hi-fi

The Meishu Phono 300B Tonmeister (\$19,300) is a class-A, zero negative feedback, single-ended-triode (SET) integrated amplifier. It weighs about 65lb and started shipping in late 2019. I brought it up the stairs to my sixth-floor walkup listening warren with help from Audio Note confrere Robert Lighton. The Meishu Phono's new pair of Psvane Standard Hifi Series 300B tubes required

SPECIFICATIONS

Description Two-channel SET integrated amplifier with phono stage. Output: 8Wpc into 4 ohms (9dBW) or 8 ohms (6dBW). Input impedance: 100k ohms, line level; 47k ohms, phono. Input sensitivity: 240mV for full output. Channel balance: ± 0.3 dB. Tube complement: 5U4G plus two each

300B, 5687, ECC82, ECC88, and ECC83. Moving magnet phono stage loading, 47k ohms, 47pF (fixed); gain, 37.3dB; input sensitivity, 10.8mV at full output; channel balance, < 0.25 dB; noise < 1 mV. Max. power consumption: 200W.

Dimensions 18.1" (460mm) W \times 8.7" (220mm) H \times 20.9"

(530mm) D. Weight: 65lb (29.5kg).

Finish Fascia, anodized aluminum or black acrylic.

Serial number of unit reviewed 3MP3-024. Manufactured in the UK.

Price \$19,300. Approximate number of US dealers: 11. Warranty: Two years, parts and

labor.

Manufacturer Audio Note Ltd., Viscount House, Units C, D & E, Star Rd., Star Trading Estate, Partridge Green, West Sussex, RH13 8RA United Kingdom. Web: audionote.co.uk. Email: info@audionote.co.uk. Tel: +44 (0)1273 830 800. US distributor: As above.

1–200 hours to hit their stride, advised NYC Audio Note tech Ben Jacoby. Burn-in commenced.

Lighton also brought along an Audio Note S4 SUT so that I could use the Tonmeister, which has a phono stage that's MM-only, with my MC cartridges.

Generating just 8Wpc into 4 or 8 ohms, the aluminum-encased Meishu Phono 300B stands a stout 18.1" wide × 20.9" deep, and 8.7" tall. Its weight is mostly in its transformer-bearing rear, which makes hauling it up stairs and moving it on and off my equipment rack a challenging and noisy exercise (grunts, groans, and other emanations). The Meishu's back panel is made of 3mm acrylic; its fascia, 10mm acrylic.

The Meishu Tonmeister's volume control—no remote control here—is designed in-house at Audio Note and manufactured by an outside contractor based in the UK. The amp's snazzy gold knobs are “made for us in Taiwan to our design, as are the RCA knobs, which are plated with 50 microns of silver. XLRs are by Neutrik,” Qvortrup said.



Made for us, or by us, was a common theme in my conversations with Audio Note folks. All Audio Note products are assembled by the company's 28 full-time employees in the West

MEASUREMENTS

I performed the measurements of the Audio Note Meishu Phono Tonmeister with my Audio Precision SYS2722 system.¹ The tubes were already installed when I received the review sample. I removed the cover to check for proper installation. All was well. I waited for 30 minutes after powering up the amplifier before starting the testing.

Looking first at its line inputs, the Meishu Tonmeister preserved absolute polarity, ie, was noninverting, from both the 4 ohm and 8 ohm output transformer taps. The maximum voltage gain at 1kHz was a moderately low 29.65dB from the 4 ohm tap into 8 ohms and 31.3dB from the 8 ohm

tap into the same load. The input impedance is specified as 100k ohms. I measured a still-high 77k ohms at 20Hz, 74.5k ohms at 1kHz, and 63.7k ohms at 20kHz.

The source impedance from the 8 ohm output tap was a high 3.2 ohms at 20Hz and 1kHz, increasing slightly to 3.45 ohms at 20kHz. The variation in the small-signal frequency response with this output with our standard simulated loudspeaker² (fig.1, gray trace) was therefore high, at ±1.8dB. The variation was lower from the 4 ohm tap, at ±1.1dB, but with both output taps, there will be audible modifications of loudspeaker responses with almost all loudspeakers. Into resistive loads (fig.1,

blue, red, cyan, magenta, and green traces), the Audio Note amplifier's output started to roll off below 40Hz and above 20kHz, reaching -3dB at 9Hz and 55kHz. Fig.1 was taken with the volume control set to its maximum; the excellent channel matching was preserved at lower settings of the control. There is the slightest hint of a resonant peak at 60kHz in the Meishu Tonmeister's frequency response, which correlated with some damped ultrasonic ringing in the amplifier's reproduction of a 1kHz squarewave

¹ See stereophile.com/content/measurements-maps-precision.

² See stereophile.com/content/real-life-measurements-page-2.

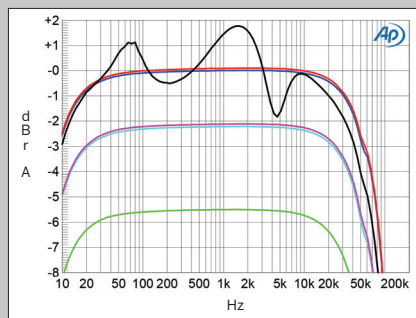


Fig.1 Audio Note Meishu Phono Tonmeister, line input, 8 ohm output tap, frequency response at 2.83V into: simulated loudspeaker load (gray), 8 ohms (left channel blue, right red), 4 ohms (left cyan, right magenta), and 2 ohms (green) (1dB/vertical div.).

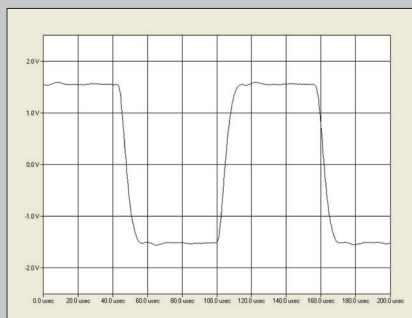


Fig.2 Audio Note Meishu Phono Tonmeister, 8 ohm output tap, small-signal 10kHz squarewave into 8 ohms.

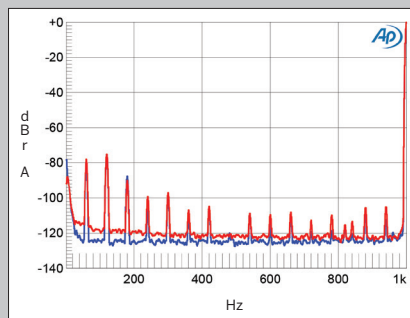


Fig.3 Audio Note Meishu Phono Tonmeister, 8 ohm output tap, spectrum of 1kHz sinewave, DC-1kHz, at 1Wpc into 8 ohms with volume control set to its maximum (left channel blue, right red) (linear frequency scale).

Sussex Audio Note factory. “We make many of our parts in-house, [including] all signal transformers, signal capacitors, the top-of-the-range Pallas low-capacitance cables for digital, [and] attenuators,” Qvortrup told me. “We make or commission all sonically critical parts, from the way our wires are drawn and the materials in our cables, to the manufacturing technology in our nonmagnetic tantalum and niobium resistors.” Audio Note-branded electrolytic capacitors are made to the company’s specs by Japan’s Rubycon Corporation. “We make our MC cartridges in house from scratch, as well. We have about 4000 processes in our document library.”

Audio Note’s careful selection and control of critical parts is said to play a major role in the hallowed Audio Note sound, including its unerring naturalism.

“The output transformer, interstage transformer, and coupling capacitors are all made in-house at our factory in the UK,” Audio Note transformer expert Andy Grove wrote in an email. “We use whatever materials and techniques get the performance we require, which means some of our equipment is quite traditional and hands-on but other pieces are very modern and high-tech, such as our CNC winding machines. We have large stocks of Kraft paper, Nomex, Kapton, Mylar, etc., in multiple thicknesses and widths; a transformer will always have several of those materials used within it.

“It’s a fine art, understanding differences of various transformer core materials and different winding designs/strategies, both on a scientific level and in [what we call] ‘Kung Fu mastery,’” Audio Note engineer Darko Greguras told me by email.

“The phono, filament, power board, and the PSU board are all point-to-point wired in the Meishu Tonmeister,” Greguras added. “This technique allows us to control the board material (FR4, Tuf-nol, Permal), the thickness of the board material—copper or silver—which can be from 0.5mm to 1.2mm. We achieve solid electrical connection by twisting a wire around resistor or capacitor leads and valve bases so a board can even work without a solder. Then the components are soldered in position. We use printed circuit boards in our amplifiers up to [but not including] level 3, because it is definitely much easier to populate them; but even then, we pay special attention to a copper thickness, FR4 board thickness, and the width of the traces.” This Meishu Phono 300B Tonmeister is a level three component, with no printed circuit boards.

“The standard Meishu Tonmeister”—including this Phono version—“uses copper wire throughout,” Grove continued, “but everything in the Meishu is balanced and aligned with exactly the same care as it is in our silver-wired uber-products. We select gauge, configuration (stranded or solid core), insulation (for example, PVC, PTFE, silicone, polyurethane, silk) and supplier to provide dimensional freedom in voicing a given product.”

The Meishu Phono 300B Tonmeister uses several tubes to get its mojo working. Audio Note doesn’t make those. The input/driver stage utilizes a Psvane Hifi Series 12AU7/ECC82 and a NOS Philips ECG 5687WB, which drives an interstage transformer. The output stage is powered by two Psvane 300B tubes. An Electro-Harmonix 5U4GB takes care of rectification. The phono stage uses Psvane Hifi Series 12AX7/ECC83 and either Sovtek/

measurements, continued

into 8 ohms (fig.2).

The Meishu Tonmeister’s channel separation (not shown) was moderate, at 49dB, R-L, and 36dB, L-R, at 1kHz, respectively decreasing to 23dB and 40dB at 20kHz. The unweighted, wideband signal/noise ratio (ref. 1W into 8 ohms) taken from the 8 ohm taps with the inputs shorted to ground and the volume control set to its maximum was 69.7dB (average of the two channels). This ratio improved slightly to 71.5dB, left, and 69.6dB, right, when the measurement bandwidth was restricted to 22Hz-22kHz, and to 86.7dB when A-weighted. With their lower gain, the ratios from the 4 ohm outputs were 1.3dB greater.

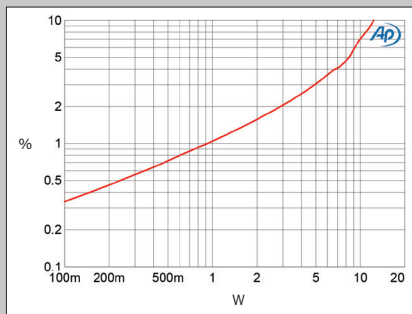


Fig.4 Audio Note Meishu Phono Tonmeister, 8 ohm output tap, distortion (%) vs 1kHz continuous output power into 8 ohms.

Spectral analysis of the low-frequency noise floor while the Audio Note’s 8 ohm taps drove a 1kHz tone at 1Wpc into 8 ohms with the volume control set to the maximum (fig.3) revealed a low level of random noise. However, AC supply-related spuriae at 60Hz and its odd- and even-order harmonics were present. The highest of these, at 120Hz, lay at -76dB (0.015%). Its level didn’t change when I experimented with the grounding between the amplifier and the Audio Precision analyzer.

Audio Note specifies the Meishu Tonmeister’s maximum power as 8W into both 4 and 8 ohms (9.03dBW and 6.02dBW, respectively), though no distortion percent-

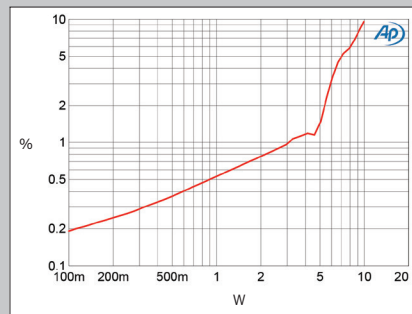


Fig.5 Audio Note Meishu Phono Tonmeister, 4 ohm output tap, distortion (%) vs 1kHz continuous output power into 8 ohms.

age is mentioned. With our usual definition of clipping—when the THD+noise reaches 1%—and with both channels driven, I measured a clipping power of just 1Wpc from the 8 ohm tap into 8 ohms (fig.4) and from the 4 ohm tap into 4 ohms. At 3% THD+N, I measured 4.8Wpc with each output tap matched to the load, and at 10%, 12.2Wpc from the 8 ohm tap (10.9dBW) and from the 4 ohm tap (7.9dBW), again with the taps matched to the loads. Less power was available from the 8 ohm tap into 4 ohms, but with the 4 ohm tap driving 8 ohms (fig.5), 5.75Wpc was available at 3% THD+N and 10Wpc at 10% (10dBW). The shape of the traces in these graphs

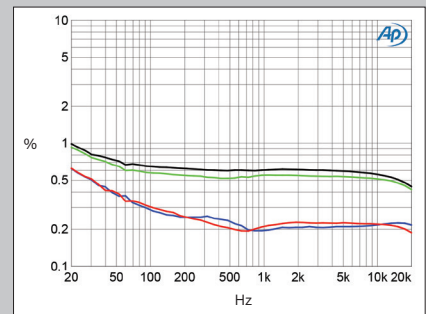


Fig.6 Audio Note Meishu Phono Tonmeister, 4 ohm output tap, THD+N (%) vs frequency at 1V into: 8 ohms (left channel blue, right red), 4 ohms (left green, right gray).

Electro Harmonix 6922s or Russian ECC88s. Grove laid out the topology. These are common tube types, making tube-rolling easy and rewarding.

“In → Volume control → Input valve → RC coupling → Driver valve → Transformer → Output valve → Transformer → Out,” he wrote. “The input valve is to provide a bit more gain so that the input signal can be line-level. RC coupling is used here because we don’t need a lot of voltage swing and because it allows some flexibility to shape the tone and bandwidth of the system and to avoid cascaded stages of similar nature—which is another advantage of using transformer coupling; it’s kind of like amplifier-stage genetic diversity. Next is the transformer-coupled stage, then the output valve and output transformer, which is common to most amps of this type.”

Greguras then described the Meishu Phono 300B’s tube-rectified moving magnet phono stage, which I used extensively in my listening.

“We call our ECC83 and ECC88 phono stage a classic with good reason,” Greguras wrote. “It’s single-ended with no feedback. ... It has the best sonic blend of the ECC83 and ECC88, both in anode followers, with RIAA correction between the stages, optimally biased for a good dynamic transfer, yet sweet transients.

“In the M1 phono preamp, Oto and Soro integrated amplifiers,” Greguras continued, “the [power supply] is based on solid state diodes. But ... the Meishu Phono 300B Tonmeister benefits from valve rectification and chokes.” Those chokes, too, are made in-

house. “This means less mechanical sound, closer to real life, and richer harmonics.”

The parts in this model are upgraded, from metal-film Beyschlag resistors, standard electrolytic capacitors, and Audio Note tin caps to “a mix of 0.5 and 1W Audio Note tantalum film resistors, Audio Note Standard and KAISEI Electrolytic capacitors, [and] an Audio Note copper coupling capacitor. As we move up on the ladder of parts, there is less sound of its own.”

I asked Qvortrup about the manufacturing philosophy behind Audio Note products.

“We strive for our equipment to have no sound at all but the sound of the recording itself,” he continued. “We use an evaluation method we call ‘comparison by contrast.’ When we audition new equipment, we do not use known recordings. We pick five or ten recordings at random, listen to each of them, and then make a judgement as to whether one or the other piece of equipment individualizes the sound of each recording, and the one that does can then be considered to add/subtract the least from the recording.”

On the outside, the Tonmeister’s facade includes four gold-plated control knobs labeled function (tuner, aux, CD1, CD2), record (source, tape), volume, and balance. Around back, things are similarly straightforward, with RCA jacks denoted Tuner, Aux, CD1, CD2, Tape-In, Tape Out, and Phono. There are three loudspeaker binding posts for each speaker lead, 8 ohm, and 4 ohm, and common. There’s an IEC connector for power, two ground pins (signal ground and chassis ground), and an on/off switch. That’s it.

measurements, continued

suggests that the amplifier’s circuit doesn’t use loop negative feedback. It is also fair to note that the waveform wasn’t actually clipped at these high levels of distortion; instead, it was asymmetrically rounded off.

Figs.4 and 5 indicate that the lowest distortion at low power is obtained from the 4 ohm transformer tap. Fig.6 shows how the percentage of THD+N in both channels varied with frequency with this tap driving 8 and 4 ohms at 1V. The THD+N rose slightly at low frequencies and was significantly higher into 4 ohms (green and gray traces) than it was into 8 ohms (blue and red traces). At the same level from the 8 ohm tap (not shown), the distortion

across the audioband was close to 0.5% into 8 ohms and 1% into 4 ohms.

The distortion waveform (fig.7) was predominantly the subjectively innocuous second harmonic, with higher-order harmonics progressively lower in level (fig.8). However, the levels of the third, fifth, and seventh harmonics were higher at low frequencies (fig.9), which will probably be due to the onset of core saturation in the output transformers.

Due to masking, in itself the level of the second harmonic may not result in audible distortion, but this will only be true if it is not accompanied by intermodulation distortion. With the Meishu Tonmeister’s

4 ohm taps driving an equal mix of 19 and 20kHz tones at 1Wpc peak into 8 ohms (fig.10), the 1kHz difference product lay just below -50dB (0.3%), with the higher-order products at 18 and 21kHz 10dB lower in level. This is marginal performance, in my opinion.

To examine the behavior of the Audio Note’s phono input, I connected a wire from the Audio Precision’s ground terminal to the amplifier’s chassis ground post on its rear panel to obtain the lowest noise. The phono input preserved absolute polarity and the maximum gain at 1kHz was 67.8dB at the 8 ohm outputs and 66.14dB at the 4 ohm outputs. The gain was fixed at 36.4dB

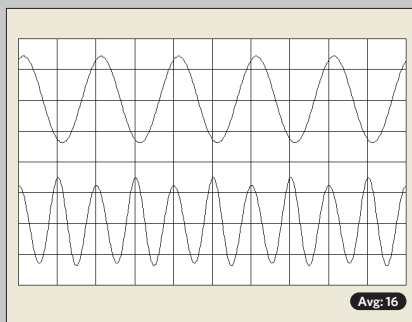


Fig.7 Audio Note Meishu Phono Tonmeister, 8 ohm output tap, left channel, 1kHz waveform at 0.5W into 8 ohms, 0.72% THD+N (top); distortion and noise waveform with fundamental notched out (bottom, not to scale).

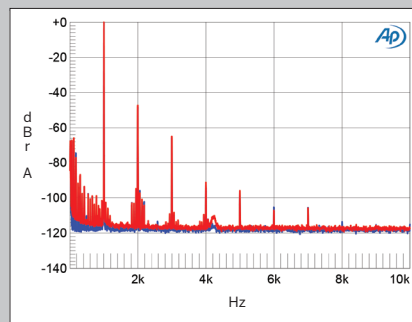


Fig.8 Audio Note Meishu Phono Tonmeister, 8 ohm output tap, spectrum of 1kHz sine wave, DC-10kHz, at 1V into 8 ohms (left channel blue, right red; linear frequency scale).

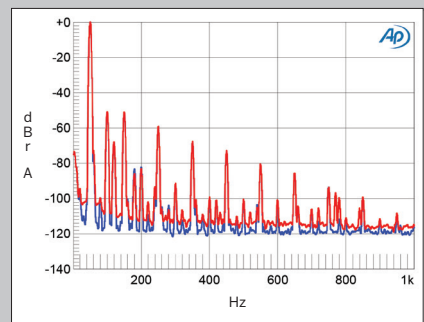


Fig.9 Audio Note Meishu Phono Tonmeister, 4 ohm output tap, spectrum of 50Hz sine wave, DC-1kHz, at 1V into 8 ohms (left channel blue, right red; linear frequency scale).

Setup

The Tonmeister I reviewed was seen at the New York Audio Show, but it wasn't playing music there because it had been damaged in transit from the UK. After the show, it went to Audio Note technician Ben Jacoby, who made the necessary repairs; then it was sent here. It arrived at my place with the balance control reversed, but that didn't affect the Meishu's sweet sound.

I put the Tonmeister atop an Ikea Aptitlig bamboo board. I used the Audio Note UK AN-S4/M step-up transformer from my MC cartridges, into the Tonmeister's MM-only phono stage.

The amp's meager 8Wpc had no trouble driving my DeVore Orangutan O/96s, delivering smooth highs, a clear midrange that leaned toward lush, and a surprisingly taut yet rich low end. (These DeVores are nominal 10 ohm speakers with a specified sensitivity of 96dB/W/m; don't try this at home with your 82dB-sensitive, 4 ohm floorstanders.) I listened mostly, but not entirely, to vinyl. (It isn't called the Meishu CD or Meishu Stream 300B after all.)



Listening

One recent autumn evening, I came across three young folks playing laptops and a small keyboard at the corner of Bleecker and Lafayette Streets. This band's name is Your Throat. They

measurements, continued

at the single-ended Source output, so, to avoid damaging the amplifier's output stage, I measured the phono input's behavior at the Source output with the volume control set to its minimum.

The input impedance is specified as 47k ohms. I measured 48k ohms at 20Hz, 37.5k ohms at 1kHz, but just 8k ohms at 20kHz. The phono input's RIAA equalization was very accurate, with excellent channel matching (fig.11), though the low frequencies rolled off a little, reaching -3dB at 16Hz. The wideband, unweighted S/N ratio with the inputs shorted to ground was a good 64dB in both channels, ref. 1kHz at 5mV. Restricting the measurement bandwidth to the audioband increased the

ratio to 68.9dB, while an A-weighting filter further increased the ratio to 76dB. Negligible power supply-related spurious were present in the phono stage's noise floor; this is a relatively quiet phono stage.

The low-frequency and midrange overload margins, calculated from the difference between the nominal 1kHz input level of 5mV and the input voltage where the THD+N reached 1%, were superbly high, at 37.8dB at 20Hz and 32dB at 1kHz. The margin at 20kHz was lower at 14dB. The phono input's harmonic distortion was respectably low in level, with the second harmonic the highest in level at -60dB (0.1%, fig.12). With the relatively low overload margin at the top of the audioband, I wasn't surprised

to find that the second-order difference product with an equal mix of 19 and 20kHz tones peaking at 25mV lay at -40dB (1%). High-order intermodulation products were vanishingly low in level, however, until I increased the signal level by 10dB.

The Audio Note Meishu Phono Tonmeister's measured performance is what I would expect from an amplifier with a single-ended output stage that uses a single 300B tube for each channel. In this respect, its behavior resembles that of the Western Electric Type No.91E integrated amplifier that Ken Micallef reviewed in November 2022.³—John Atkinson

³ See stereophile.com/content/western-electric-type-no91e-integrated-amplifier-measurements.

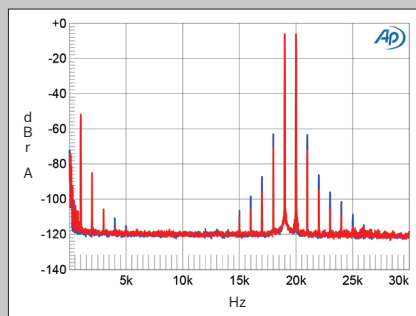


Fig.10 Audio Note Meishu Phono Tonmeister, 8 ohm output tap, HF intermodulation spectrum, DC-30kHz, 19+20kHz at 1Wpc peak into 4 ohms (left channel blue, right red; linear frequency scale).

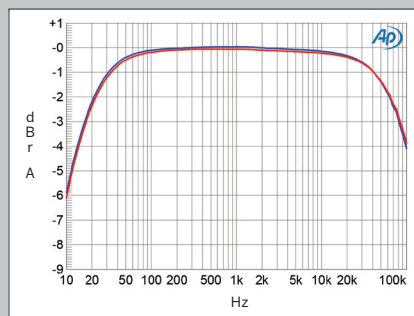


Fig.11 Audio Note Meishu Phono Tonmeister, phono input, response with RIAA correction, measured at Source output (left channel blue, right red) (1dB/vertical div.).

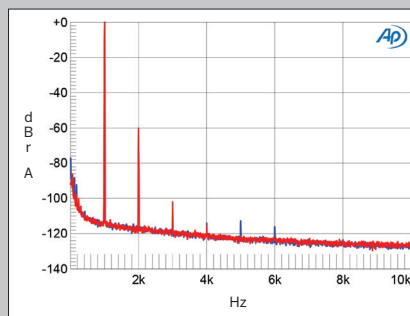


Fig.12 Audio Note Meishu Phono Tonmeister, MM phono input, spectrum of 1kHz sine wave, DC-10kHz, for 5mV input, measured at Source output (left channel blue, right red, linear frequency scale).

drenched me in Mellotron-like waves, circular melodies, layers of gassy noise, and deep undertows of oily bass beats—all this from a single 12" driver in a stage-monitor wedge. I was so engrossed that I stood for 30 minutes in 40° weather, time and place suspended as I fell under their music's spell. (Did they have recordings to sell? No. A Bandcamp page? A website? Anything? No.)

The Audio Note Meishu Phono 300B Tonmeister affected me in a manner similar to Your Throat. Its performance was whole cloth, transparent, with superquiet, black backgrounds. It was texturally and tonally beautiful. Mesmerizing, providing new insight into familiar recordings, resolving previously unheard details. The Tonmeister made me do what every passionate audiophile wants to do: forget about judgment and audiophile virtues and just listen. It did that in ways that only my Shindo Laboratories components and a few other products have done, all of them lovingly crafted, small-batch music-remaking machines, the best I've heard in-house.

The Tonmeister reproduced recordings I know intimately as if I, or maybe they, were waking from a long sleep. The amp's transparency, to tube-choice, sources, and recordings, rendered from every vinyl LP what sounded to me like original intent—what the musicians, producer, and mastering engineer conceived in the studio—though I realize that's impossible to know. What I'm sure of is that each recording I played through the Tonmeister had more depth, physicality, and flow than I've previously heard from any variation of my Greenwich Village rig. I've had this kind of transcendent listening experience only in a few select rooms at audio shows and friends' systems.

"Having listened to this audio combo system myself," noted my listening buddy, hi-fi scholar and technical whiz Steven Cohen, "what I can say is that this system served the music exceedingly well. That's why we'd keep coming back to listen more, and in a sense, that is the point of having such a well-balanced system, that it naturally gives you a great shot at hearing what the artists and producers intended, and then some." Exactly. Well said.

I could continue to blather about the Tonmeister's macroscale charms, its rich tonality, its ability to cast a sweeping soundstage, its force, potency, energy. But the devil is in the details, so here are a few of those.

My 1958 pressing of *The Poll Winners Ride Again!* (Contemporary S7029) is a tone-saturated, superimmediate performance captured brilliantly by engineer Roy DuNann. This LP always sounds fantastic, with flow, swinging dynamics, and abundant detail. Via the Tonmeister, Shelly Manne's drums and cymbals bristled with texture and energy; Barney Kessel's sometimes corny guitar escapades were physical and unruly; Ray Brown's upright bass filled my room, bowing and blooming beyond the speakers, right into my stomach. I felt and heard the full span of Brown's instrument, in both frequency and dynamic terms.

L'Orchestre de la Suisse Romande's performance of Stravinsky's *The Firebird* (Speakers Corner/Decca SXL 2017), conducted by Ernest Ansermet, walloped me with a dense, swirling wall of sound, its large soundstage populated by visceral, nearly-3D images. I was riveted by the orchestra's every nuance, the subtlety and emotion of the piece, from those ominous strings and gentle percussion (emanating from the Meishu's dead-quiet background) to the textural shading of each instrument in space. It captured the essential mood and message of every recording.

Another exceptional recording, tenor saxophonist Sonny Rollins's *Volume 1* (Blue Note BLP 1542), is a rambunctious workout by Rollins, trumpeter Donald Byrd, pianist Wynton Kelly, bassist Gene Ramey, and drummer Max Roach. On "Decision," the Tonmeister captured Rollins's pungent tone and Byrd's buttery textures right down to the spit blowing through the instruments, live sounding, immediate, and layered in ambient space. Ramey's

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Analog sources Thorens TD 124 turntable/Jelco MS350S tone-arm/EMT TSD 15N MC cart.

Digital sources HoloAudio May DAC augmented with Sonore opticalRendu, Roon Nucleus+, Small Green Computer power supply, TRENDnet switch, streaming Roon/Tidal/Qobuz via Apple iPad Mini.

Preamplifiers Shindo Allegro, Audio Note S9SUT.

Power amplifier Shindo Haut Brion.

Loudspeakers DeVore Fidelity Orangutan O/96.

Cables Interconnects: Triode Wire Labs Spirit II (RCA), Analysis Plus Silver Apex (RCA), Shindo (RCA). Speaker: Analysis Plus Silver Apex Speaker (bananas). AC: Triode Wire Labs Obsession NCF.

Accessories Pro-Ject VC-S2 ALU Record Cleaning Machine; Audio Desk Systeme Vinyl Cleaner Pro; Hunt Mark 6 Carbon Fiber Record Cleaning Brush; IsoTek EVO3 Aquarius line conditioner; Salamander five-tier rack (2); IKEA Aptitlig bamboo chopping boards (under turntable, preamp, power amps); mahogany blocks (2" × 2" × 0.5") under cutting boards. Hi-fi set up on short wall firing into 10' × 12' room, wood slat on plaster walls. —Ken Micallef

bass was taut and full, his fingers almost visible as they scaled the strings. This recording sounds like live music, bouncing off the walls of Rudy Van Gelder's Hackensack studio, but that sense was amplified by the Tonmeister.

A final observation: the Tonmeister doesn't do air. There's no sense of diaphanous treble breathing a halo of iridescence around instruments or voices. I didn't miss it: It may not do air; instead it does flesh. As is surely clear if you read this far, I found the amplifier's rich, brawny, physical reproduction more than satisfying.

But then, I'm used to it: My Shindo Labs amplifier and preamp don't do air, either. The Tonmeister is more resolving than my Shindos, has tighter low end, and is more transparent than my tubed Shindo separates. It's just as communicative as the Shindos. None of them do air.

Conclusion

I only talked about vinyl, because I had my best experiences with vinyl. But I also used the Meishu with my HoloAudio May DAC. The combination was rich and fluid and brought me many hours of musical satisfaction and surprise.

In 2011, Art Dudley wrote in his review of the Audio Note Jinro integrated of "an abundance of that often-noted-yet-never-explained 'SET sound' that allows solo voices and instruments to stand musically and spatially proud of the rest of the mix." That, certainly, is part of what I heard with this Meishu amplifier. It framed every recording within its unique space with meatiness and viscosity, drive and dynamics, deep tone and texture.

Words fail to express the satisfaction I derived listening to music through this expensive Audio Note integrated amplifier. I've got nothing bad to say about it—except for the air thing, if you care about that. I detected no (other) anomalies, artifacts, sonic peculiarities, or outright shortcomings. The Tonmeister, together with the Audio Note SUT I auditioned it with, took what I hear from my vinyl collection and made it better, portraying each performance as a singular, unique event occurring at a particular time and place, its secrets revealed.

If there's a better integrated amplifier in the world than the Audio Note Meishu Phono 300B Tonmeister, I haven't heard it yet. ■