





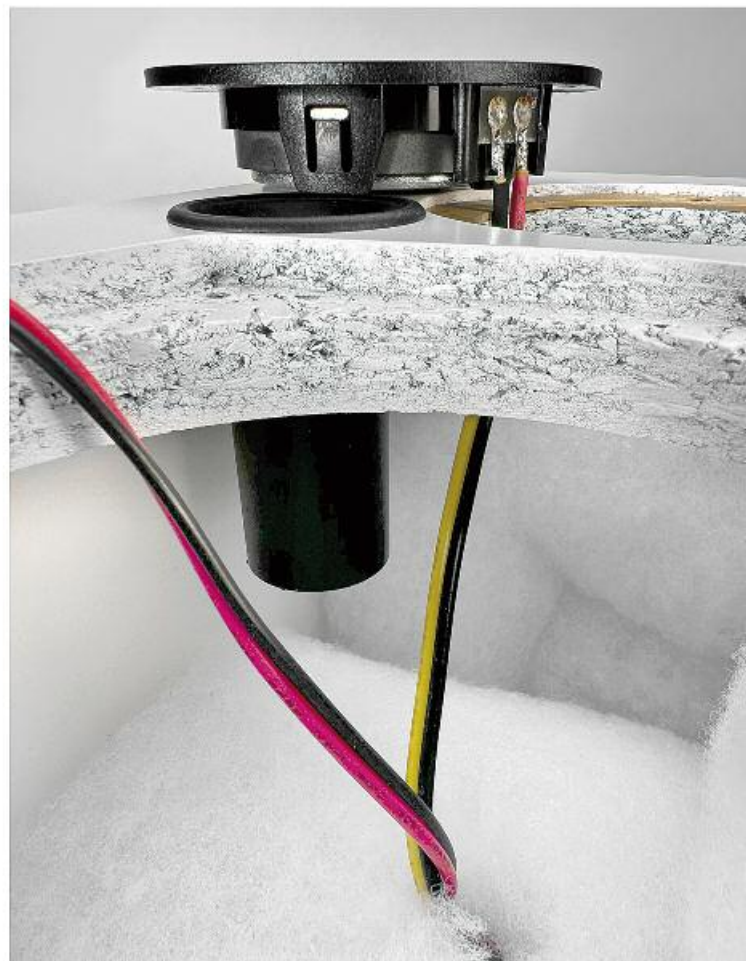
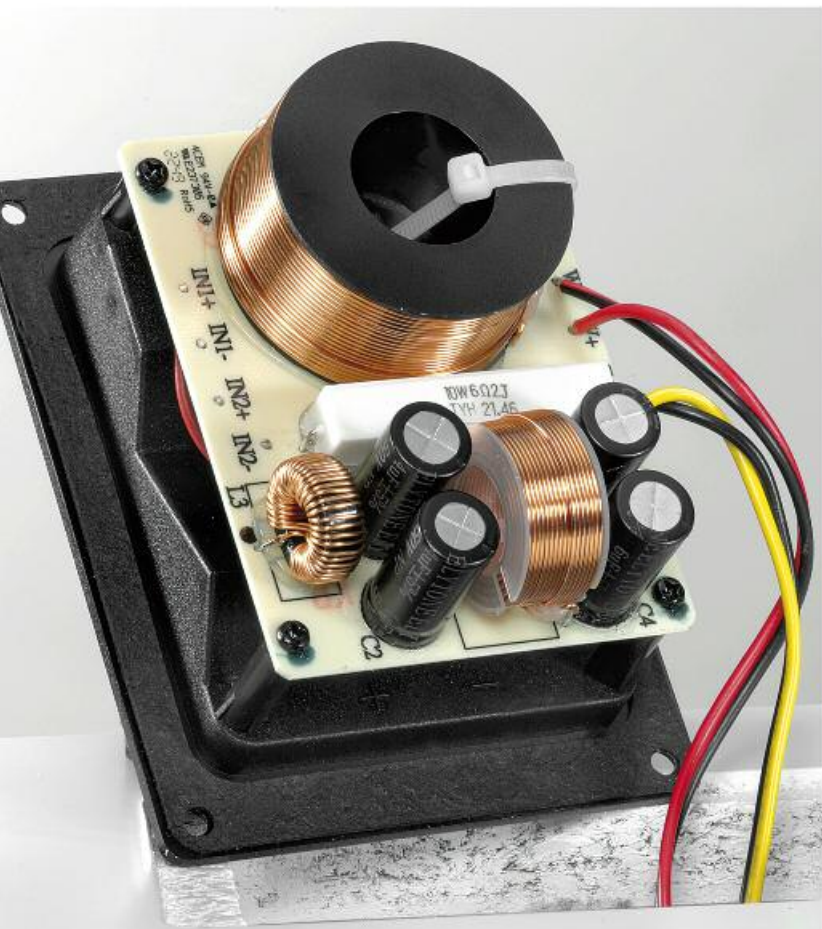
## Two gems

**The smallest speakers from Audio Note UK don't look spectacular: simply the way compact speakers have looked for decades. The AX-One/II's reveal their true value as soon as you play music through them - then they prove to be real gems!**

Audio Note UK was founded in 1989, initially as a distributor for the Japanese brand of the same name, which today trades under the name Kondo (yes, that's the one...). In order to differentiate itself, the company, which has long since established itself as its own brand, still has the suffix "UK" in its name. Although it is based in the south of England near Brighton, its entire range of speakers is assembled by an Austrian company. Given the somewhat difficult economic conditions caused by the UK's departure from the European Union, Danish-born Peter Qvortrup, founder of Audio Note UK, has shown commercial foresight to keep more than one foothold in the EU. Audio Note UK is a classic high-end full-range supplier, offering everything from turntables and cartridges to digital sources and matching amplifier electronics, a comprehensive range of loudspeakers and, last not least, a colourful variety of accessories like speaker stands and cables.

The AX series marks Audio Note UK's entry into the world of loudspeakers. It currently consists of two models, with an AX-Three soon to follow. The series was introduced almost 25 years ago and was very successful, but was discontinued at the time due to delivery problems with the cabinet supplier. Audio Note UK refused to accept this, and, once new suppliers had been found, it redesigned and refined the series from scratch - hence the "II" in the type designation. The cabinets are not made from industry-standard MDF, but from 18 mm thick, high-density chipboard, which is veneered on both sides to optimise the resonance performance for fast and accurate impulse reproduction. Scan-Speak's specialists supply the chassis according to the English specifications: in the case of the AX-One/II, a low-midrange model measuring just under 13 cm with a paper cone and a foam surround and a tweeter with a 19 mm cone made of artificial silk. Incidentally, the tweeter does not use ferrofluid in the air gap of the voice coil, a factor which is intended to contribute to natural impulse reproduction. The speakers have a very high-quality finish, without the usual "high-end bling bling" found elsewhere.

Straight out of the box, the AX-One/II's immediately sound fresh and lively, but the coherence of the sound and its distance from the cabinets require a certain "break-in" period. I can only confirm to





a limited extent that it has to be 100 hours as the operating instructions suggest, because I was able to fully enjoy listening after about 30 hours. On the other hand, the AX-One/II continued to improve over the entire test period, not only in terms of its clarity but also in the reproduction of fine dynamic nuances. However, dear readers, you need to be strong and courageous when it comes to their positioning! Contrary to the high-end mantra that speakers should be positioned as freely as possible in the room, Audio Note UK expressly recommends positioning the speakers close to the wall - or even in the corners of the room! - to support the bass response. And this works very well. The closer you get to the rear wall, the more bass energy the AX-One/II emits, without cluttering up the sound or even droning. This is where it becomes clear that the positioning the speakers close to the wall has actually been incorporated into the extremely successful overall tuning process. The set-up is really easy. With the right music material, the speakers give an immediate and unmistakable response. One of the recordings I used included a good track with an acoustic bass played by the Norwegian bassist and composer Arild Andersen (album Mira, ECM Records ECM 2307/ 372 8782, D 2014, CD). On the title track, Andersen begins with a peaceful line on the bass; if you concentrate on the bass

Above: The two carefully chosen drivers are sourced from the Danish manufacturer Scan-Speak. They fit cleanly in the 18 mm front panel

Bottom left: The principle of being more than it seems also applies to the crossover. A few selected components have been matched to the concept and thus make a major contribution to the homogeneous character of the AX-One/II

Bottom right: The detached tweeter with the internal cabling and the bass reflex tube extending into the interior of the cabinet. The carefully selected damping material and the structure of the cabinet material are clearly visible. A closer look reveals the veneer on both sides of the HDF panel

and gradually move the speaker closer to the wall until the volume of the instrument harmonises evenly with the overtones of the strings, it all fits. And before I know it, I'm a little less than thirty centimetres from the rear wall, much closer than I usually am with other loudspeakers. Whilst the AX-One/II's don't morph into a deep bass miracle, even with this set-up they produce music with a springy, fast and seamless bass foundation - a truly mature performance all round! I was amazed that the spatial reproduction remained intact and did not collapse on account of the small distance from the wall, something I have often experienced when speakers have been placed too close to the walls. Everything remains clear and tidy here, with Tommy Smith's velvety saxophone and Paolo Vinaccia's delicate drumming completing the trio in my listening sample. The sound is wonderfully detached from the loudspeakers, the spatial representation is more wide than deep and also extends slightly beyond the loudspeaker level. The AX-One/II's tend to create a three-dimensional relief with the loudspeaker plane as the basis, rather than a superficial, holographically deep space. Perhaps this type of spatial reproduction sounds more natural than an illusion of three-dimensionality which, on closer listening, turns out to be gimmickry ...

The closed, coherent sound of the smallest members of the AX series is exemplary. To test the AX-One/II on this criterion, I chose a recording of harpsichord music. A harpsichord is not so easy to record and reproduce because its sound is made up of several elements. When the string is plucked, it vibrates very quickly and then flows into the overtone sounds of the vibrating string, while at the same time the instrument's wooden body provides a foundation rich in base notes. In 1979 Gustav Leonhardt recorded several pieces by the French composer François Couperin, who was born in 1668 (Pieces De Clavecin, BASF, Harmonia Mundi 2020 348-2, D 1973, LP). In these works Couperin attempted to go beyond the usual Baroque forms, like the suite for instance, and create individual character pieces. Gustav Leonhardt takes us on a journey of discovery and



presents the calmly paced character of "La Ménérou" just as impressively as the thoughtful soundscape of "Prélude No. 5 in a". The AX-One/II's reproduce all the subtleties with complete effortlessness, the harpsichord built by Martin Skowronek in 1962 to a model created in 1745 by the instrument maker J.D. Duelcken feels as if it is standing in the same room with me. The sound has nothing artificial about it, the clean high frequencies are simply there and don't add any glittering (and ultimately unnatural) accents, everything is exquisitely clear and clean.

How do the developers at Audio Note UK conjure up such a substantial sound from such a small speaker? To quote Audio Note UK verbatim: "Purity is simplicity. Elaboration creates problems; simplicity and purity create perfection." This maxim is put into practice by using ingredients that are simple in principle but have been known to developers for decades and mastered with precision. What's more, these ingredients can be fine-tuned thanks to in-depth knowledge of the drivers, for instance. Audio Note UK also tunes the speakers individually, taking into account all the components, the drivers, the housing and the frequency crossover, so that the influences of the individual components on each other can also be factored in. Another example is the positioning of the drivers on the baffle. Instead of yielding to the trend of building the baffle as narrow as the drivers allow, the developers from the south of England have taken their cue from the ideas of Peter Snell back in the 1970s. According to Audio Note UK, baffles that are (too) narrow lead to a nasal sound that is too thin, especially in the low mid-range, causing the mid-range and bass to fall apart and making it impossible to achieve a coherent sound reproduction. But let's not get carried away - I have also heard speakers with a narrow front produce a credible basic tone. On the one hand, what matters is not just the principle applied in the design, but rather skilful implementation and successful tuning by experienced developers. But then again, it is truly astonishing what a mature and incredibly coherent sound can be coaxed out of the relatively small AX-One/II. In the ballad "The Border Widow's Lament",

originally written in the early 19th century, the British singer June Tabor laments the early, violent death of her lover ( on the album: *An Echo Of Hooves*, Topic Records TSCD543, UK 2003, CD). Tabor's wonderful alto voice and the piano accompaniment are rendered so sensitively, so heartbreakingly, that I couldn't help but shed a tear at the final lines "No living man I'll love again/since that my lovely knight is slain/ with just one lock of his yellow hair/ I'll chain my heart forevermore".

By the way the AX-One/II felt very comfortable on my Dynaudio Stands. That said, I also tried placing them on slightly lighter stands that I had modified quite heavily with Messingspikes and Black Forest Audio Magnesium pucks, which made the sound a little more vibrant and lively. Nonetheless the bass on the heavier stands sounded a little more solid. Surely a matter of taste, but it's worth a try. It goes without saying that I would also include their own loudspeaker stands in my shortlist. The same goes for the cables used. Audio Note UK recommends bi-wiring, but most of the time I used a good single-wiring cable and replaced the brass bridges on the terminal with cable bridges. The use of bi-wiring cables resulted in a somewhat higher resolution without significantly changing the tonal balance. There again, this is a matter of taste. If I kept the AX-One/II I would keep both options open.

The fundamentally closed, coherent basic character of the speakers is complemented by very natural and credible dynamic capabilities, something you wouldn't initially expect from the compact AX-One/II's. They also reproduce coarse dynamic gradations in a very relaxed and responsive manner. This characteristic also results in very good response behaviour; the speakers sound very good even when played quietly. Nevertheless, they do require some power. Audio Note UK specifies a range of seven (!) to 75 watts, which of course means that the two hundred watts per channel of my Cyrus Stereo 200 were more than adequate. The lower limit of seven watts specified by the manufacturer seems a little low to me, but who knows what that looks like with a tube amp from your own company. (And this may well

encourage you to take a closer look at the entire Audio Note UK range ...) Incidentally, the AX-One/II is also suitable for reproducing orchestral recordings or electronic music. Sure, there is a lack of bass at the very bottom of the frequency range, but the way it is presented, it sounds round, harmonious and by no means drained, so you practically never miss the low bass. They didn't even suffer in my listening room of around 25 square metres, which is adjoined by a room with a further 15 square metres. The smallest model in the AX series really comes into its own in recordings where homogeneity, natural sound colours and fine dynamic gradations are important. It reproduces choral music beautifully, and in string

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## Mitspieler

**Player:** Lin Axis with Linn Basik Plus, Project RPM 5 with 9cc tonearm, Thorens TD 160 Smk. IV with TP 16 Mk.IV tonearm **Cartridges:** Grado Timbre Reference 3 (MI), Ortofon Vinyl Master Red, Ortofon VMS20 (MM), Excalibur by TAD Gold High Gloss (MC) **Phono amplifier:** Trigon Vanguard 2 with Volcano 2 battery power supply, Lehmann Audio black Cube with PWX auxiliary power supply **CD drive:** Cyrus CdxT, Pro-Ject 1cd Box DS2T **CD player:** Eternal Arts DP Mk.III **D/A Converter:** Pro-Ject DAC Box RS **CD recorder:** Tascam CD-RW 9000 II **Pre-amplifier:** Cyrus Pre xpd with D/A converter and PSX-R auxiliary power supply, LehmannAudio Black Cube Linear **Power amplifier:** Cyrus Stereo 200 **Speakers:** Dynaudio Contour 1.3 SE, Dynaudio BM 5 Mk III (active), Dynaudio Sub 250 (subwoofer) **Headphone amplifier:** Lehmann Audio Black Cube Linear **Headphones:** Grado SR 325, HiFiMAN 400i **Cables:** Pro-Ject and Horn audiophiles (phono), HMS (digital), in-acoustics, Isophon, kimber, Melodika, Monitor Audio, Straight Wire, Taralabs and transparent music link, power cable from Sun Audio, in-acoustics and Cyrus **Accessories:** DÄDIMAT turntable support from Black Forest Audio and VARIO from bFly-audio, BaseOne equipment bases and flatline, PURE absorber and Line Mk.2, Q Satellites from bFly-audio, soundpucks, sound spacers and sound sheets from Black Forest Audio, Cardas Myrtle Woods, Sun Audio socket strip, Furutech disc de-magnetiser RD1, Furutech DeStat SNH-2, sound improvement disc model 14, Audioprism CD Blacklight, Project VC-S2 record cleaner alu

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## Loudspeakers Audio Note UK AX-One/II



**No frills:** The design, which is based on simple proportions, is continued on the rear wall with the bi-wiring terminal. The terminals accept cable lugs as well as banana plugs or bare cable strands. Audio Note UK recommends bi-wiring. However, it also works very well with cable bridges and a single cable

quartets it is also able to capture the communication between the musicians fantastically.

Take the Sonata for Piano and Cello op. 45 in B flat major by Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy (Cello Sonatas, Paul Tortelier & Maria De La Pau, La Voix De Son Maître 2C069-16282, F 1979, LP). Paul Tortelier's cello stands slightly to the left of the centre in front of me in the room, the grand piano played by his partner Maria De La Pau to the right, a little further back. What's more, I could follow all the pianist's reactions to the cellist's marvellous playing, every change in Tortelier's bow pressure, without any effort at all. The diminutive loudspeakers disappear completely, thereby allowing me to enjoy the wonderful interpretation in an almost frighteningly realistic way.

The reissued and further improved starter models from Audio Note UK are a great success. For all music lovers who want or need to place their speakers close to a wall due to the spatial conditions, these speakers open up the possibility of really high-quality sound and can become a problem solver par excellence. But I would also advise all other listeners to give the AX-One/II a listen, once they have been correctly positioned and integrated into a coherent system. You will be amazed and arrive at the same conclusion as I did: These two valuable gems are worth every cent of their purchase price. □

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### Loudspeaker Audio Note UK AX-One/II

**Operation principle:** 2 way bass reflex compact loudspeakers

Frequency response range: 60 – 20,000 Hz (plus/minus 6 dB)

**Crossover frequency:** 2,500 Hz **Nominal impedance:** 6. ohm

**Special feature:** placement near walls recommended **Sensitivity:** 87 dB (1W/1 m) **Recommended amplifier performance:**

7 W to 75 W **Finishes:** walnut, black ash, white (lacquer) **Size:** (W/H/D): 20/30/20 cm (inc. Front cover) **Weight:** 5 kg

**Guarantee:** 5 years **Price per pair:** 2,500 euros

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