



Audio Note IZero Integrated Amplifier

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Audio Note often takes flack from the peanut gallery on internet forums for their very high priced audio components. Many of us who live on things called budgets view \$100,000+ components as crazy toys for the rich. However, over the years I have come to the conclusion that if I came across the bucks to spend such dollars the first company I would look to would be Audio Note.

Why?

Quite simply, they "get it." They get what music reproduction should be, and how to extract music from various sources, and mix the elements of truth and beauty to draw you into wanting to continue listening to music, even when you should be off doing something else. *(Eh, forgive me for saying this, but the last part is purely your own doing, RGA. -Pub.)*

Here I sit with the 8-watt-per-channel IZero integrated amplifier, which is Audio Note's entry level integrated amplifier. The IZero uses four not-often-used ECL82 triode/pentode tubes, operated in class A/B. Before all you pure class A single-ended-triode readers roll your eyes in haughty derision, you may wish to hold your sneers back because if there is a class A/B push-pull amp that will change your mind, the IZero is very likely to be that amp.

As many of you know Audio Note builds systems in a series of levels. When you see components called "Zero" it doesn't exactly inspire much confidence. Then calling it IZero I began to wonder if Peter had lost his mind and started making iPod attachments, or if he is a huge fan of movies in which Will Smith fights robots. After all, Peter did name one of his amplifiers "Jinro" after a Korean gin.

Reviewing Audio Note's performance level hierarchy, IZero is named for a type of minimum technology that Audio Note's boss feels can properly recreates quality sound reproduction. Transistor amplifiers are listed as a "Minus One." This might be funny if it were not for the fact that the IZero makes a strong case against the majority of transistor amplifiers and the majority of much more costly transistor amplifiers.

So let's start with the negatives as all audio products have them. First, the amplifier has four inputs, none of which includes a phono stage. There is no remote control available and there is no headphone

output. Further, there is only one set of speaker connectors and according to the manual it appears to be rated for a 6-ohm load, thus no 4-ohm and 8-ohm taps. I'm sure not coincidentally, Audio Note speakers are rated at 6 ohms. I'd mention the 8 watts but if you're reading about Audio Note you've probably overcome endowment issues affecting many males in the audiophile world. And lastly, it takes a while to get going. Turn the amplifier on and it's about 15 seconds before any sound comes out and about 5 solid minutes before it stops sounding completely "sucky". Yes, I am trying out the word sucky. I suppose I should do my job and describe sucky. My analogy would be to that of old tube televisions when they were first turned on and the colours would be dim and filled with purple fringes and nothing was quite right. Then after awhile the tube would warm up and the picture began to get very good.

The IZero seems to kick in at about the 20-30 minute mark. So basically the IZero should be used as background music for the first half hour - turn it on, do your dishes, vacuum the carpets, take the dog for a hydrant trip, or crawl into the fetal position holding your knees rocking back and forth until all is right in your listening room and the IZero is finally ready to deliver the goods.

This is one of the slower amps I've encountered to warm up and get going full stride. My [Audio Note OTO Phono SE](#) integrated amplifier is pretty much ready to go in a couple of minutes. Now Peter Qvortrup does tell you this in the manual and boy he is not kidding.

I said lastly already but I want to add one more lastly, I promise for the last time. There is the whole Audio Note "could it possibly look any less exciting?" that they have going on. Oh sure, it looks elegant and it's nicely made and is an aesthetic match for arguably the wonderful DAC 0.1x or CDT Zero, but it hardly looks spectacular compared to a lot of amplifiers for similar or considerably less money.

Some of the amplifiers in this price range, especially from China, make you think George Patton could ride them over the Rockies. The IZero is 7kg and when you look at it next to some of the many boat-anchor Chinese amplifiers on the market, the IZero just looks so astoundingly unremarkable. It's very difficult to shake what the eyes see and the ears hear.

As some of you know I recently purchased the [Audio Space Mini 2SE](#) EL34-based integrated amplifier operating in Class A/B push-pull, offering 15 to 30 watts of power. That amplifier is bigger, beefier, sexier, has more features, offers superb build quality, and has a very good headphone output. Plus, it's nearly \$1,000 cheaper. The Audio Space is one of many superior sounding Push-Pull integrated amplifiers along with Antique Sound Labs, Rogue Audio, Grant Fidelity, Line Magnetic, Melody, Triode & Co. that have push-pull amplifiers that fall in the sub-\$2,000 price range. The Audio Space isn't necessarily better than those others but wasn't any worse and offered a more desirable feature set. So looking at the more expensive Audio Note and noting the rather pedestrian aesthetics and non tank like build quality, I was somewhat skeptical.

Audio Note, however, gets it right. And what does that mean? It simply means that the dots are connected - everything that comes out of this amplifier sounds connected and "whole." Vocals are a prime example. My Audio Space sounds quite nice in a big sound sort of way but doesn't connect a singer's vocal range as a complete whole in the same way that the IZero masters. The Mini-2SE sounds considerably more mechanical, disconnected, and ultimately less satisfying. And really it is at this point

where the IZero was going to fall into an area of what I think should be viewed as a possible classic in the making, if Audio Note can keep the price down.

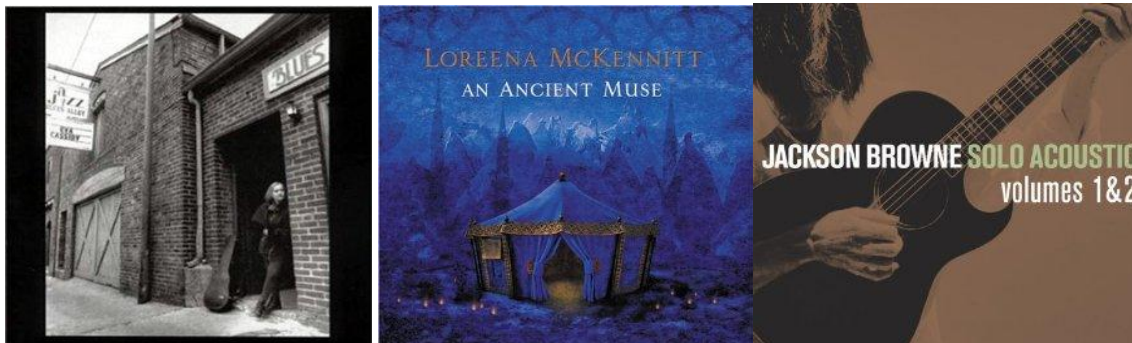
The amplifier offers a significantly rich sound, with full body and texture and manages to retain very high quality transient behavior. What did surprise me was the level of bass depth and grunt that the amplifier possessed given that on appearances the transformers are smaller than the Audio Space amp. Sure, it's not of course going to make Jinro amp owner start drinking copious amounts of Korean Jinro worrying about this little amplifier, because it doesn't do what the best AN amps do. AN's better amps create a better sense of space, and will arguably offer more at the frequency extremes, considerably more resolution and nuance. The IZero has a slight velvety rich character which might be described as leaning to the warm side of the spectrum. Then again that's what many tube buyers are after and the IZero doesn't go over the edge into mushy warmth or to the point of sounding veiled as some tube amplifiers tend to do.

The IZero engages the listener fully in the performance, and wanted to listen to music through this amplifier more than my Audio Space.

Auditions:

Reviewing the IZero I had a brief opportunity to use Wilson Benesch Vector floorstanding speakers, rated 6 ohms with a minimum 4-ohm impedance and 89dB sensitivity, as well as Audio Note AX Two loudspeakers, the latter one of Audio Note's natural partners for the IZero. The Zero series has matching Zero loudspeakers in the AX One and AX Two standmounts, and AZ One, Two or Three floorstanders.

I used a wide array of music genres during my sessions and there isn't space to go through them all. However, I will target a few specific albums. Great SET amplifiers are often purchased for their ability to handle the vocal range. I think very good SETs amps handle frequency extremes very well but they do require SET-friendly loudspeakers. Still, if there is a particular strength to SET amplifiers, it seems to me to be vocals and the midrange. So I start with Eva Cassidy, a wonderful singer taken far too soon, Canadian Celtic folk singer Loreena McKennitt, and 40+ year rock veteran Jackson Browne.



The IZero captures the voice cohesively without traces of exaggeration and sibilance. The live feel through both loudspeakers was remarkable for an amplifier in this price range and a good sense of the

hall was retained. Directly compared with the [Roksan K2](#) integrated amplifier reviewed by me here the difference was quite striking.

The K2 is a 125-watt solid-state amplifier and one of the best solid state amplifiers in the price range. The Roksan amplifier produced the notes - it possessed "punch" and sounded good with the Wilson Benesch speakers, but I found myself looking at my watch waiting until I could get to the end of the track. Changing the amp for the IZero and there was an immediate sense of richer, thicker bass lines and more ambient hall sound. In short, with my eyes closed I felt I was at Blues Alley listening to this wonderful singer.

There was no detached feeling and no looking at my watch. With Loreena McKennitt's "Caravanserai" the Roksan amp painted in a 2-dimensional brush - there was more "air" but this seemed to me to be more "noise." The voice had more sibilance and seemed to place Loreena's voice into isolated vocal sections and was ultimately detached and analytical as if her voice had been run through a processor. The IZero and my OTO Phono SE retain the emotion and body of the voice and ultimately sounds complete - one voice and whole. For whatever else the IZero may lack, to me this is the singular overriding aspect that stereo reproduction must possess and it's arguably the reason why people move from Solid-State amps into the world of SET.

With Jackson Browne's *Solo Acoustic Vol 1 and 2* discs, Jackson plays to the crowd via piano and various guitars. The IZero presented a fuller sounding vocal and allowed me to hear more of the hall. Interestingly, I was better able to make out what audience members were saying to Jackson while on stage. This in turn provides more of a sense of being in the hall. Quite remarkable for an amplifier in this price class, or any price class, really.

The above music admittedly plays to the strength of lower-powered SET amps and micro dynamic nuance, but what about music with more drive and oomph? Well, here of course is where the IZero had more trouble with the Wilson Benesch Vectors. At higher level the IZero sounded a little more constrained - though I was surprised how loud I could get the Vector before the bass began to compress. Considering it was a large room, I suspect in a normal living space the IZero would be able to drive those floorstanders quite nicely.

As before, I will highlight three albums used for more taxing evaluations across three distinct recording types and genres from a first-rate test record recording to a somewhat compressed rock album to a well known Jazz artist: The ABC Records *Western Electric Sound System Test Record 10 Live* (HD Mastering) is one of the few test records that I actually like listening to, in that not only is it superbly recorded but the music is also quite good. I also used a new album that I was not too familiar with in an attempt to follow Audio Note's philosophy of "[Comparison by Contrast](#)" with the new Killers Album *Battle Born*. Lastly, the wonderfully recorded and lesser known Pat Metheny and Anna Maria Jopek album *Upogenie*.



The Western Electric album I found to be quite interesting. On the song Hindaa from the Bonia Trio, male vocals in the mid low bands were rendered well with both my Audio Space and the Audio Note IZero. Interestingly, the Audio Space had two male singers shifted mostly to the left speaker. I noticed this when I brought the album to the [California Audio show](#) (including through Audio Note's pricier system). In every stereo in which I used this track, the lead male bass singer mostly came from the left channel, while instruments and one singer came out hard through the right speaker. One notices the lead singer as a result and nearly forgets about the accompaniment and the other vocalists.

It's a terrific recording and indeed Audio Space demonstrated their amplifier with this recording and impressed me quite a bit. With the IZero the lead male voice was shifted more to the center, and the other singers separated left and right, thus giving a sense of an actual trio.

Further, I could listen to all three singers individually. I didn't really notice big changes like this on any other recording so it's one of those interesting oddities. The soundstage may be argued as being somewhat vague as a result. Regardless, I preferred the end result here even if it accomplishes it in a less precise or less accurate manner.

With Taiko band's "Monochrome II", this is a nice drum agitation piece that has plenty of dynamics and I found the IZero to offer a richer, deeper presentation than amps at this price typically muster. The Audio Space Mini-2SE does a fine job here as well if a little thinner in the upper mids on sticks, but solid nonetheless. Rounding the album out is Handel's Suite in F Major- Variation II and Vivaldi's "La primavera" which were both enchantingly open, and possessing a large stereo spread. The dynamics here were impressive but the edge goes to the IZero again on nuance and simply hearing more subtlety and layers than with the Mini 2. The Mini 2 could create the macro dynamics and drive but not the lower-level finesse. Granted, the Mini 2 does have cap upgrade options and a world of better tube options available to arguably get some of this finesse back.

The Killers are a rock band with a more-than-respectable lead singer. The album is somewhat hit-and-miss with recording quality and sounds thinner and more compressed than any of the others. Still, it is enjoyable enough on both amplifiers though the treble is grittier through the Audio Space. "Deadlines and Commitments" is probably the best track and fortunately it seems to be one of the better sounding cuts. The speed of drums and guitar is very solid and both amps could play satisfactorily loud to get the typical rock drive. But head bangers may wish for a larger speaker/amp combination: perhaps an Audio Note AZ Three as opposed to the standmount if you plan to play hard rock, metal or generally very loud

levels. The Mini-2SE could play louder when set to the ultralinear mode - however ultralinear mode was tiring. The IZero may add a slight warmth that allows poorly recorded music not to get completely unruly. Or it may be that because the IZero doesn't add its own artifacts it merely seems to be kinder to poorer recordings. That's an argument for another day.

Regardless, I preferred listening to the Killers and all of the above albums - great recording or lesser recording - through the IZero.

The *Upogenie* album is very well recorded, as are all the Matheny albums I've run across, and the IZero has all the treble extension and airy ethereal feel that seem to be present. I say seem to be present because the amplifier lies by omission. When you directly compare it to an OTO or a Meishu you notice what those amps bring - superior transients - a bigger, more open presentation but again without the direct comparisons the IZero very much seems to present the full picture. I suspect this is because the amplifier does a terrific job of presenting ambiance and a better overall sense of decay compared to many amplifiers. I have used this Metheny album a lot and many amplifiers get the transients but lack the body of instruments and the room intact. The timing and ambiance I suspect is why it's easy to believe it's presenting all the information. When comparing music replay on my Audio Space Mini 2SE, I simply continued to want to go back and listen to the IZero regardless of recordings.

This is no slight on my Audio Space integrated - it's significantly less expensive (about 2/3 the price) and it does offer more features and significantly more power, and it's ready to go in a couple of minutes. There is every chance that the Audio Space and many of the amplifiers I mentioned earlier will drive more loudspeakers because a large number of speakers will not be happy with an 8-watt amplifier.

It may also be possible to extract more from the Mini 2 and other similarly priced tube amplifiers via tube upgrades and capacitor upgrades. However, doing that will also raise their prices possibly to the price of the IZero. Personally, I'd rather get the results at the outset over hoping and praying that spending more on higher end tubes and cap upgrades will be the magic elixir to better sound, because it's also very possible that spending more on the various will still wind up in the IZero's wake.

Again, the IZero isn't an Ongaku, or an OTO SE, and there is a reason that amp costs that much, to the chagrin of my bank account. The IZero simply doesn't have the resolution, or the inner detail, openness or "sparkle" of breathiness of the best amps. So the IZero leans to the warmer and arguably safer side of Audio Note's amplifier spectrum. What a great budget amp like this one does do, is sound so darn inviting that your ear will adjust quickly to what it does, so that you're not inclined to bother with making those quick A/B comparisons. The IZero is a kind of chill pill for obsessive compulsives.

Comparing stock to stock versions, the IZero is a significant step up in the critical areas of sound reproduction over any Push-Pull amplifier or any solid-state amplifier that I have auditioned in this price class. What I noticed from the AN in listening to recording after recording was the ability to follow more of the event without losing focus on accompaniment. I attribute this to the dots being connected. With lesser amplifiers I focus more on one area of a performance and lose focus on other areas. I suspect this is because my brain is trying to fill in or make the missing corrections, and compensating for something that doesn't sound quite right. Ultimately, with those amplifiers I have to concentrate more during

listening and the listening experience slowly borders on becoming work rather than relaxation, somewhat like working under fluorescent lights as opposed to natural light.

The IZero allowed me to relax and get swept up in the performance the way a very good Single-Ended amplifier does. Higher level AN amplifiers and very good SET amps have more delineation of subtlety with brush strokes on cymbals, for example. Such things were slightly softer with the IZero but to get a good SET amplifier these days you're looking at \$4,000 or more, even from the Chinese manufacturers such as Line Magnetic, Audio Space, and Melody. The Audio Note Kit One would be an interesting alternative to the IZero but remember that 300B tube replacement is considerably more expensive, and you have to build the Kit yourself.

I talked to Pete, and he and his designer, Andy Grove, are mighty proud of their Zero. I get the sense that in a certain way they have more pride in the zero series than their higher level, cost-no-object components because while most companies can throw lots of money at a solution and can make fairly high level sounding components, the trick for companies making relatively affordable products is that they can no longer drop in very expensive transformers or black gate caps or use top-of-the-line wiring, boards, and resistors etc.

Indeed, they have to somehow get more from a part than even they thought possible. A big part of tube amplifiers though comes down to the quality of the transformers, and I suspect this is where Audio Note has a huge advantage over most if not all other tube amplifier makers. They design their own transformers and don't need to alter their design to fit an off-the-shelf part. They design the amp and the transformer and they can get exactly what they want.

Peter Qvortrup and Andy Grove set out to make an amplifier that they could be happy putting the Audio Note name on, an amplifier that fully lives up to the Audio Note standard of fully engaging music replay. To succeed in this while also doing it as affordably as they have was no small feat. For a long time my favorite budget integrated amplifier was the Solid-State Single-Ended pure class A Sugden A21a integrated amplifier. The Sugden now has company in the IZero and I hope that like the Sugden, the IZero becomes a classic for audiophiles on a budget.