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Power amplifier **Kondo SOUGA**

Price (in Poland): **190 000 zł | 55 000 €** (rest of Europe)

Manufacturer: **Audio Note Co., LTD.**

Contact: **242 Shimohirama, Saiwai-ku | Kawasaki**

Kanagawa 212-0053 | Japan tel.: +81-44-520-3150

e-mail: infor@audionote.co.jp

Manufacturer's website: **www.audionote.co.jp**

Country of origin: **Japan**

Product delivered for test by: **Szemis Audio Konsultant**

Text: **Marek Dyba** | Photos: **Kondo (3-8), Marek Dyba (9-16), Wojciech Pacuła (1-2)**



A close encounter with a legend, or an exalted review

C Although we usually don't put any titles to our reviews this particular one was so special for me that this title just imposed itself on me, so I had to use it... Every year in the May issue of „High Fidelity” Magazine we review only Japanese products. We keep doing it even though it is more and more difficult to come by some of them in our country. Japan has been having a rough time – the catastrophic events of 2011 – tsunami, earthquake and Fukushima power plant failure only made it worse for Japanese economy since the high exchange rate of their currency had already put their export in troubles over previous few years. As a result less Japanese products have been imported to our country so it's been more and more difficult to score any product made in Japan for a review. So when I was bit desperately looking for something for a review I contacted Mr Wojtek Szemis, even though, to be honest, I did not count for much. But what the hell, why not try? And to my surprise I heard: „Yes, at the moment I have the Kondo Souga amplifier, would be interested in reviewing it?” There was not even one in a million chances that such a dedicated SET fan like me could refuse. I have to admit that every year during AudioShow Mr Wojtek's room is my refuge.

Usually I go there many times over two days of the Show to get some rest, to listen to some music. And as long as I can get some nice spot, and Mr Szemis is not playing some very exotic music of his, I just sit and gather my strengths before I continue the run from room to room. To be perfectly honest I love it there especially when a turntable is used as a source – than it always sounds very well despite the whole not-so-good conditions that are intrinsic to the Audioshow (actually, any show in the world). There is one more factor that makes me spend as much time in this room as possible – I am in the same position as the majority of audiophiles – I have no any other chance for listening to the legendary Kondo masterpieces.

During the AudioShow last November I was hoping to get a chance to listen to the newest addition to Kondo line-up – their loudspeakers – but unfortunately they didn't make it to the show and I, as many other people, was a bit disappointed. Fortunately I had a chance recently to listen to these speakers during High End 2013 show in Munich (I'll get back to it later) – which was a fantastic experience but made me regret that they didn't come to Polish show even more.

Both of us – Mr Wojtek and me – we realized clearly that Souga would not have a truly „worthy” companion in my system, but I counted on an unique experience anyway and I wasn't going to let

it slip. Kondo (Audio Note Japan) is a synonym of the top performance tube devices, a dream of most tube fans, a love at first site, but for most of us only a platonic one. These Japanese products are treated as pieces of art, and I personally believe they are, but that also means that they cost like ones. There is no more use of discussing these prices as there would be of discussing why some people pay millions of dollars for some paintings. Some people always try to analyze the cost of used materials, technologies, or to wonder whether any amplifier should cost that much (although they should remember that there are many with more zeros on their price tags...) - but all that is pointless. Such products are bought by a person, who first of all of course can afford it, but also wishes to have something very special, exceptional, something that will touch his/her soul, that will allow him/her an intimate contact with true ART, or, on the other hand, he/she treats such a purchase as an investment. Kondo does both very well – it delivers exceptional performance, the way it plays music will touch a lot of hearts and souls, but at the same time these are ones of few products on the audio market that don't lose their value so quickly. And although the legendary Kondo San moved some years ago to a better place, where, I hope, he still creates his supreme works, the company is doing very well under new leadership of Mr Ashizawa Masaki. And it is not just continuing what was created by Mr Kondo, but designing and building new products. One of these is a new power amplifier Souga, that replaced in Kondo's portfolio an older model called KSL Neiro.



I guess I explained already the „legendary” part of the title, and how about „exulted” one? I had Souga at my disposal for little over a week and I spent with it as much time as possible. It was an amazing, breathtaking experience. I took a lot of notes during listening session, or rather mostly between them, but I realized that to try to write a „regular” review I

would need some time to cool off, to avoid being too exulted when writing a review. I took some time and well... I failed to write a „regular” review anyway. I couldn't – Souga did touch my heart and soul and left its mark on them – too poetic? Too bad, but that's what happened – obviously experiencing the ART of KONDO does that to a man with a sensitive soul.

SOUND

Recordings used during listening session (a selection)

- The Ray Brown Trio, *Summer Wind*, Concord Jazz, CCD-4426, CD/FLAC.
- Pepe Romero, *Flamenco*, Lasting Impression Music, LIM K2HD 022, CD/FLAC.
- Eva Cassidy, *Live at Blues Alley*, G2-10046, CD/FLAC.
- Louis Armstrong & Duke Ellington, *The great summit*, Roulette Jazz, 7243 5 24548 2 2, CD/FLAC.
- Cassandra Wilson, *Travelin' Miles*, Blue Note, 7243 8 54123 2 5, CD/FLAC.
- Keith Jarrett, *The Koeln Concert*, ECM, 1064/65 ST, LP.
- Rodrigo y Gabriela, *11:11*, EMI Music Poland, 5651702, CD/FLAC.
- Arne Domnerus, *Jazz at the Pawnshop*, Proprius, ATR 003, LP.
- The Ray Brown Trio, *Soular energy*, Pure Audiophile, PA-002 (2), LP.
- Patricia Barber, *Companion*, MFSL 2-45003, 180 g LP.
- Joseph Haydn, *Les sept dernieres paroles de notre Rédempteur sur la Croix, Le Concert des Nations*, Jordi Savall, Astree, B00004R7PQ, CD/FLAC.
- Miles Davis, *Sketches of Spain*, Columbia Stereo, PC8271, LP.
- Lou Donaldson, *LD+3*, Blue Note Stereo, MMBST-84012, LP.
- Ray Brown Trio, *The red hot*, Groove Note, GRV-1028-1, LP.

As I mentioned before I had realized even before I started this test, that I couldn't provide Souga with truly „worthy” setup – I didn't have any audio equipment that cost 50k EUR. So in fact this time instead of standard assessment of top performance

of reviewed element, I could rather try to find out what kind of influence it could have on the system I knew very well. The first setup I listened to was Souga driven directly by Vitus RD-100 – a new D/A converter from renowned Danish manufacturer, that sported not only digital, but also analogue inputs and a volume control. Also when Mr Wojtek brought Kondo to my place I was still auditioning the fantastic Ardeno Alter speakers. I was pretty sure that around 8W from Souga (around as each amplifier is build individually and individually measured so the power output might differ slightly – customer receives a small book with all information about his amplifier, I mean particular piece, and it includes also results of measurements of this unit) would be insufficient to drive these speakers. I assumed that as I tried my own 300B SET amp (ArtAudio Symphony II with output transformers from Diavolo), and AirTight ATM-300 – both offering 8W per channel, and none of them was able to drive Alters well enough to show their full potential. Both amps delivered wonderful, rich, smooth midrange, and sparkling, crisp treble, but both struggled to drive properly 15" woofers. So I assumed I would have to replaced them with my Bastianis Matterhorns that were surely an easier loading. Just to remind you – Ardeno Alter are open baffle speakers with 15" paper woofers, Sonido fullrange drivers and Fountek ribbon tweeters. Until this time every experience I had confirmed that for them to show their full, outstanding potential, I needed an amplifier with at least 20W output power. So I couldn't really expect Souga to do what other amplifiers with similar output power failed to.

Souga is a stereo power amplifier with twin 2A3 tubes per channel working in PSE setup. It replaced a KSL Neiro in Kondo's portfolio and one of the differences is silver used wherever it was possible instead of copper – the output transformers were manually winded with silver wire, the wiring is of course silver, there are silver foil capacitors, and also RCA sockets look silver. Considering all that no wonder that Manufacturer also recommended his silver cables – KSL-LPz. Mr Szemis was kind enough to bring me a set together with amplifier so I could use both, IC and SC during my test.

I received Souga in the evening and to be honest I wasn't ready to replace 40kg speakers with another 50kg ones at this hour. I decided to hook up Alters to Souga taking also into consideration that in the

evening I usually listen at quite low levels so I was hoping that Kondo would do at least fine. I placed a Ray Brown Trio's vinyl on a platter, dropped the needle into the groove and... that's how a very long night started. From time to time I receive some products for reviews that make my life, as a reviewer, very difficult as they present music in such an involving way that I can't focus on assessing the equipment while totally involved in musical spectacle. In this particular case all the previous „tough cases” seemed like a walk in a park. Souga, which was to be expected from a high-end tube amplifier, presented music in amazingly convincing way. There were many elements that contributed to that, starting with beautifully three-dimensional, palpable presentation, very truthful, or should I say: convincing (as listening to the recording you can't know if what you hear really is exactly what was played in a studio) tonality, timbre of acoustic instruments, and ending with openness, smoothness, and liquidity of sound. It all came together creating the most amazing, convincing presentation, so when Ray Brown started to play his bass I felt shivers going down my spine (yes, that's a part of this exult I mentioned in the title). To my surprise the bass sounded great even at the very low sound level – that was interesting as usually I needed to play it loud for bass to sound right. Bass was nicely extended, there was a proper share of „wood” in the sound, wonderful decay, fingers sliding along strings and so on – each and every little detail delivered in most palpable, believable way, so I was just sitting there in the dark trying to see this bass, hidden in the shadows but surely there – that's what my ears clearly told me. The only reasonable explanation for a fact I couldn't see it was that the blue glow from 2A3 tubes wasn't bright enough... Another thing that amazed me was, obvious even at this low volume level, that amplifier had a fantastic grip over speakers – fast attack phase, and wonderful decay, unless musician decided to damp a string immediately, than Souga had no problem to do the same. But the real point was that while listening to *Soular energy* not for a second did I think about any of that. Music started and it just flipped a switch in my brain from „reviewer” position to „music fan”, and there was nothing but music until the end of the record. All that mattered was what brilliant Ray Brown and equally phenomenal Gene Harris did with their instruments. Actually it wasn't really

about how brilliant musicians they were, how good their instruments sounded, how well it had been captured on tape, although all that was true! It was more about getting to the bottom of what actually happened in Concord Records studio. There was some sort of special chemistry happening between these two outstanding jazzmen, that with Souga was so clearly audible on this particular album. Although they recorded many more albums together this one was obviously a very special one, and Kondo made it crystal clear. There are some jazz standards on this record from Count Basie, or Billy Strayhorn, but the Ray and Gene's interpretation sounded fresh and very convincing, mostly due to this extraordinary interplay between them.

And even though I enjoyed this recording many times, using different systems before, it was Souga that made me feel like I had felt when I discovered this album many years ago – the same emotions, the same rush, the same delight.



Then I had listened to it from a CD, using much cheaper, worse sounding system but it was about discovering something new, something extraordinary so it made it straight to my own personal jazz canon and it stayed there for all these years. Now it felt like a new discovery, like I had never listened to *Soular energy* before, because now I could enjoy not only the music, not only the recording, but this incredible interplay between two brilliant musicians, tons of emotions exchanged between them, and this irresistible impression that these two gentlemen had a great time while recording this album. I guess that's how all the staff in the recording studio must have felt like even sitting behind glass, but experiencing live music and musicians, being a part of this extraordinary event. Please notice that I didn't claim that the sound delivered by Souga was the same as live performance – that's not possible regardless of how good, how expensive system you have, but this

particular one, thanks to Kondo amplifier, was able to elicit the same level of emotions, rush that a good live concert usually did.

Now, after few days without Souga, I can finally let go at least some excitement, which seems to be a proprietary feature of this amp, and try to focus on some hifi aspects of the sound. What impressed me most, apart from all described above, was a realistic, palpable soundstage. It was so realistic because it was different in each recording – there are many devices that offer, for example, a huge soundstage... regardless of what it is like in the recording. While here, when I played *Jazz at the Pawnshop* it was obvious that musicians crowded on a small stage of Pawnshop club.

Even though each instrument had proper size, proper placement on the stage, distances between instruments were nicely defined, and outstanding selectivity of Souga still allowed me to enjoy a sound of whichever instrument I chose to listen to at particular moment. On the other hand, when I played my favorite *Carmen*, or *The last seven words of Christ on the cross*, the soundstage was huge, because both recordings were made in huge halls (the latter in a church to be exact).

I was simply delighted with what Souga delivered driven by 'entry-level' Vitus. RD-100 is a novelty from Danish manufacturer and is a member of Reference line, although according to Ole Vitus 'reference' is just the beginning of what his company has to offer – and thus 'entry-level'. Anyway – it sounded very good but there was still a huge disproportion price-wise between RD-100 and Souga, so I had to try something else. I decided to try my own ModWright LS100 preamplifier between Vitus and Kondo. That change sound of a system a bit but it was rather a sidestep than a step forward. Sound got bit warmer, I think also bit smoother, but at the same time it lost small part of its great transparency and clarity. As there was no chance to borrow a Kondo preamplifier, I asked another favor of my friend Jacek (thanks again!), the proud owner of Reimyo system. I asked him if he could come with some of his stuff. Jacek came to me and brought with him a CAT-777 preamplifier, and a DAC and CD transport (see <http://highfidelity.pl/@main-410&lang=> and http://www.highfidelity.pl/artykuly/0811/reimyo_cat_pat.html). Combining these devices with Souga did the old audio trick again – I guess many of you experienced that more than once – you thought that your system delivered already ultimate performance,

but when you replaced just one element with another one, you realized that impossible became possible, and performance improved again gaining level beyond your imagination.

Now it became clear how well Souga was able to differentiate recordings (not just by the size of soundstage). I am not so much of a connoisseur to be able to tell what piano was used in particular recording, or who made particular violin, or who played it (well, sometime I can tell, but surely not always), but Kondo amplifier clearly presented differences between instruments, between the way different musicians played them, and also between how the recordings were actually made. Ray Brown's bass sounded different on *Soular energy*, differently on *The red hot*, and again differently on double CD album *Live from New York to Tokyo*. Different places, different ambience, other mood – simply different moment in time when music was caught on tape, and thus different sound of the same instrument played by the same musician – sometimes with more verve, sometimes more quiet, leading the band or just playing in the background. On some recordings bass seemed even bigger than it really was, on others it played so gently that it seemed half the actual size.

A bass is here just an example, chosen because I love the sound of it, but I could write more or less the same about any other acoustic instrument. Such a way of presentation allowed all jazz recordings, especially the older ones, but also newer ones like Tomasz Stańko's ECM albums, acoustic blues, also classical music to sound in a very special, unique way. Comparing it to some other great amplifiers I had a chance to review – like Soulution, Tenor, Air Tight that offered fantastic sound and before Souga audition I would have said that these devices delivered sound as close to live music as possible, I now knew that it wasn't true, or at least not entirely true. Kondo when assessed in terms of some “audiophile's” standards might not always be better than those competitors – Soulution offered better grip and better bass definition and amazing clarity, Tenor combined best features of tube and solid-state devices offering very dynamic but yet sweet sound, and Air Tight's 211 monoblocks impressed me with very energetic presentation combined with extremely delicate, yet clear and crisp treble – but still it was Souga that gave me a thrill of listening to many outstanding performances like no other

amplifier had before. Kondo allowed me to discover new layers of colors, emotions, shades and so on in recordings I thought I knew perfectly already. Other amplifiers allowed me to stop listening for a moment to make some notes, or to leave a room for a short while, but not Souga – I just couldn't afford to lose a single minute of my time with it, especially that I knew that this audition would last too long (I had this amp at my disposal just over a week, than it had to go to potential customers waiting for their chance to audition it).

Listening sessions with Souga reminded me watching some brilliant movie, a thriller that keeps you near the screen from the very first till the very last minute – you can't just leave not even to get something to drink or eat, nor to pick up a phone, you just have stay alert not to miss a single thing. Almost each and every recording was like a new, special experience even though I had listened to each of them dozens of times before. Let me use another, this time literary, parallel – listening to well known music was like reading again the same book I had read before, but this time having also read for example the biography of the writer, that allowed me to better understand what he actually meant by this book. That's what also happened here. I use the same albums for tests of different devices and actually it is quite rare that I discover something new in these recording thanks to reviewed items. Souga allowed me to rediscover many recordings, to find new layers of information, that had been buried somewhere under the main course of music, maybe audible but until now somehow irrelevant. Kondo treated all media the same – vinyl, CD, or files – listening to good recordings regardless the media they were played from, was an eye-opening experience. What's most important for me, I discovered new things mostly in musical and emotional layers of all these recording, not in sound per se. That's a huge difference!

To be honest I'm under impression that current audiophiles, but also many audiophile companies focus their attention on sound, and not on music anymore. They judge everything by the grip, extension and slam of bass, smoothness and richness of midrange, vibrant treble and so on. I agree – all these elements are important but... these are only means to achieving ultimate goal, and are not a goal by itself. You can have all that but without proper balance between them, without emotions,

without the very essence of the music will you really be able to enjoy listening?

Trying to analyze the sound of Souga, assuming that after listening to its performance anybody would still want that, you could point out some aspects of sound that could be probably delivered in a slightly better fashion. But still, when listening to the music you don't care about any 'audiophile' imperfections because you sit in front of your system holding your breath and waiting for another surprise, admiring an absolutely unforced manner this amplifier uses to deliver the very essence of each recording. You're under a spell of the most amazing music reproduction you've ever heard, so you don't care whether some other amplifier could possibly deliver bit more slam, or even better transparency – who cares?! Just listen to some recordings of the most talented musicians you know – this person will come even from a remote past to become your friend and to play wonderful music for you. After a short while you start treating it as something normal – one of old friends just came to play for you in your room - Louis Armstrong, Miles Davis, Tomasz Stańko – they come every Tuesday at 8 p.m.



Souga is not a total all-rounder – first of all you need some high quality, relatively easy to drive loudspeakers, because while 8W from this amp seems to have „more power” than 8W from my 300B SET, it is still just 8W and speakers with sensitivity larger than 90dB are surely recommended. Secondly even with proper speakers (like Ardeno Alter for example) Souga will not be a first choice of people who listen mostly to rock, metal or hip-hop – for that kind of music you should probably buy yourself a nice, powerful solid-state. It doesn't mean that Souga lacks dynamics, not at all! I enjoyed a lot even quite dynamic AC/DC's rock'n'roll with it. But I realize that this kind of music can be played even in a better, more convincing way. So if

that is what you mostly listen to, look for another amp. But if you find most joy listening to acoustic music – jazz, blues, classical (great selectivity and resolution of this amplifier will allow you to enjoy even great orchestral pieces), and so on, than I can't recommend you a better stereo amplifier than Souga – plain and simple. I can't say it's the best in the world, as I haven't heard them all, but it is so good I see no reason to look any further (if you can afford it, of course).

If you have managed to get to this point of this exulted text you must have had realized that unlike in other reviews I didn't elaborate much on the „standard” aspects of the sound, which makes this review different than others. But in this particular case I see no point in it. Souga is all about music, not the sound, it is about how closely it can get the listener to the music, to musicians, to the emotions that music is supposed to relay on us, like it does during live concerts. Other high-end amplifiers try to get us also as close to concert-like experience as possible, but rather to its sound aspects, and not to music ones. They try to play loud enough, with proper dynamics, large soundstage, power and so on. What Kondo delivers is the same thrill you can feel attending live concert, an intimate bond with performing musicians, a direct contact with them. You can feel shivers going down you spine when the one and only Luciano Pavarotti sings *Nessun Dorma*, or the great Miles plays *Concierto de Aranjuez*. It doesn't matter that recording was done 50 years ago, that there are some cracks and pops from vinyl – it is all about (almost) live contact with wonderful music that touches your soul, eliciting enormous emotions. Well, for me it was a love at first sight, a love that will, considering the price of this amplifier, remain only a platonic one. I bet that many people who had a chance to audition Souga feel the same. This review was first of all an amazing experience for me and secondly it solved one of my future problems – when I become a rich man I won't have to lose time to think which amplifier should I buy first for my own pleasure (as for reviewer's job there might some more appropriate).

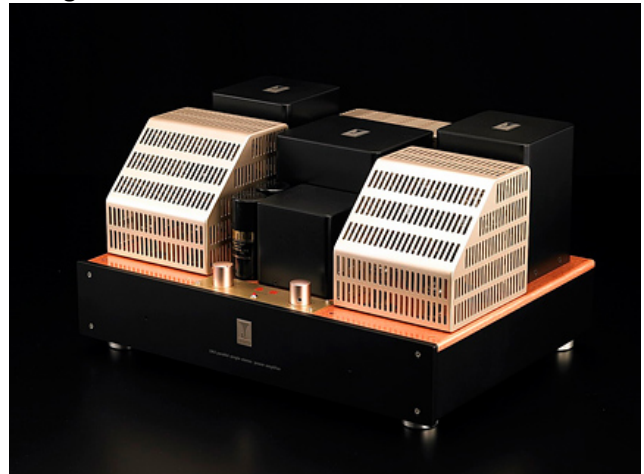
Post Scriptum

Let me add a small addendum to this text – I wrote it after my visit to High End Show in Munich. As you can probably imagine after reading this text, once I got to Munich I had to find Kondo's room there and to spend quite a lot of time in there. In fact this was a room I spent most time in during three days of Show, I came back many times and sat there for long, long minutes. The (almost) complete Kondo system consisted of new Kondo Biyura loudspeakers (the ones that didn't make it to Warsaw AudioShow), driven by new monoblocks with twin 2A3 in PSE, called Kagura, that probably will be placed above Gakuon model in company's portfolio (or maybe replace it?). There were two source – an analogue one - Kondo Ginga turntable, and a digital one with Kondo DAC and Esoteric transport. Of course there was also a M1000 mkII preamplifier and silver cables. The Kondo crew used mostly jazz and classical music for presentations, mostly selected older recordings, but some contemporary too. And regardless of how old the recording was, or what medium was used system gave me the same thrill as Souga in my system did. Obviously the general circumstances during show are always far from optimal, but still each time I sat in this room I forgot immediately about the noise coming from outside, all that mattered was pure music. In fact once or twice I really lost a track of time because of extraordinary selection of music chosen by Kondo guys. This might not have been an audiophile's dreamed system, maybe not the most versatile one, but surely every true music lover (who often is not the same person as audiophile) must have appreciated absolutely unique feature of this system – the way it connected listener with the very essence of the music and how it allowed him to experience the most thrilling emotions. That's what Kondo did for me, that's all I expect from my dreamed audio system.

DESIGN

Kondo Souga is a tube stereo power amplifier with twin 2A3 per channel working in PSE (Parallel Single Ended) setup. The set of tubes includes also: 2x 12BH7 and 2x6072 (12AY7), plus a 5U4GB rectifier. Unlike its predecessor, KSL Neiro, Souga is filled with silver elements – silver output transformers, each winded manually, silver capacitors (with silver foil as electrode), silver wiring (natural silk is used and

twisted around the silver conductor, it works as an insulating layer between the silver wires and the exterior PVC jacket), and even RCA sockets seem to be made of silver. Chassis is made of copper. Front, side and back panels are black, as well as transformers covers (all four of them) while the top cover has a natural, copper color. The sockets for power tubes and their drivers are placed in top cover in front of transformers, while the rectifier together with few large capacitors is hidden behind them. There are two small knobs placed also on top cover – one is on/off switch, the other allows to use functions like „mute”, and between them there is a red LED indicating that the device is on. In the middle of the back panel there is a power IEC socket, and on both sides a pair of Kondo's proprietary speakers bindings, and RCA input. There is only one set of speaker posts so each customers has to order his unit with either 4 or 8Ω outputs. Output transformers have two tappings so it is possible to change that also later.



Specification (according to manufacturer):

Maximum output power: 8 W per channel
Frequency response: 8 Hz – 35 kHz (+0 dB, -3 dB)
Input: 1 x RCA
Input impedance: 100 kΩ
Tube set: 4 x 2A3, 2 x 12BH7, 2 x 6072 / 12AY7, 5U4GB x1
Power consumption: 130 W
Dimensions: 430 x 233 x 314 mm
Weight: 34 kg

- CD player CEC 51XR
- Integrated amplifier ArtAudio Symphony II
- Turntable Michell Gyro SE
- Tonearm Technoarm
- Cartridge AT33PTG
- RIAA preamplifier ESELabs Nibiru
- Loudspeakers – modified project Jerycho with FSAC-2B
- Interconnects – Gabriel Gold Extreme mk2, Binaural focus monolith Ag
- Loudspeaker cable – Gabriel Gold Revelation mk 1
- Power cabling – DIY Acrolink 6N-PC4300





