

INTERVIEW

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Interview

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J Jürgen Saile: Ashizawa San, after the passing away of Hiroyasu Kondo you became president of the company. Audio Note Japan is a traditional company, but do we have to expect any changes now?

Masaki Ashizawa: First, I must correct, I was already president of the company two years before the passing away of Kondo San. Kondo San was seriously ill and had handed over the affairs of the company to me, two years before his death. It is very unusual in Japan to hand over the own company to a foreign person, especially if one has a son in his family. Nevertheless Kondo San remained the spiritual leader, he was my teacher. For that reason, we will carry on with this in mind. Only in terms of quality, we will try to improve still further. **Kondo san was the first person who discovered silver material for audio applications. Meanwhile, there are several manufacturers who also offer capacitors and coils made of silver, like Duelund for example. These Components still do not match the requirements of Audio Note?**

The Kondo cables have a legendary reputation. They are an essential component in the Kondo setup. There exist also versions with copper as conductor.

This question is a bit tricky, it's not just the silver material alone, but also how it is used. Of course,

our silver cables and capacitors the design is equally important. (This is where the marketing manager cut in on the conversation) Masaki is a very polite person, so I would like to answer the question. We are not very happy with the products offered, but he can not say that. There are now very good products, but at critical positions we do not like to use them. Therefore we take the trouble to produce them by ourselves, although our production capacities are very limited, we can build a maximum of 50 amp units per year.



And each amplifier has four to six silver foil capacitors, that means referring to mono blocks over 400 capacitors per year that must be manually wound. We certainly do not do this work because we want to save money. We have very high quality in

standards that have been established by the founder of the company.



How many employees do you have?

Besides me six. They are very versatile, and thus also have different tasks.



For power transformers you also use other brands, such as Tango?

Not in principle, the presented amplifier here, Kagura, contains exclusively our own transformers. In each case, output transformers and chokes are produced by ourselves. We have very good relations with the developer of the Tango transformers, he can assist us in developing our own power transformers. However, as there exist an enormous number of security provisions, so – with our limited capacities - it is better to leave the production of power transformers to ISO Tango, built according to our own design. We have one employee who has the best skills to wind our transformers. He is the best, worldwide!

Kagura represents the culmination of the development of Kondo amplifiers. One can see the impressive size of the 211 triode compared to the driver tubes in front. The tubes on the rear side belong to the Graetz rectifier bridge circuit.

Ashizawa San, you are the chief designer. Now, if you develop a new product, such as the new speaker Biyura, do you make the complete development quite alone, or do you have



specialists in certain areas, such as chassis, crossover, housing?

The development is located primarily in my hands. Of course I will be supported by employees who make drawings, or keep in touch with the suppliers. But these are all just minor activities.

What is so special about this speaker?

First, it uses chassis with field coil magnets. We had the chassis with permanent magnets for some time, but at this time we did not have a complete speaker system. When we decided to develop this system here, the decision to use field coils came. Field coils have many good points, but in our listening tests, we have also found some negative ones. These had to be eliminated first. For example, the kind of iron used in the magnet field coil is extremely important. Therefore the development of the entire system had lasted more than four years.



The newly developed Biyura Speaker with field coil magnet and of course silver crossover parts. Externally you cannot see the extravagant effort to make these speakers. Right on the board the Kondo DAC, also with tubes in the output stage.

Is it a full-range driver with support at high frequencies by the horn?

It's a pure two-way system, the bass driver is more of a wide-range chassis.

In the crossover of course you use your silver foil capacitors?

I think yes!

Another topic: your new amplifier Overture uses EL34 pentodes in push-pull configuration. This is rather unusual for a Kondo design. What was the reason for doing this?

Related to the Kondo sound most people think of single-ended triodes. But I think it is not necessary to use triodes to get this sound. It goes well with push-pull pentode designs and it's just a question of how you handle this.

The marketing manager adds: these ideas in the public have a long tradition, but Kondo is a company that does not stop at one point, we try to perform as many innovations as possible. This already began at Kondo San times. For example, the Kego amplifier had a hybrid rectifier, so tubes and transistors in one circuit.

The goal in developing the overture was to offer a new product line for beginners. Unfortunately, only for beginners with the necessary financial resources. Now, before someone buys the smallest Kondo preamplifier M7 and for reasons of cost combines it with any improper poweramp, we would rather provide the appropriate amp and offer the whole thing as integrated amplifier. In addition, the new amplifier should have an output power of 30 watts, and of course tubes.



If we had to implement this with triodes, something would come out like the Kagura. So something completely different. Therefore we use pentodes in this circuit. EL34 are currently used, but we are thinking of possibly using other types in a new generation. However, it was not easy to realize the typical Kondo sound in this design, not easy at all! We used a psychological trick, the tubes are all hidden in a case, so you have to listen first and then maybe ask whether 300B tubes have been used or not. The push-pull design can also supply more power, so that Overture is suitable for a larger number of speakers. Moreover, we do not just use tubes, but also transistors, but only for the bias

setting.

Is the EL 34 connected as a pentode or a triode?

We use them only in Pentode mode.

Now a difficult question: Do you believe that there are different listening habits between Asian and Western people? Because of the different culture?

The majority of classical music comes from Europe, so the people here are more familiar with this kind of music. Referring to Jazz things look different. So I think the sound, which people like depends on the tonality of their mother language. In the Japanese language I sometimes miss the tone. Japanese speakers are also not very popular outside of Japan. This one here (Biyura) is different and designed for all needs.



What kind of music do you use to tune your components? Still Toscanini?

We like to use vocals, for instance records with Elly Ameling. We have selected ten records with different styles of music, which we use to tune our components. Toscanini was a favorite of Kondo san, but we seldom hear it now.

Ashizawa san, arigato gozaimasu!

The interview first appeared in German in "HiFiStatement.net", in July 2013

