

# LISTENING by ART DUDLEY

THIS ISSUE: Art lives with two sonic works of art from Japan.

## The Kondo Attitude

**W**henever I'm moved by an artist whose work I've never before heard or seen, my first impulse is to wonder: What *else* has this person done while I slumbered in ignorance?

The same applies to those audio designers whose craft has approached the level of art. The products of Ken Shindo, Tim de Paravicini, Jean Constant Verdier, J.C. Morrison, Junji Kimura, Don Garber, Denis Morecroft, and a handful of others have all elicited that response—yet none more than the late Hiroyasu Kondo. His Audio Note Ongaku amplifier of 1989 woke the world to a number of possibilities: that a successful commercial amplifier could be designed to operate in single-ended mode; that it could be designed around new-old-stock (NOS) power tubes;<sup>1</sup> that it could provide less than 30Wpc of output power; that it could forgo printed-circuit boards in favor of point-to-point wiring; that it could contain not a single solid-state component; that it could be shockingly expensive.

I didn't hear an original Ongaku until around 1996, by which time the burgeoning single-ended-triode movement had adopted its designer as an unofficial firebrand: understandable, I suppose, but to restrict the Kondo legacy to just one output-circuit variation is to miss the point. For one thing, as revealed in a 1996 interview with former *Stereophile* contributor Jonathan Scull (see [www.stereophile.com/interviews/597kondo/index.html](http://www.stereophile.com/interviews/597kondo/index.html)), Kondo-san also designed and built amplifiers using push-pull architecture, the merits of which, “when properly executed,” he endorsed. For another, it seems that, more than any matter of circuit architecture, Kondo's greater concern was to design and manufacture every component part used in his products, down to making his own capacitors by hand, and creating a custom die for the extrusion of his silver wiring.

Those things were brought to mind by two relatively

new products in the Kondo line: the Overture integrated amplifier (\$33,900) and the GE-1 phono preamplifier (\$12,900). Both were designed by Katsura Hirokawa and tuned by Ashizawa Masaki, the latter of whom joined the company in 1990, as Kondo-san's apprentice. Masaki-san

is now the CEO of Kondo Audio Note Co., Ltd. in Japan,<sup>2</sup> which remains in the hands of the founder's family. Owing to a change in US distribution, from the former distributor to New York City-based Rhapsody Music & Cinema, the Overture and GE-1 recently spent two months in my system: the first new Kondo products I've experienced at home in a number of years.

### Made of stone-ah

Although it appears modestly sized in the photos on Kondo's website—as would virtually anything when viewed alongside the 75-lb Ongaku—the Overture integrated amplifier is something of a beast in person, measuring nearly 17" deep and weighing over 45 lbs: almost too much for even the top shelf of my Box Furniture equipment rack. The sturdy, meticulously crafted chassis, made from a combination of steel, brass, and aluminum pieces, is described by Ashizawa Masaki as “expensive and compli-

cated, but very useful for sound tuning.” Also contributing to the Overture's heft are its custom-wound Tango power transformer and output transformers—among the amplifier's relatively few parts that *aren't* made in-house.

After removing the Overture's top plate—and admiring the all-too-rare beauty of a five-figure audio product whose casework is so well engineered that all of the construction bolts and their threaded holes line up perfectly, and whose chassis does not flex with the weight of the parts within—I couldn't help being impressed with the appearance of the handmade silver-foil capacitors used in the signal path.



The Kondo GE-1 phono preamplifier (top) and Overture integrated amplifier (bottom).

<sup>2</sup> There is inevitable confusion between two companies sharing the same name. Audio Note in Japan, whose Kondo Overture and GE-1 are reviewed in this issue's “Listening,” is referred to as Kondo Audio Note; Audio Note in the UK, which is no longer connected with the Japanese company, is run by Peter Qvortrup.—Ed.

<sup>1</sup> Today, new samples of the VT4C/211 output triode are available from China.

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Each is marked with its precise value, along with the name of the technician who made it and the date of its manufacture. The choke coils and the smaller transformers are also the company's own, as are all of the internal hookup wires. The tantalum resistors, although made at another facility (using Kondo's solid silver wire as leads), are a proprietary Kondo design, and are individually measured and sorted in-house for consistency.

The silver input and output connectors, too, are Kondo's own design, made to their specifications.

Adjacent to the audio-signal circuitry, extending beyond the range of the tubes themselves, is another Kondo signature: a ground plane made from pure, solid copper. The present-day manufacturer of Kondo products extols the use of solid copper for its RFI resistance and good mechanical grounding properties; Hiroyasu Kondo, in his writings and conversations, suggested that the electrical current meant to mimic music sounds best when comprising electrons drawn from copper and silver. (Again I'm reminded of the dictum that audio devices tend to sound like the materials from which they're made—something I learned from writer Herb Reichert, and that Herb learned while working for Audio Note.)

The Overture's volume potentiometer could be regarded as an off-the-shelf part, assuming the shelf in question is sturdier than average. The Alps HQPro, which is completely encased in a precision-machined brass

housing, would be too large to fit inside some of the high-end preamps I've owned. (Although the Japanese Alps company appears to aim the HQPro series at their home market only, I found the website of a Polish electronics distributor that offers the Overture's 100k ohm version for the equivalent of \$550.) But the Overture's Russian-made tubes—two EL34 output pentodes, one 6072, and one 12BH7 per channel—really *are* off the shelf, having been supplied by Electro-Harmonix, the company that began life making such guitar pedals as the Big Muff  $\pi$  and Small Stone. These tubes may seem less tony than the rare, NOS tubes supplied by other amplifier makers, but I can vouch for at least the Electro-Harmonix 6072 dual-triodes used as the Overture's input tubes, which sound uniquely clear and noise-free in the input sections of my Shindo Corton-Charlemagne monoblocks.<sup>3</sup>

Speaking of the Corton-Charlemagne, the Kondo Overture

<sup>3</sup> The E-H 6072 is available in matched pairs from a number of sources; I bought mine from McShane Design, of Orland Park, Illinois.

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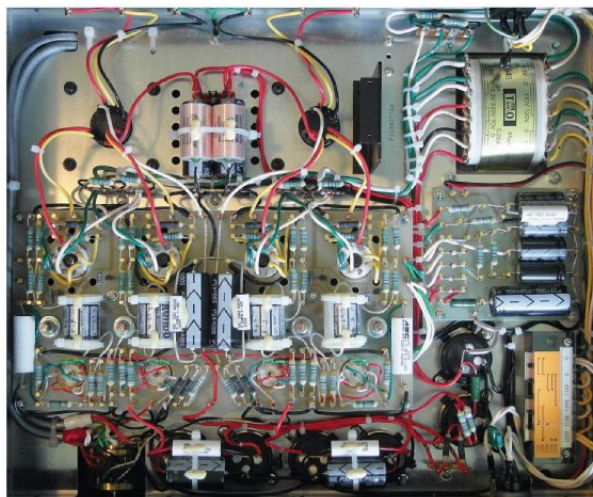
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shares with that amp its use of a class-A, Ultralinear output circuit with minimal (3dB) global feedback, executed by Kondo with split-primary output transformers custom-wound by Tango. According to Ashizawa Masaki, an Ultralinear circuit was chosen in order to ensure “reasonable output power, [while] at the same time we have to reproduce smooth tonal character, like a triode.” A fixed-bias circuit was chosen to avoid the need for high-power-handling cathode resistors: “Good-sounding ones are rare,” according to Masaki-san, who also points to Kondo’s proprietary Constant-Current Bias (CCB) circuit, wherein the music signal is spared from passing through the circuitry used for setting bias voltage. Maintaining an appropriate relationship between the music signal and the circuitry for the amplifier’s operating voltages is also



A look inside the Kondo Overture integrated amplifier.

stressed throughout the Overture’s power supply, where Masaki-san says that circuit-layout techniques are critical.

The 32Wpc Overture isn’t big on creature comforts, lacking a balance control, a mono switch, and, as one might guess from its pairing with the

Kondo GE-1, a phono stage. But it does offer four pairs of line-level inputs—selectable by means of a rotary switch with an unusually solid feel—and a choice of 4 or 8 ohm output sockets. Notably, the Overture also offers freedom from that most needless of all extra-cost accessories, the remote control. The Overture comes standard with the company’s ACz Avocado silver AC cord, which sells separately for \$2450.

With regard to the Kondo Overture’s build quality, I can say only that I’ve never seen a more meticulously constructed amplifier, be it tubed or solid-state, from any manufacturer. The attention to detail and the sheer level of craftsmanship displayed in the Overture are nothing less than staggering.

The same construction quality, as well as the same silver wiring, handmade capacitors, bespoke resistors, copper ground plane, and

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tuned, multi-metal chassis, are seen in the Kondo GE-1, a moving-magnet (34dB of gain) phono preamplifier with separate, switchable input pairs for two phono pickups. The GE-1 uses three of the aforementioned Electro-Harmonix 6072 dual-triode tubes, which provide a two-stage, zero-feedback gain circuit and a cathode-follower final stage for low output impedance. At the other end of the GE-1, an input-impedance selector switch—with choices of 20, 50, and 100k ohms—offers the user a non-signal-degrading means of tailoring response in the face of turntable rumble or other system anomalies. The power supply of the GE-1 is built around an original Kondo cut-core transformer and a 6X4 rectifier tube, with a solid-state (TO3 transistor-based) supply for the heater circuits. The stock AC cord is Kondo's ACc copper, which sells separately for \$1150/1.75m.

### Leeza

Especially where preserving the texture and the tactile qualities of recorded sound is concerned, I persist in thinking that all moving-coil phono pickups sound best when loaded with a well-made and properly selected step-up transformer. Because the people of Kondo share that belief and design their phono preamplifiers accordingly, it was easy to begin my Kondo adventure by substituting their GE-1 for the phono preamplifier of my Shindo Masseto preamp, with my own Hommage T2 step-up transformer in place.

With my system thus configured, the tonal signature of the GE-1 was quite different from that of the Shindo phono section: Where the Shindo was rich and boldly colorful and just a bit bass-happy, the Kondo was leaner and more pastel and somewhat more open—it sounded more *modern*, if you will, but in a pleasant way. And, in any event, the Kondo was every bit as good as the Shindo at communicating musical force and touch. With very compressed pop music, in fact—Procol Harum's *A Salty Dog* (Regal Zonophone SLRZ 1009) comes to mind—the Kondo found more impact than I thought was in the groove. In particular, the GE-1 revealed bassist David Knights, whom I'd always taken as competent but no more, to have a rather nice touch, emphasizing some notes with a staccato attack, and others

by sliding away from them before they died out altogether.

Back to the matter of tone: There's little question that my Shindo Masseto's phono stage portrays timbral colors as being deeper and more saturated than did the Kondo GE-1; examples abound, none better than Pieter Wispelwey's recording of Bruch's *Kol Nidrei*, with Daniel Sepec conducting the German Chamber Philharmonic Bremen (SACD/CD, Channel Classics CCS SA 16501), in which Wispelwey's cello was less dark



The Kondo GE-1 (top) and Overture (bottom), seen from behind.

and had less apparent tonal complexity through the Kondo. Another was that pleasantest of jazz chestnuts, Ike Quebec's *Soul Samba* (LP, Blue Note/Classic 84114), in which the tenor sax and piano were rather richer through the Shindo. To some, the existence of such a distinction implies that one preamp must be *better* than the other; I persist in the perverse belief that, because such a thing is nearly impossible to know for sure, the "best" playback device is the one whose tonality and other qualities most impress you in the context of your system.

In time, I added the Kondo Overture integrated amp to my system, replacing my Shindo monoblocks and the line stage of my Shindo preamplifier. After the Overture had spent just half an hour warming

up—Bob Visintainer, the proprietor of Rhapsody Music & Cinema, had thoroughly burned in this sample before sending it to me—I simply couldn't believe what I was hearing. I put on John Barbirolli and the Philharmonia Orchestra's recording of Elgar's *Enigma Variations* (LP, EMI ASD 548) and was again impressed by the degree of sheer, human feeling in the playing that was uncovered by the Kondo gear. The obviously painstaking manner in which Barbirolli rehearsed his players and shaped every line was on full display: The usually subtle differences that distinguish one conductor's version of a well-worn work from another's were more pleasantly, evocatively straightforward than ever before.

And that was just music; the sound, too, was remarkably good. The system now sounded more extended in the treble than with my Shindo separates, yet in spite of the apparent reduction in richness per se, the Kondo gear was nonetheless subtly colorful, with woodwinds in particular sounding vibrant and real. The sound of the flute in Variation 10, *Dorabella*, was, as I mentioned in my notes, about as perfect as I'd ever heard from a hi-fi, being both silvery and appropriately meaty and substantial. But the nicest thing the Kondo electronics found in this record was the portrayal of scale and size appropriate to the music. During those many Elgarian crescendi, when the strings swoop and the trombones shore them up, the amp's sense of physical scale

moved with them, expanding and contracting in a manner I've never before heard from my system. Really: I could have written 300 words alone on how well this amp brought that Elgar record to life. Although the GE-1 lacks a mono blend switch, the *Mozart à Paris* boxed set from the Electric Recording Company (7 LPs, Pathé/ERC DTX 191-197), played with my EMT OFD 25, sounded magnificent. The Piano Sonata in a, K.310, played by Lazare Lévy, sounded appropriately dry and startlingly present, with as much human flow as I've ever heard from a hi-fi. Tonal balance was, again, a bit light and could have stood a little more low-frequency fullness and "bloom," but the sound was nonetheless listenable and convincing.

The Kondo gear also did a fine job of expressing the intensity of Johanna

Martzy's legendary performance of the *Ciaccona* of J.S. Bach's Partita 2 (EMI/ERC 33CX 1287); I was captivated, although I missed the greater richness of my Shindo separates, which seem to add to the Martzy experience. But there was no questioning the Kondos' astonishing reproduction of Walter Gieseking's 1950 recording of Beethoven's "Waldstein" sonata (LP, Angel 35024), which sounded appropriately physical—and lyrical, and charming—through the GE-1 and Overture.

The Kondos communicated force in a big way—figuratively and, taking into account the way the Kondo amp melded physical impact and physical scale, quite literally. The plucked strings that open the recording, by Neville Marriner and the Academy of St. Martin-in-the-Fields, of Britten's *Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge* (LP, Argo ZRG 860) were physically stirring, even at the modest volume levels I prefer—yet in the subtler sense, the Overture's excellent sense of drive pushed the melodies along in a nice and natural manner.

#### Maxium

In retrospect, I feel comfortable suggesting that the Kondo electronics have less of an identifiable "tube sound" than my own Shindo gear—and are even less obviously tubey than Lamm's well-engineered ML2.2 single-ended amplifiers, which I wrote about in the April 2013 issue. Still, I think any experienced listener would say that the Kondo GE-1 and Overture possess the timbral naturalness, the texture, and the complete lack of harshness and mechanical sound that are traditionally associated with good tube components. That the Kondo products had, in my system, a believably wide and well-chosen bandwidth, and that they performed without undue noise, hum, or any other such flaw, suggest that

they are remarkably *well-engineered* tube components.

There remains only the matter of value—or lack thereof, as the case may be. Kondo Audio Note in Japan has a total of seven employees: They make most of their own parts, and even where they do not, the company demands and achieves a level of quality that all but the most dedicated would refer to as *unnecessary*. Moreover, the company seems, at times, almost perversely unconcerned about actually selling any of their products. Do I think the principals of Kondo, their distributors, or any of their dealers are getting rich by selling this stuff? I do not. Do I think that either the Overture integrated amplifier at \$33,900 or the GE-1 phono preamplifier at \$12,900 is a high-value product? I do not.<sup>4</sup>

Consumer goods that make sense as works of art—products this original, this influential, this *excessively* well crafted—often don't make any other kind of sense. Yet neither that realization, nor the acknowledgment that I will surely never be able to afford even the least expensive Kondo amp, can prevent me from saying that you should go out of your way to hear these products. Perhaps 1% of you will both *get* them and be able to afford them—for which you have my congratulations and my envy. For everyone else, these Kondo electronics can provide a glimpse into a sonic world in which words such as *extravagant* and *unnecessary* don't exist, and where excess has less to do with opulence than with a single-minded dedication to the pursuit of audible art. ■

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<sup>4</sup> There are many people in the DIY community who will read this column and think, *I could make this thing myself for less than 1/10 the cost.* I sigh my sorry sigh.

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### LIST OF THE MONTH: THE EIGHT WORST MUSIC/YOUTH CULTURE MAGAZINES OF ALL TIME

- 8) *Rolling Stone*, for its list of the greatest musical artists ever
- 7) *Rolling Stone*, for its list of the greatest albums ever
- 6) *Rolling Stone*, for sucking up to Robbie Robertson
- 5) *Rolling Stone*, for its list of the greatest singles ever
- 4) *Rolling Stone*, for retracting negative reviews of albums by Dylan and the Stones
- 3) *Rolling Stone*, for its list of the worst band names ever
- 2) *Rolling Stone*, for firing Lester Bangs
- 1) *Rolling Stone*, for liking Bruce Springsteen just a little too much