

Amplifiers, Gear, Sound and Vision, Speakers

Shindo and Living Voice System REVIEW

Written by [AshK](#) on June 26, 2012

Shindo Montille Stereo Power Amplifier \$8,200

Shindo Aurieges MM Preamplifier \$8,200

Living Voice Avatar II Floorstanding Speakers \$10,999

Ashley Kramer has finally either totally lost it, or finally found it. Decide for yourself by taking time out to read his mega-review of an amp/speaker combo that proved nothing less than revelatory.

IMAGINE THAT YOU'RE a primitive man in the wild days of old. You live in your cave, more or less merrily doing your thing. You hunt, you dig up tubers, you flee from the larger animals and you cower in abject terror during thunderstorms. You light fires with a chunk of flint so you can burn dry branches to cook your hunks of freshly caught meat.

Then one day, an interfering time traveller from 2065 beams in and for some unknown reason, he decides to cook for you on an expensive European stainless steel laser powered stove that he happened to bring along. He knocks up a six-course gourmet meal that utterly blows your mind because you literally couldn't even conceive of it up to that point. Then he vanishes along with his stove, and you're left to gnaw on charred aurochs shank for the rest of your life. You wouldn't be a happy caveman, would you?



A less extreme example, perhaps? You're a hillbilly who lives in the boondocks. Your father drinks home distilled rotgut moonshine, and you spend your formative years drinking the same foul moonshine. On

your 18th birthday, you join the Marines to break free from the hopelessness of your hardscrabble existence. Somehow, you end up on embassy duty in London and find yourself in an tremendously classy bar while on furlough, flush with the fire of youth and a stack of your saved up pay.

You call the barman over and say, "Yo barkeep, set me up a glass of your best whiskey."

He says “The very best, Sir?”

“Man, did I stutter?” you indignantly reply.

The slightly bemused barman raises an eyelid a mere fraction before pouring you a glass of a liquid that looks the way Scotch would look if Manuka honey and amber had a love child.

You take a small sip while staring around the smoky bar and your world shifts slightly on its axis. You know that you’ll never be the same and you curse both this new awareness and all the wasted years that preceded this moment.

That, in a melodramatic nutshell, is the Shindo Laboratory experience. It’s nowhere near as theatrical as tales of time travellers or hillbillies in London. In fact it’s quite understated, but that same sense of the universe shifting, of profound and lasting change, is definitely there.

Who or What is Shindo?

I’d heard of Shindo long before I had a chance to hear the equipment. What dedicated anorak-wearing audiophile isn’t aware of this legendary Japanese manufacturer? Audio people talk about Shindo Laboratory in the same hushed tones as they discuss Kondo, that other magnificent example of Japanese audiophilia, and for good reason. This stuff gets respect, love even. Those who own Shindo components seldom part with them, but there’s almost always a hi-fi guy who owned some Shindo components once upon a time; he may have had to sell them in a bitter divorce or because of other dire changes in fortune, but his experiences are always remembered with a far-off look in the eye, and spoken of in reverential prose laden with words such as “magic” or “astonishing”. The sense of regret is as palpable as that of an old man who once missed a chance to spend an enchanted evening with a young Sophia Loren.

I actually passed up the opportunity to audition and perhaps own a Shindo preamplifier a few years ago. Why I did so, I can’t really tell you. I think I knew then that it might prove to be only the start of something big and expensive; at least based on the feedback I was getting from people who’d heard it. It was all too intense to contemplate while on the cusp of a long overseas trip, so I let it go. When the chance came to review this Shindo preamp/power amp pairing, along with some suitable speakers, I jumped at it. Jumped? Hell, I virtually leaped across town like Superman to get my hands on the gear when it became available.

So, where does this revered status come from? What makes Shindo special? After all, it’s just another high-end valve gear brand isn’t it? Well no, that’s like saying a Bugatti Veyron is just a bumped up VW Phaeton.

The secret here is involvement, hands-on passionate involvement, because Shindo Laboratory of Tokyo, Japan is effectively Ken Shindo and his family. With the assistance of his family, he’s been making his jewel-like hi-fi components for over three decades, and when I say making, I really do mean making. Not outsourcing, not getting them built by an OEM, making them one at a time, by hand.

In a rather deep discussion with one of the team at Turned On Audio, who kindly provided this review system, the theory was raised that one could look at Shindo Laboratory gear from a Zen perspective: the important thing isn’t what’s in there, although that matters a great deal, it’s who made it.

That of course is entirely true. Give me every part needed to assemble these two units and a precisely detailed instruction sheet and I couldn’t replicate the sound, even assuming I could solder

at a level far beyond expert. There's something to be said for knowing deep in your gut what works, what influences the sound, and according to Ken Shindo, everything influences the sound. Placing a capacitor lead in a certain, very specific orientation might make a miniscule audible difference, but multiply that tiny variation by a factor of dozens or hundreds and you end up with a product that would sound quite unlike the one I churned out. Knowledge, experience and instinct are a powerful combination.

Ken Shindo got his start as an electronics engineer working in television design, but he was fascinated by audio design, specifically amplifiers. To cut a long story short, he spent a lot of time experimenting with circuit design and looking into the way that individual components swayed the sound of a given amp. He's developed a strong preference for vintage parts from the golden age of sound – some of the highest quality (and according to Shindo-San – the best sounding) components ever manufactured date back to the days of valves. NOS (New Old Stock) valves are of course regarded as being the pinnacle of valve manufacture, so they feature heavily in Shindo Labs equipment.

A limited supply of these old parts means that Shindo Labs audio components are made in small runs, with sufficient parts stock kept on hand to service the gear for a long time to come. There's no 'vintage only' canon to Shindo's work though: a part that sounds right and fits in with the rest of the components would get implemented with no trouble. It's just that the oldies really are in many cases, the goodies.

Amplifier Construction and Features

The Aurieges preamp is a compact and lightweight unit, built into a steel chassis and finished in the traditional Shindo bottle-green colour. The gold coloured knobs, old-style power switch and the plexiglass front panel with its delicate gold lettering speak of a bygone age, when elegance was a given. This really is a lovely looking amplifier, light years removed from a modern DAC-equipped fully featured preamp, but none the worse for it. Inside are four NOS tubes, and you get three line level inputs (RCA) and a phono input that supports Moving Magnet cartridges supplying over 3mv. There's no balance control but there's a workaround on the power amp.



Shindo Aurieges Preamplifier

The volume knob rotates as if it's turning in a warm teflon bath, which is a good thing because a remote control is not offered with this amp. In truth, you don't want one because adjusting the volume on this amp is like lowering the tonearm on a beautiful turntable, and you wouldn't consign that job to a remotely controlled butler, would you?

To truly understand the Shindo ethos, you need to crack the lid on these amps. I wasn't brave enough to do that but fortunately, someone's already done it and a brief search on the web will take you to Art Dudley's excellent articles on the subject, replete with close-up photos of the interior of the Aurieges. From the care taken in laying out the parts to the impeccable soldering, this amp is an obvious labour of love.

The Montille stereo power amp is also a beautifully made work of art but its design contrasts somewhat with that of the preamp. They look as if they came from the same wider family but are actually from different parts of the country. Still, the Montille is stylish enough in a very old school way, which is entirely in keeping with its origins.



Shindo Montille Poweramp

The tube cage keeps the valves well hidden but in a darkened room, their glow warms the heart, not to mention the room – the Montille runs reasonably warm but doesn't cook like some amps I've had in the house. Still, after a few hours, there's a nice rosy warmth coming from the hi-fi rack. Despite its low 15-watt output, the Montille is a push-pull amplifier, not single ended. It uses 6V6 valves, which are driven quite conservatively.

On the front of the amp are two level controls, one for each channel. These can be used as balance controls but their main purpose is to allow the power amp's levels to be adjusted so the volume control on the preamp is used close to the middle of its range, where it will be most accurate in terms of channel balance.

The Speakers

The Shindo power amplifier really needs some efficient speakers in front of it, which is why I settled for the Living Voice Avatar II floorstanders. Sensitivity is a highish 94 dB, with a nominal impedance of 6 Ohms, so they're a reasonable match for the Montille power amp. Even more sensitivity and a higher impedance might well be in order, but this combination was said to sound quite sweet, so in they went.

At first glance, there's not much to these two-way, three driver speakers, particularly in light of the company's dramatically more esoteric higher-end offerings. These are traditional speakers, so the only curves to be seen are the ones cut in the front baffle for the drivers. The cabinet is rear ported, parallel sided and rectangular, heavily braced internally and built using a hardwood composite for an all-up weight of 20kg per speaker. They're finished using "premium furniture grade, book-matched grain-filled veneers" and they really do look sharp, especially once you lose the grilles.

A strange design choice is the black base, which I always thought was just a design effect but the cabinet actually ends where the wood veneer stops. The black bits are separate spiked bases, with the speaker itself plonked on top; I used blobs of Bluetack to couple them and offer a degree of security to the fit.



Certain driver materials seem to conform to a sonic baseline, notably silk dome tweeters and paper cone midrange drivers and woofers. Most everything else that's come along has been implemented to solve one or many of a legion of speaker design problems with varying degrees of success. However, in dealing with issues such as power handling, durability, motion control, excursion, frequency extension and the like, you inevitably step away from that baseline and change the sound.

That's not necessarily a bad thing, but there's not much that sounds as clean as a plain silk dome tweeter. They may not reach up to 50kHz but what they do, they likely to do well, especially when we're dealing with a really good 'un like this high-end Scanspeak unit. Paper drivers tend to sound clean and energetic and make a good case for themselves when it comes to speed and sensitivity. Living Voice has gone with two proprietary 6.5-inch doped paper units. The drivers are placed in what Living Voice calls a "high sensitivity, wide dispersion MTM (mid/tweeter/mid) driver topology" or D'Appolito configuration, with the tweeter placed closer to one edge to improve imaging. Claimed frequency response is 35 Hz – 25 kHz.

In addition to the high quality drivers and impeccable finish, the parts complement shows where the money has been spent. For your \$10,999, you get proprietary hand-wound air core inductors, non-inductive wire wound resistors, a mechanically isolated crossover with careful attention paid to the layout, star-earthing plus Hovland discrete film and foil Musicaps. All of this adds up to a loudspeaker that is more capable than you'd give it credit for based on one look.

One hassle I had with the Avatar II's is that the MTM driver layout places the tweeter well down the face of the cabinet so they sit in the acoustic center of the mid/bass drivers (which is a good thing), but this truncated height makes for a low soundstage height. I'm used to tall floorstanders with a tweeter close to the top of the cabinet and an upward firing midrange to boot. They offer a really tall soundstage, and after years with them, I tend to look down on squat sound fields – this is by no means limited to the Avatars; many shorter floorstanders or standmounts make me want to elevate them with a foot or so of granite.

Fiddling with the spikes to angle the speakers slightly backward helped to raise the soundstage a bit without adversely affecting the rest of the sound characteristics. If I owned these speakers, I'd definitely find some way to get them about 6-8 inches higher off the floor.

Cables

The cables in use here have been specifically designed for use with Shindo components. That of course makes sense for the short 0.75m Shindo branded silver interconnect (\$1,399), but even the 2.5m single wired Auditorium 23 speaker cable (\$1,599) and 1m interconnect (\$1,199) are hand made and share a link with Shindo. Auditorium 23's Keith Aschenbrenner developed this cable line when he tried to come up with a suitable speaker cable to partner with a new range of electronics he was distributing (Shindo Labs, coincidentally). He eventually found an arrangement described as "inherently musical", and that's what was suggested for use with this system.

Sound Quality

Like most, if not all valve amplifiers, there's a warm up period with the two Shindo components but thankfully, and contrary to expectations, it isn't long, and most importantly, you don't have to suffer through it.

From stone cold, there's a noticeable sweetening of the sound after just a couple of tracks. At that point, you're good to go but sonically, things just get better from there for about half an hour, when it all totally stabilises. In small increments, the amps open up and the sound improves, almost as if some sneaky fellow is turning up the volume by a fraction every so often. Guitar bodies become more resonant, strings shudder with extra life, drum skins tighten and vocalists stop rehearsing and get seriously stuck in.

My first impressions of this system were favourable but I wondered what I was missing. After all, this lot was meant to be incredibly special. It didn't seem to be doing anything amazing. After a few minutes however, I registered that while I was listening as a hi-fi reviewer, the system was just getting on with playing music, and I was enjoying it more and more with every second. That may sound trite but the music just sounded so good, so complete, that dissecting it into its component parts seemed not just silly, but a total waste of time.

On many of my CDs, this system went a long way to stripping the music of the conceits that make up the majority of the copy in many reviews of hi-fi components. This quality made this one of the most difficult reviews I've ever written. Attack became something armies do, impact for hammers, extension the province of yoga instructors and neutral turned out to be something the Swiss are keen on. When you're not particularly worried about the things that you normally listen for, in fact you're appreciating the music so much that you're utterly indifferent to them, then you're going to have some trouble describing what you're hearing. I tried my best though, hence the lengthy review.

It's tempting to say that the Shindo/Living Voice ensemble adds authenticity to a recording but that's not correct at all. Perhaps it's closer to the truth to say that there's a lack of artifice to the sound and the system isn't adding anything. Rather, it's removing layers of haze and cutting through to the recording itself. You'd expect vintage valve gear (even this modernised incarnation) to sound way too lush and warm, with bass that's best described as bountiful but not firm. That's just not the case here because the accuracy and tightness from top to bottom is beyond question, and the overall characteristics are neither warm nor cool. Even with the SA8260 and its distinctive Marantz sound, the result is so analogue-like, so smooth and grain free that it's hard to believe there's not a reel-to-reel tape machine or turntable on the front of it.

I've theorised that the way a hi-fi system renders the spoken voice will tell you a great deal about the way it will cope with most other aspects of musical playback. With this Shindo/Living Voice combination, voices are scarily believable, with an in-the-room physicality. Jackson Browne tends to have a good old natter with the audience at some of his concerts; at least he did at the one I attended in Auckland a few years back. He does the same on his two recent solo acoustic CDs and on the *Love Is Strange* double CD. When these spoken interludes happen, I'm tempted to look up and see exactly where he's sitting at the front of my room. Authentic? Heck yes. You can almost picture the air flowing around the mic as he talks.

Now take that ability to extract words from a CD and apply it to singing, or to the resonance of a guitar string vibrating in the air or a drum strike, and you have a remarkably realistic portrayal of the original performance, at least to the extent that the mastering engineers were able to pull it out of the air in the first place.

The noise floor on this system is very low indeed; a flat line of nothingness with the music placed above it and even the smallest detail clearly apparent, which gives the impression of a wide dynamic range. While it's nice to be able to hear the kind of things hidden in recordings, treasured by anorak wearers and usually only revealed by good headphones, there's a far more important benefit to this wealth of silence, and that's the way the music itself is revealed.

On Graham Nash's 'Simple Man' from the Crosby, Stills and Nash boxed set, the piano notes that start off the song sound like the softly struck but still physical strikes of actual hammers (as opposed to a recorded rendition carved onto a digital disc), complete with the vibrations, reverb and decay that are easily missed, or rather simply not there in many systems. Nash's vocal is suspended in space behind the amps and sounds like a man's voice singing, nothing more and nothing less. Follow it carefully and concentrate hard, and you can almost see the way he's carefully structuring each note, and the same happens when the harmony vocals kick in: you hear what sounds like real people, singing.

Touches on the cymbals are clear behind the vocals, while the decay of all the instruments can be heard almost as if they were on a different track. This forensic quality is usually the preserve of 'phones, or electrostatic, ribbon and planar speakers but the tweeter on the Avatar II speakers is capable of the finely nuanced control of sonic information found on only the top examples of the driver maker's art.

On this system, there's more to the intricate tapestry of sound created by the bow on violin strings, a sense that the system is literally showing off more of what's on the track by allowing everything – and I do mean everything – on the CD to reach the speaker drivers. The music simply doesn't come across as being artificial, vocals and instruments sound the way you instinctively know they should, with (dare I say it?) the correct timbre.

The way the system tracks each note is remarkable. Gary Steel called it “timing”, I’d call it musicality, but we’re both right; here the songs just flow without a hint of exaggeration in speed or the feeling that anything is lagging.

Some hi-fi ensembles need quite a bit of volume to sound true; without the loud pedal pushed towards the metal, the sound becomes flat and the soundstage collapses into itself, sucking the life from the music as surely as a black hole always tries to slurp in the USS Enterprise. Not so this system. Even at late night levels carefully chosen to keep the neighbours onside, the music emanating from the Shindo/Living Voice combination remains believable. The perspective changes, as the image seems to physically move backwards out of the bay windows behind the speakers, almost as if the listener was being moved rearward in a big empty hall. Close your eyes and imagine that you’re all alone, seated now in row 36 instead of row 3, and that Diana Krall is still playing on her piano just for you, long after the rest of the audience has bewilderingly left for urgent appointments.

This mental leap of faith isn’t hard to make, because while the performance moves into the distance, the elements that make it sound right (for want of a better word) are still there. This isn’t really about retained micro and macro dynamics or a sense of scale; rather it’s just that whatever is happening to make the music sound so lifelike at higher levels is still happening to a large degree even with the volume knob down.

Regardless of volume levels, it just plain works. Cue up some vintage Dylan – ‘All Along The Watchtower’ for example – and punch the volume up. Your face will light up when you hear the bite of that harmonica and the rawness of the vocals. Hear? Feel it is a far more apt way to describe it and by feel, I don’t mean 15-inch driver feel, but rather the kind you sense in your gut.

The tracks on Neil Young’s excellent *Live At Massey Hall 1971* can best be described as achingly beautiful when heard via the Shindo gear. Turn down the volume for a midnight session, push play, ease back into the sofa and let the 17 songs take you back more than four decades. The 67 minutes pass far too quickly when you hear it on this system, much the same way the years did.

Rocking The Casbah

So anything and everything with an acoustic bent is reproduced with impeccable grace and a degree of confidence that is borderline eerie in its realism? That’s all very well for folks who want to listen to Vera Lynn before toddling off down to the RSA on a Friday night. What about those who like a bit of rock to go with their roll? Will this system leave them hanging like a ravenous meat-eater staring at a plate of silken tofu and Bok Choy?

Gary Steel visited while I had the Shindo/Living Voice gear installed and we listened to some mellow acoustic music along with Steel’s heavier choices. He was so disconcerted by the experience that he wrote up this lengthy [blog](#) and he was dead right. The system was enchanting with certain music, but fell flat on its face when asked to pump up the jam and bring Frank Zappa or Massive Attack to life. No deep bass, no drive, no power. When Steel left, I was perplexed. Was the system totally incapable of rocking out? I didn’t see how this was possible, so I set about changing the room around.

The system was placed against a wall that looks out onto the open plan dining and lounge area on the floor below. There’s a series of wooden shutters and glass doors behind the speakers that were open while I was doing the first part of my review. All that space behind the speakers did wonders for the air and openness of the acoustic music I was listening to, but it was doing rock no favours at all. After closing everything and shifting the speakers back towards the rear a tad, the low notes

beefed up substantially. Not to the degree that I could close my eyes and picture the four red-rimmed woofers on a set of big Cerwin Vegas, but at least the Avatar II's were sounding tight and punchy down below, and rock was sounding far more dynamic.



One of my favourite recent discoveries is 'Sail' from Awolnation's Megalithic Symphony CD, which is strange considering I don't like the rest of the album at all. Once I made sure the neighbours were away, I gave the volume knob on the Aurieges a shunt to the right and was rewarded with a very satisfying bass rumble and plenty of grunt. I could also hear way too much of the recording, with the distortion on the track making me want to turn it down, but that's the software, not the system.

It does a decent enough job on rock but the speakers don't go all that low even when close to a wall, and there's a sense that the system is out of its depth at high levels. Compared to the performance on offer with more mellow music, this is notably not as good. There are speakers that would do a better job in this respect, even with only 15w of valve power, so a mix and match session would probably balance out the equation. Then again, getting masses of power is easy these days, if that's your thing. It's horses for courses and every single hi-fi system is compromised in one way or another, or in many ways. So this isn't the sort of audio gear you'd buy to get Tiki Taane sounding realistic down the bottom of your lounge, as opposed to the local pub (before he got arrested at least).

The Other Side

For every up there's a down, right? So it proves here – a system capable of delivering this much insight into what's been captured in a recording doesn't have a special filter button that turns down that discernment when you play a bad, compressed or compromised recording. The smooth nature of the Avatar II speakers does ease the pain by a small amount where a more edgy presentation might otherwise make things unbearable, but you'll be in no doubt whatsoever when the software isn't up to speed.

Don't want to hear your favourite singer's voice cracking in a live concert? Not keen on hearing when the vocalist gets too close to the mic or the engineer too close to the limiters? Rather not be privy to just how flat and undynamic some recordings actually are? Okay then, you'd better toddle off and listen to a different stereo system. Again, this isn't unique to the Living Voice and Shindo pairing; the further you move into the high-end, the less comfortable lousy recordings become (as Mr Steel pointed out). It's just that some systems are more forgiving than others, and here you know



what's what all the time. For me, this honesty is cool. The flaws are part of the music. Up to a point that is: heavy compression and peak limiting are awful to hear. Listening to coarse bootlegged Dylan tracks or the raw Zevon songs on *Preludes: Rare and Unreleased Recordings* is a pleasure because you're getting so close to what was captured on the day, but badly mastered music is a tough listen.

More Acoustic Notes

I've always found Natalie Merchant's voice to be quite charming and I've been enjoying it from the earliest days of 10,000 Maniacs right through to her more recent work. Her *Retrospective 1995-2005* compilation has some lovely songs on it, and this system made them sound as good as I remember hearing them. The level of insight into the recordings here is extreme.

I was checking a message on my iPhone while cuing up the final track on this CD, 'Sally Ann', which is one of my all time favourite female vocal performances. When the Marantz's laser hit the groove and the fiddle came in, it sounded outright fabulous, rasping into the room with a vengeance. The vocal sounded even more amazing (what's better than outright fabulous I wonder? Whatever it is, that's what I had here), like she was in the room, along with the instruments; intense, emotional and impossible to ignore or treat as background muzak.

I'd be remiss if I didn't mention my number one review CD – Nil's Lofgren's *Acoustic Live*. I think I've played this on at least 90 percent of the hi-fi and home theatre systems or headphones that I've reviewed. I know it backwards, yet I still listen to it for pleasure.

I can't make any claim here with absolute certainty because audio memory is as volatile as oilcloth in a fire, but I'm pretty darn sure that the guitar has never sounded quite this real to me. The briskly strummed section between 0:15 and 0:25 is so clearly rendered that it's easy to visualize the fingers on the strings, and the combination of detail, texture, depth and speed makes it sound less like a facsimile than on most anything I can recall. The vocals are as clear and open as the guitar notes. In the past, I've heard more weight in the decay of the strings in certain parts of the song, extra impact when he thumps the guitar body and additional scale to the performance (not to

mention more height to the images) but this performance was one of the most involving I can recall.

What's Hi-Fi All About Anyway?

Being this close to the performance or having the impression of natural and unforced realism is captivating, and is where the Shindo/Living Voice system differs from many others I've heard. Some systems sound like good or even great hi-fi in the way they play back a recording, but they still sound like hi-fi; this, on the other hand, often sounds like music.

The difference isn't light and dark; in fact, it's subtle and it's easy to disregard it by listening for the aspects of the hi-fi experience that you love best. The more you listen, however, and with the right music (that's vital), the more there's a realisation that something wonderful is happening, a shift in consciousness that creeps into your mind. Once it's there, you have a problem, or in this case, I do.

The human auditory system is an exceedingly adaptable thing, and capable of making allowances when it needs to. Got a slight steely edge to a tweeter? Don't stress, you'll adapt and it'll sound fine after a while. You may even tell yourself that it's "highly detailed". Dealing with a wee bass peak and a touch of honking from a speaker's ports? No worries at all, it won't be long before it sounds like a "generous bottom end". Digital glare from your old CD player? That's all good too, and it actually is because in small amounts, everything from clanky metal domes to resonating boxes can be tuned out, accepted or explained away.

Even the tiny things that we're only subconsciously aware of (crossover distortion, unnatural sounds from strange driver materials, hum, hiss), those little things that prickle at the back of your mind won't stop you enjoying the music. That's a good thing because they're found on so many systems, even expensive ones. Nothing is perfect in this game, and we can only hope to come up with the best possible compromise for our tastes and budgets.

Those compensations and concessions, conscious or otherwise, just don't seem to be a factor here. Sure, it would be terrific if the Montille had 400 watts of heat free power with no change in character (or cost), maybe the Aurieges could have a 24/192 DAC built in, along with a remote for the couch potatoes out there and perhaps the speakers could reach down to 16Hz without getting any bigger but that's all wishful thinking. Actually, it's bullshit that doesn't matter one whit. Sonically, where it counts, the one area that matters and which is what hi-fi is all about, there's a purity here that I've never heard quite as distinctly in the past. It reminds me of a system fed by an exceptional turntable, despite the fact that my Marantz is no analogue machine. I know it well and it's got that Marantz CD sound to it in every way, but here, it's as smooth as polished glass without being tamed or boring.

I'm not for a moment saying that this system is all things to all men. It's not. After all, one man's meat is another's poison and nothing is as subjective as the arts. Hi-fi is definitely as much an art as it's a science when you come down to it, and I've heard more than a few approaches to this blend of passion and engineering I love. There are so many different ways to spend this much money in audioland. Between all the brands, amplifier topologies, speaker designs and cable materials, not to mention all the sources, it would be hard for anyone to tabulate all the options and combinations.

Some equivalently priced systems will hit harder, with big bass, huge impact and the ability to reproduce the levels of a Drum and Bass show, and some buyers will love that. Others will turn to the revelatory capabilities of electrostatic speakers so they can hear a pin drop in the corner of

their vast soundstage. Some systems will be much more balanced and able to do justice to mellow jazz as easily as they resurrect Hendrix.

Even my own system is more adept with the hard stuff and can do things that make my spine tingle, but getting me this close to the belief that I'm listening to real people playing music on actual instruments? That it can't quite do, but then again, very few can.

I've always been into detail and subtleties in musical playback, along with textural information, accuracy and that old chestnut called "foot tapping musicality". This system offers all that and more, within its limits, of course. It moves along quite nicely in the direction my gear was always heading, as long as most of my listening was always in the more mellow acoustic area, which it isn't. So the Shindo amp and preamp could stay for sure, but I'd look for different speakers. I'm hearing good things about DeVore and will hopefully be able to cadge some time in front of a Shindo/DeVore system soon, just for interest's sake.

Conclusion

Which brings us to the end of the tale. This has to be one of the strangest reviews since our hapless caveman blogged about his time-displaced oxtail soup and coq au vin on a long forgotten rock-face using berry pigment and pastes. It's also far too long but it's been hard to precisely define this collection of audio gear. Cutting to the chase: I'm totally taken with the Shindo components; as enchanted as I hoped never to be. I'm also terrified to consider that these are the entry level to the Shindo Labs range.

There's a remarkable level of synergy here, but as good as the Living Voice speakers are (and they are very good indeed, within their limitations), I believe that it's Ken Shindo's magic that elevates them, along with the source to superior levels. Throw a much better source on the front and get the speakers you prefer, assuming you need more than the Avatar II's, and you'd be set for life. This is the kind of sound that has the owner occasionally staring between the speakers in bewildered amazement. If you own a stereo system costing this kind of money, or more for that matter, and you're not feeling like that on a regular basis, then you made a mistake and that's all there is to it.

Shindo Labs gear is craftsmanship the way it used to be, pure and simple, and that does something to the pride of ownership factor that few other audio brands can approach. I can think of no finer way to spend my audio dollars, and I'd urge anyone with the cash who deeply loves their music to at least audition Ken Shindo's components, if only to broaden their perspective – this is without doubt, where the heart of the music can be found. ASHLEY KRAMER

Living Voice – www.soultoleaudio.com

Shindo Labs and Auditorium 23 www.turned-onaudio.co.nz