

Audio Note Japan Kondo Overture

Aug 10, 2012
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Have you noticed how Japanese audiophiles (some of them) have the habit of closing their eyes and waving their hand with the music as if they were conducting the orchestra. I don't know exactly what that is about but I guess that's their way of internalizing music. The reason I'm telling this is that hand waiving was the first thing that popped into my mind while listening to Audio Note Japan's Kondo Overture integrated amplifier. It was that natural. More of that later.

Despite its 25000 euro price, the Overture is the cheapest what ANJ can offer for its fans. Overture ain't Ongaku. The chassis is made of aluminium instead of copper, and the Overture's OPTs are pure copper, not silver as in the Ongaku. The ANJ's own silver is treated with age annealing. Is their copper as well?

Here's what ANJ's Masaki Ashizawa told me:

"First of all, silver is a relatively soft material, which will "self anneal" with time, and too much additional annealing makes it "over" soft. This generates a lot of problems for the cable manufacturing process resulting in a lower audio performance. Simply put, using "age annealing" means to find the best balance point when applied to silver cables. Copper, on the other hand, delivers its best audio performance in its high purity form. Applying annealing will oxidize it easily, which eventually lowers its

purity. Therefore we did not apply any annealing to the copper used at the Overture transformers. But don't worry, winding skills is another very important factor in making transformers, and all transformers in Overture are skillfully hand-made by ANJ. This is at least as significant a feature than the wire material."



Overture ain't a Class A single-ended amplifier with a fancy triode tube as its bigger sister. Instead it's a common Class AB push-pull design with common EL-34 pentodes. What's the secret then?

Masaki Ashizawa: "That's what's audiophiles keep constantly asking. At CES 2011, visitors praised the sound of the Overture as silky smooth, elegant yet with very clean and good dynamics. They thought that the circuit must be either Triode or Single-Ended design. Once we told them that they were listening to an EL34 Push-Pull circuitry, they were amazed about the quality level that EL34 can deliver. It was at that point we knew that we had reached our goal."

"Overture outputs 32W+32W and the EL34 tubes are in ultra-linear connected. Using ultra-linear circuit is fine but honestly more important to the Overture's sound is our fine tunings, KONDO original parts as well as some new design features such as the Constant Current Biasing techniques. It prevents the music signal from passing through the biasing circuitry. With especially carefully adjusted circuits in addition to high quality parts used, only minimum level of feedbacks is needed. The global

feedback level is just 3 dB, partly explaining the high transparency and coherence obtained."



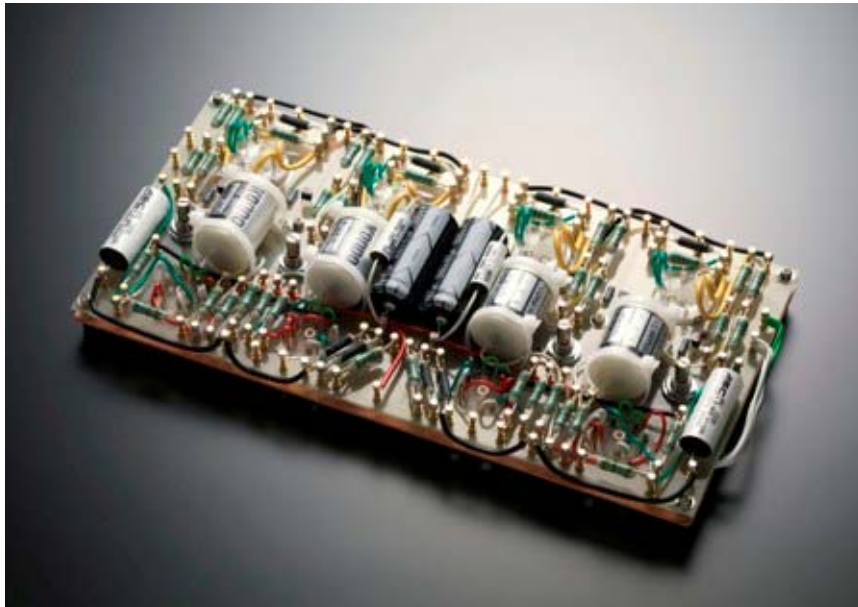
Consequently, the fact that the signal path features capacitors is not as important as exactly where the caps go in the driver and output stage. The caps are hand made using ANJ's own silver, and so is internal wiring. All in all, Overture is a heavy and broad-shouldered amplifier. The stripped front panel features the input selector and the volume. Four unbalanced inputs decorate the rear panel as do speaker outs for 4 and 8 ohm loads. Unlike in some other ANJ amplifiers the speaker terminals accept banana plugs. Here are some specs:

Specifications

Max. Output Power	32W
Frequency Response	6 - 140kHz (+0dB -3dB, 1W)
Total Harmonic Distortion	0.08% (1kHz, 1W)
Line Input	1, 2, 3, 4
Input Impedance	100k Ω
Noise	0.5mV
Vacuum Tubes	4 x EL34, 2 x 12BH7, 2 x 6072
Power Consumption	180W
Size	W438 x H201 x D409
Weight	20.5kg

Natural and intuitive listening

The output tubes in the review individual were the standard ElektroHarmonix. The 12BH7 at the input were R.A.M.-labeled (ie. a matched pair), and the other input tube was General Electrics 6072. With +90 dB sensitive speakers Overture run very quietly, surprisingly quietly in fact, no noise whatsoever, even from a close distance (from the speaker). I tried several speakers, monitors and floorstanders (eg. Dunlavy Athena). The CD player was a Sony connected to either Sentec DiaAna, LEAD Audio LA-100 DAC or PS Audio PWD DAC. All cables were provided by Audio Note Japan. Listening to the Overture didn't make my jaw drop immediately. It didn't make me jump up from my listening seat and shout out hurrays. But it did make me listen to my standard samples for a longer period of time that I'm used to. It kind of lead me slowly and inattentively to inhale music and urged me to continue to do so, even when it was clear what my judgment would be.



Indirect inducements and covert force of attraction became a sort of theme for my listening impressions. The true nature of the sound lay below the surface. An example. The first handshake with the Overture gave me an impression of being slightly sweet and slow and veiled. The 'weakness' was, however, confusing: against all odds, the Overture never asked to raise the volume level. And the best explanation is that all the important and essential things in music, including many low-level details, were nicely separated and served at lower volume levels. Another example. I tried to listen to music samples with plenty of high frequency content, hiss and chink of the cymbals etc., in order to get across the specific tone of the Overture. It was exceptionally difficult. I realized that hi-fi euphemisms regarding

a 'typical' transistor amp or a 'typical' tube amp didn't apply here. The tone wasn't this or that, it just was.



Hiroyasu Kondo liked speak about a "mechanical sound". A mechanical sound will dull the listener's senses during longer listening sessions. What ANJ is after is a "natural sound". I'm ashamed to say (because it sounds too poetic), but I think I understand him better now. Natural not in a sense of "one with the nature", but in the sense of "artless", "unstudied", "all-inclusive". When that artificial character is completely gone, the amplifier lets music speak. Such naturalness is deceptive because it comes close to being bland. And the Overture's voice is far from bland.

Taking lessons from the Overture

Without flattering or mysticism the Overture illustrated music from inside rather than from outside. The findings were revealed a disc after a disc and over a longer period of auditioning. The Swiss-French Ceccarelli Trio's jazz The Beatles arrangements turned out to be greater music than I expected. And a wholly new sonic discovery was the interplay between the pedal of the bass drum and the rest of the bass department.

The Fry Street Quartet's Stravinsky, Rorem, Scarce String Quartets: the Overture picked up the ways in which each musician weighed the dynamics. When the instruments stood out from each other, listening to this music did not become incomprehensible, non-specific audio spotting.



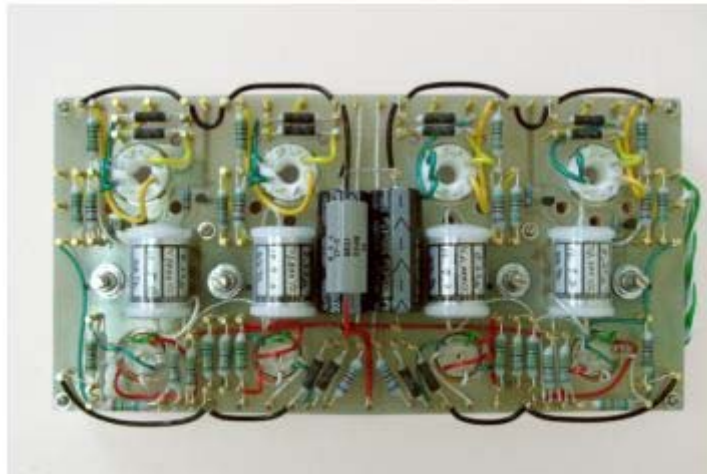
With Bach's Cantatas the Overture spotlighted the singer (Ian Bostridge) in relation to the orchestra (Europa Galante). What was truly impressive with this disc was the almost austere naturalness of music reproduction.

What the Overture's sound is not?

Overture does not sound big and roomy in a way some McIntosh integrated tube amps do, for instance. The Overture kept the sound within the speaker rectangle the precision side-wise being exemplary.

Overture is not a reproducer of high dynamics. Stormy and loud piano music as well as the sharpest outbursts of saxophones appeared a little soft. But be careful: here too the graduated and layered soundstage can fool you.

Overture's bass department sounded a little polite. The double bass in jazz music was not generally a problem but the very lowest bass notes were softer than expected. Lynyrd Skynyrd Guns, God and Cry rumble began to sound a little thin in climaxes with respect to the band's aesthetic goals. Everything is relative, however. Overture handled heavier orchestral pieces without stumbling.



And the Overture ain't Shindo in the delicacy department. The sound does not feature the same inner structure, the same tonal and temporal depth psychology. There's something great about the Overture's sound but it's not a SET kind of sound, and I think guys at ANJ know it having been exposed to Ongaku and other SETs. This is to say nothing about the betterness/worseness issue though; it's just different.

Speakers for the Overture

The rated 32W output power surely is sufficient for majority of loudspeaker. Yet I constantly felt that the Overture would perform optimally (unveil its most important qualities) when it doesn't have to work like a horse. Hence, sensitive, impedance friendly speakers. Tonally it would be important to find a loudspeaker - neutral or not - that would allow the Overture's natural sound to come into sight, well, naturally. No show speakers, please. And, of course, Overture deserves to have as high quality wide-bandwidth loudspeakers as possible. If one can afford to invest a nurse's basic annual salary to an amplifier, anything else would be sheer madness.

Kondo Audio Note Japan Overture, c. 25000 euro