

Note Perfect

David Price assembles an immaculately styled, super sounding style system based around Aura Note's striking Premier music centre and AudioSmile's excellent Kensai mini monitor loudspeakers...

Few hi-fi systems are designed from the ground up by a gifted industrial designer. That's why I was so interested to try the new Aura Note Premier, penned by the great Kenneth Grange. A founding partner in Pentagram, a famous design consultancy, his CV is impressive. Many of his designs are everyday household items, such as Kenwood food mixers, Wilkinson Sword razors, Kodak cameras and Anglepoise lamps. A couple of my favourites of his are the Parker 25 fountain pen and Ronson Quadrille cigarette lighter, both expressions of aesthetic modernism as pure as Concorde or the Lotus Esprit ever were for this seventies schoolboy! Grange's designs have won ten Design Council Awards, and he won the Gold Medal of the Chartered Society of Designers, and he's a member of the Royal Society of Arts' élite Faculty of 'Royal Designers for Industry'.

Whilst this is a most impressive career, the Aura Note Premier would never have been the basis of my system if it wasn't well engineered from a hi-fi point of view. Let's be honest here, both Patrick and Adam's systems are no sonic slouches. The good news is that the other parent responsible for this beautiful box is April Music, a company whose Stello range of separates has proved extremely capable. As such, the Aura Note comes with a sizeable custom made toroidal transformer, and selected components in the signal path, such as the Crystal Semiconductors CD3310 digital volume control IC and respected CS4398 24bit, 192kHz DAC. A 50W RMS per side MOSFET single-ended push-pull output stage with discrete amplification circuitry is used.

The unit itself consists of a top-loading CD player (complete with



magnetic puck and sliding glass cover), an amplifier featuring two analogue line level and one digital optical input, an iPod input (via a supplied cable attaching to the iPod's dock connector) and two USB inputs (the first for playing MP3 files from flash memory sticks, the second for attaching to PCs to play out music digitally) and plus a built-in (non RDS) FM/AM tuner. There's a preamp output for a subwoofer or external power amplifier, plus a 3.5mm mini-jack headphone output. The chrome finish of the casing is flawless, the chromed buttons feel great and the 'old school', seventies style red LED display is a joy.

Selecting partnering loudspeakers didn't require too much thought. Earlier testing had told me that it sports a very solid 50W per channel, which is just about enough for the excellent AudioSmile Kensai mini monitors. These £1,499 designs come in a tiny 150x250x200mm box, the hand-assembled cabinets made in the UK. The business end of the speaker is a small 12cm diameter surface treated magnesium cone bass/midrange unit, with solid copper phase plug, Faraday rings and a long throw (9mm) coil. Paired to this is another rare treat, an Isoplanar ribbon tweeter that boasts an effective area of two and a half times that of standard 25mm dome tweeters. This runs down to 2.2kHz, whereupon the mid/bass driver takes over; the crossover is hard-wired and uses poly film capacitors, low resistance inductors, and is covered with butyl rubber compound to reduce the effects of vibration.

The port is an aperiodically damped slot resonator, notable for

furnishing the Kensai with a bass that goes exceptionally low for the cabinet size.

SOUND QUALITY

It's a fine thing to have a superb sounding hi-fi, but the experience can be somewhat diluted when it takes over your living room and you have to step over yards of cabling and assorted power amplifiers and loudspeakers. Switch to a system like this, which does everything from a box little bigger than an old telephone answering machine, and you get a different kind of satisfaction, and that's before you even switch on! Maybe I am getting old, but there's something very agreeable about a small but beautiful looking hi-fi that doesn't just give you your room back but sounds far better than it's got a right to, too!

The usual lengthy running in process took place, and I also opted to use a Clearer Audio Copper Line Power Cable (£75 for 1m) for good measure, finding immediate benefits to the sound in terms of clarity and smoothness. The Aura Note also found itself sitting on a set of four Milty Foculpods (£19.95), which brought about a fuller bass and a more relaxed musical sound. Finally, Black Rhodium Tango loudspeaker cable (£15 per metre) did the honours feeding the AudioSmiles; I still think this cable is great value and cleaner and smoother than many I've heard at five times the price.

Firstly, a quick listen to the Aura Note Premier through my reference

Yamaha NS1000M loudspeakers; highly revealing and yet not famously kind to power amplifier output stages, they would immediately give me the measure of the Aura Note. Through a line input, it was obvious the amplifier section was of good quality. There's a decent amount of power, with a lively, tuneful bass, a wide and expansive midrange and a shiny, detailed treble. In a way, the sound reminded me of the Sugden Mystro [see p61] albeit on an obviously smaller scale. It was bouncy, musical and a lot of fun to listen to; dynamic contrasts were surprisingly vivid for such a modest machine, and the Aura Note just bounded along with the song like a puppy just set off the lead. Boz Scaggs' 'Lido Shuffle' from LP was rollickingly good fun.

More impressive still was the unit's own CD player, which worked with the amplifier section most synergistically. Fun Lovin' Criminals' 'Up on the Hill' was a treat, the system coming over as a very confident and punchy performer. It was particularly solid rhythmically too, having a sense of metronomic precision that I remember from testing the Stello CD-T100 CD transport. The song's baseline was firm and confidently articulated, the rhythmic delivery of the lyrics clear as day and the song's busy but subtle mix carried with alacrity. There was a lot of detail coming through, but it wasn't shouted at the listener. Indeed that's how I'd characterise the Aura Note; it's a powerful yet discreet performer, one that never forces itself on you but still has a tiger in its tank, so to speak.

Tonally it's richest and warmest on its CD source; FM radio was good, but not outstanding considering what the format is capable of. Spoken voices on Radio 4 were clean and nuanced without a trace of nasal coloration, but I found its bass a little light on Glen Campbell's 'Wichita Lineman' on Radio 2. Still, the tuner did give a very quiet, noise-free account of itself even with the supplied 'wet-string' aerial where many 'real hi-fi' tuners I've tried in the same way couldn't. AM radio wasn't bad, but I've yet to be impressed with any modern tuner package on this waveband. I wholeheartedly approved of the Stello's DAC section; via optical in from an old Sony CDP-911E (£300 machine in 1993), it provided a useful boost for this venerable machine. There was better definition to the sound, with more warmth and a softer and more silky treble. By contrast the Sony's own DAC sounded colder and more steely,

as well as being far more musically constrained. Thumbs up then for the digital input; it's a great feature and adds real flexibility.

Together with the AudioSmiles, the Aura Note made great music. Despite the diminutive proportions of the speakers, and their less than generous sensitivity, the system filled my largish listening room with relative ease. Even the floor-rattling 'Ready for the Weekend' by Calvin Harris didn't phase it, the Kensais showing little signs of compression (or indeed distress of any kind) at high levels, while the Aura Note just romped along with the song's squelchy baseline and rousing classic House-style choruses.

Those superb Isoplanar ribbon tweeters provided a great sense of space to better recorded source material, such as 4hero's 'Look Inside', along with a wonderfully smooth yet tonally accurate rendition of the song's superb violin accompaniment. Compared to my Yamaha NS1000M tweeters, I found there was still a slight lack of detail, but they more than made up for this with a creamy smoothness which really suited the Aura Note's crisp high frequency sound. I also loved the rhythmic integrity of the Kensais; unburdened with large cabinets to keep a grip on, the speakers disappear immediately into the room, whereupon they issue music into the ether with a wonderfully natural sense of timing. You find yourself tuning in to a song's vocal phrasing, enjoying the tremendous immediacy the Kensais afford.

Tonally the Kensais are very neutral, and the Aura Note is just a touch on the warm side, so the result is very pleasing. There's never a moment's harshness, yet the sound balance isn't so smooth that it's soporific. The loudspeakers' magnesium cones have a flavour of their own, but it suits the Isoplanar ribbon tweeters brilliantly, and the result is a very delicate, detailed, fast and open sound. In fact, the integration between the two drive units is superb, making them very easy to listen to for long periods, and a synergistic pairing with the Aura Note makes life even sweeter. Obviously, you shouldn't expect massive, wall shaking bass from this system, but conversely it's not as lightweight as you might think; I

found this combo more than able to fill a largish (by UK standards at least) listening room with highish levels of sound. Going back to my NS1000Ms (which have a larger midrange dome than the Kensais' mid/bass unit), and another octave or two of bass arrived, but I still found the Kensais hardly any less enjoyable to listen, which is high praise indeed.

CONCLUSION

If I could only have one hi-fi system in the world, the Aura Note Premier might well be it. I adore its simplicity of design, its superb ergonomics, fuss-free operation and fine sound quality. Taken in isolation, it's not the world's best sounding bit of kit, but as a package it is brilliant at the price. Together with the equally diminutive and ultra-capable Audiosmiles, and it's, ermmm, little audio dynamite!

An odd couple, admittedly, but like all great partnerships the strengths of one complement, not expose, the weaknesses of the other. Actually, neither the Aura Note Premier or the AudioSmile Kensais have anything much to be embarrassed about, but still they seem to flatter the other. In absolute terms the AudioSmile speakers are the better sounding devices, but they're so evenhanded and devoid of distortion that they'll still sing with less able ancillaries.

The Aura Note has nothing to apologise for sonically; it's a serious



hi-fi product alright, but just in a lovely box. You'll get better sound

from separates of the same price but only just, and miss the Aura Note's sublime styling and lovely finish every second of the day. So here it is, a small system sporting fine sound with a massive measure of style.

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Buying hi-fi is a highly personal thing, and this group test shows why. Give three different people the chance to put together a low-to-mid price system and you get three very different outcomes...

Naturally, no one here at *Hi-Fi World* raised an eyebrow when Patrick Cleasby came up with the Onkyo system, with the A-5VL amplifier at its heart. It's the latest in a long line of Class D integrations from the Japanese company, all of which sound rather better than you might expect. The A-5VL might be a cheap product, but is exceptionally well made at the price. The addition of a built-in DAC and HDMI connectivity in this latest model means that it will input Direct Stream Digital (DSD) directly in from the C-5VL SACD player, which is a great facility to have if you're an SACD fan.

The star attraction of the system is surely the Onkyo NS-D1 though, which takes the direct digital datastream of the iPod straight out to the A-5VL amplifier, bypassing the iPod's own unlovely internal DAC and analogue output stage. As anyone who's tried to use an iPod for hi-fi duties knows all too well, this can only be a good thing. It's a welcome newcomer to the market, the main disappointment being that it's a little more plasticky than we'd hoped. Coupled to the special Rockbox software [see p81] which lets the iPod run FLAC files (Apple only permit Apple Lossless on the iPod), this new iPod dock gives you the ability to pipe FLAC files straight off your iPod. This will really chime with many computer audiophiles, for whom FLAC is their favourite format.

Even with stock I6/44.1 via the C-5VL CD/SACD player, the Onkyo system is a very pleasant thing to listen to. It suits the lively, crisp nature of the Wharfedale Diamond 10.1 loudspeakers, giving a fast, punchy sound that's surprisingly large in scale. There's oodles of detail bursting out of the Wharfedales, although they can be a tad brightly lit so it's worth spending some time getting the matching interconnects and speaker cables right. Properly fettled, there's not much that can come close to this system at the price.

Just as PC was always going to end up immersed in hi res digital, iPods, HDMI cables and the like, so it was a foregone conclusion that Adam Smith was going to submit a vinyl-based system. Actually the Rega P3-24/AT-OC9, StageLine/Naim 5i and Guru QM10s are all products we've

reviewed before in this magazine, but never in this combination...

Here we have the *doyen* of the nineteen eighties British belt drive scene, the classic Rega Planar 3 (sorry, 'P3'). I'd venture that a good many readers of this magazine 'cut their hi-fi teeth' with this very turntable (myself included). The most recent incarnation, the P3-24, with offboard power supply, ramps the price up a bit but really pushes it forward. Most pleasing is the Rega's easy musicality; never one to smash you in the face, it has a lovely smooth warm tonality, but this is deceptive as it actually pulls out a huge amount of information from the groove. The arm is excellent, easily good enough to track the Audio Technica AT-OC9MLII moving coil cartridge, and the latter's spicy musical nature peps up the Rega, making for a synergistic combination.

Speaking of which, the Naim Nait 5i is a cracking partner to the Guru QM10s. The two get on famously, giving a wonderfully fast and vivid sound that's brimming with rhythm and bristling with detail. The Naim is an excellent integrated at the price; it covers its tracks brilliantly as you never get the feeling you're listening to a cost-cut budget amp. It has a lot of charm, and is beautifully built. You could certainly say the former about the Guru QM10 loudspeakers; they're characterful in the way the eighties-tastic Epos ES14s were, or the Monitor Audio R352s. They're unashamedly about making the music fun, focusing in on the emotion of a

All is not lost for yours truly however, because the little AuraNote Premier turned in a performance that belied my expectations. Don't judge a book by its cover, or the sound of this little unit by its gorgeous exterior. It's obviously a 'style system', but its beauty doesn't come at the expense of the quality of the electronics within. Rather like classic Bang and Olufsen's high end products of the nineteen sixties, seventies and eighties, it is designed to be effortless to use and yet there is real 'engineering depth' beneath the skin.

The AudioSmile Kensai loudspeakers continue to amaze me; speakers are a very personal thing but these completely float my boat. The brilliance of that isoplanar ribbon tweeter (and it's not just great because it's a ribbon, it is also a great ribbon as ribbon tweeters go), marries up beautifully to a very fast, grippy and yet smooth sounding mid/bass. For me personally, I'd rather have one of the best tweeters in the business in my speaker and forsake an octave (or two) of bass, than have a powerful bass response and a cloudy midband and treble.

Together, the AuraNote and AudioSmiles turn in a totally believable sound; music is fast, open and entertaining yet seriously subtle and sophisticated. I was not expecting the system to be as effortlessly loud as it turned out to be, as it was able to fill up even my very decent sized listening room with sweet, smooth, spacious sound. In fact, thanks to those superb ribbons, the sound was

"they're all so different, yet share a common bond of being well matched systems made of high quality separates. Each one is a winner..."

piece of music, but they don't pay too much attention to tonal or timbral accuracy. I've heard hundreds of speakers which are very neutral but dull as ditch water to listen to and to live with. The Gurus are a riot, kind of like a little sports car you just want to jump into and drive for the hell of it. On the end of Adam's system they're dynamite. I have to say, grudgingly, this was by far the most musical of the three systems here, so Mr Smith, take a bow!

almost ethereal.

Overall, each one of these systems has an awful lot going for it. The Onkyo is punchy and fun yet decently smooth, the Rega/Naim/Guru is riotously rousing in musical terms and the AuraNote/AudioSmile is sweet yet sophisticated. They're all so different, yet share a common bond of being well matched systems made of high quality separates. Different strokes for different folks, but each one of them a winner.

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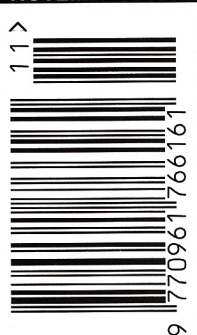


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