

image hifi 4/2000: x-perience (English translation)

Audio Note System Zero

System price: 12,000 DM

by Cai Brockmann

The debate continues on today: does the number zero belong to the natural numbers? Natural or not, it can be stated with certainty that Audio Note's Zero Series, launched in 1999, eases entry into the world of vacuum tubes (/valves).

Pure luxury, thy name is Audio Note. The people at Audio Note are steadfast advocates of tubes, and among their product offerings are inconspicuous amplifiers which contain more pure silver than all the jewelry of Queen Mum at a gala dinner. For 600,000 DM they're yours. Also available, at approximately the price of a brand new compact car, are pickup cartridges. Or speaker cables or D/A converters as expensive as a BMW Z3 sports car. And in addition to all this, Peter Qvortrup, the president of Audio Note, cultivates his passions: gigantic collections of tubes, components and LPs, each good enough to drive any connoisseur to tears. The uninitiated might get the impression that Audio Note is reserved exclusively for the solvent upper class.

But that is decidedly not what Peter Qvortrup has in mind. The restless Dane from Brighton, England, is one of those obstinate people in the hifi business who can easily provoke the anger of more complacent competitors with his sharp edges. Qvortrup hates the obsequious mainstream and loves to ask unpopular questions. He doesn't take anything for granted without checking it out himself first. And he always wants to have his way. It is not surprising that he has developed a definite, perhaps healthy, arrogance, and he has made more than just friends. And he couldn't care less about journalists, in particular those from the hifi trade press.

I like people like Peter Qvortrup.

And I like Audio Note.

In the early nineties, when my long repressed enthusiasm for tubes finally broke free and a plethora of tube amplifiers was competing for my favour, a quite inexpensive Audio Note control/power-amplifier combo spoke directly to my musical heart. For a long time all other candidates were left behind, pale and boring in comparison. But what does "quite inexpensive" mean in this context? Well, bearing in mind Audio Note's extensive line of high end equipment, less than 10,000 DM for a control/power-amp combo can be considered a bargain.

And bargains sell well, in some cases so well that manufacturers often begin to strip down profitable low budget series until they turn into cheap "volume ware," ruining once prestigious names. By then, of course, it's too late.

Peter Qvortrup, of course, is aware of this. This is the reason that Audio Note has taken plenty of time to expand its product range downward. Internal criteria are rigid. For many years, a scale of "Levels," clearly defined by Qvortrup himself, has been in use. The Levels are a price-performance schedule for developing, evaluating and combining each Audio Note component. Until 1999, Level One had represented Audio Note's basic system: gear with a well developed layout but equipped with rather unspectacular parts. And still, as ever, the Audio Note connoisseur can achieve top performance with components from Level Five, where pure silver and super-duper special parts abound.

Interestingly, this level system also features negative numbers. But take note: Levels Minus One and Minus Two are strictly reserved for solid state components. Even people who don't like tubes have to grin at this audacity. In the world of Audio Note tubes rule - always and everywhere!

The Zero Series' debut, at the High End '99 in Neu Isenburg near Frankfurt, didn't alter much. Level Zero still means tube equipment - with one exception. The CD transport works without a bulb. The output stage of the indispensable D/A converter, undoubtedly the part which is vital for sound quality in this price range, underscores the importance of the tube.

The D/A converter sports the robust and durable dual triode type 6111WA, a miniaturized tube developed in 1951 to function at least 100,000 hours without failure and - if placed correctly - to generate the desired tube timbre. Because of its size and technical data, the extra small 6111WA, which doesn't require a socket, may have a long career in Audio Note's Zero Series.

The 6111WA is featured on three different Zero Series components: on the D/A converter, the phono preamplifier and the line preamp. In all three you'll find a 6111WA right on the main board, the long wires cut and soldered directly onto the board. I could go on for pages about sophisticated circuitry layout and component selection. I could ask my colleague Roland Kraft for further advice, continue on about fancy and refined details... but I won't!

There is simply not enough space for that. After all, this Zero system consists of eight components - or rather nine, if one takes into account the alternative, brand new, remote controlled preamplifier. And there could easily be several more, because Audio Note offers a full range program including record players, in-house designed cables and millions of components. As I mentioned before, there is a huge catalog - so we'll have to content ourselves with the least expensive offering from the world of Audio Note, the entry system.

The Zeros look smart - at least the electronics do. Modern but not stylish. Charming at first sight in their lovely silver compactness. Made in the Far East - the price, my friends, the price! - they promise solidity: aluminum diecast cases and massive faces which, on request and for a little extra, are also available in black.

Knobs and buttons are rather sparse, which enhances the elegant and pleasing appearance. I find the CD transport particularly sharp. It displays as many knobs on front as the mono power amps, namely none.

"Help," I hear you cry! You whose remote controls fail late at night or who lose them regularly in the creases of your sofas. Please don't panic: two buttons on the back of the transport control basic functions (drawer open/close, play/pause). This very cool solution makes the Sony-based transport convenient for everyday use.

The DAC-Zero is even simpler than its data supplier. It has neither displays, knobs nor a remote control, but instead features an up-to-date 24bit/96kilohertz delta-sigma D/A converter. And of course the 6111WA mini tube in the output stage.

The T-Zero, on the other hand, proudly displays buttons and a full size display -understandable features considering that it is a tuner which must be able to seek and store radio stations on FM, AM and long wave without remote control. In its output stage, a ECC83 dual triode tube ensures good sound quality.

Just as new as the tuner is the M-Zero-RIAA phone preamp. This latest component is optimized for MM pickups, whose signals it amplifies and of course passively equalizes with the help of two dual triodes - 6111WA and 6112WA (NOS Sylvania).

The whole system is controlled by the M-Zero-Line. Five line level inputs, including tape loops, should suffice for most applications. Two pairs of RCA jacks at the output stage encourage easy bi-amping and are served - of course - by a 6111WA. Audio Note Level fans will be pleased that the M-Zero is equipped with Level One components.

Even newer than the brand new tuner and RIAA is the preamplifier's fraternal twin, a comfortable alternative to the M-Zero-Line. It turns out to be equipped not only with remote control, electronic source switch, motorized potentiometer and the suffix "Remote Control", but also with some amusing prototype casework. It reads "M-One" instead of "M-Zero" and "valume" instead of "volume," oversights which I find charming. I almost failed to note these fun faux pas on the prototype because all of my attention was fixed on the remote control features and LEDs.

In contrast, the P-Zero mono power amplifiers convey seriousness. In a slightly deeper but also enclosed case, ECL82 tubes glow in AB operation, delivering clean eight watts via golden terminals on the back. That should be sufficient to drive the Danish-built Absolute Zero II - the fourth premiere within the Zero series - reasonably well. The appearance of these floor speakers, however, is definitely sober, and a glance at the back, which is only 85 percent covered, leads us to suspect a mistake. But this is not the case. The seemingly short wooden boards are not a mistake but actually serve as the port for a "quasi quarterwave rear loaded horn," as Audio Note calls it. The advantages of this uncommon bass tuning are as follows: the agile papercone woofer gets unspoiled support; the speaker offers an efficiency of true 93 dB; and the Absolute Zero II can be positioned either free standing or against a wall. The only disadvantage: because of the huge bass port, the frequency response in lower regions drops abruptly. But it seems much more important to me that each pair is carefully tuned to its partner and has to stand up to the specifications of Audio Note's in-house reference.

Strong words - but I've experienced the effects with my own eyes and ears, first at the Audio Note facilities in Brighton and a few weeks later in our new image hifi studio.

My colleague Udo Ratai and I were fascinated immediately by the Absolute Zero II speakers - okay, I admit, by the whole system. It's true that to initialize the CD transport we have to switch it on and off two or three times before the DAC finds the correct data base, but we are used to that from computer programs, and so we keep our cool.

Somehow the whole Zero system seems to radiate a certain relaxed mood. As soon as you know - and have accepted - what Audio Note's smallest system cannot deliver, life becomes easy.

So it's best to say goodbye to the idea of having wild parties with the Audio Note Zeros. It just wouldn't work - the system is simply not made for this - and that's okay! The attraction of this system lies not in its ability to play rough, but rather in its light-footed yet convincing musical performance. And this applies also to degrees of volume far beyond the acceptable neighbourly noise level. So can you have parties? Yes - but no wild ones.

Frankly, the owner's choice of music will probably be influenced by the same refined taste that leads him or her to select the Zero system. Of course I don't intend to discuss personal preferences in music. By no means! But I do predict that the Zero's delicate musical performance will inevitably have a similar impact on personal music selection. As I am experimenting with the tuner I happen to stumble across a fantastically produced radio play (on public radio, of course). I stay with it through the usually boring closing sequence because the tuner's smooth and strong sound quality doesn't create artificial masking, but instead seems very live. Then an LP of Ella Fitzgerald in her golden years turns on the platter; after enjoying the deep colours of her voice, my vinyl collection is checked for similar highlights. You will come across almost forgotten albums with the sudden wish to listen to them again. In my CDT-Zero spin splendid pop, rock, baroque, blues, rap and hiphop pieces, as well as works from other eras. And classical opuses. And big band jazz -- not in full glory, but as close as it gets. And by the way: it gets extremely close and sounds excellent.

You have surely noticed that the Zero set puts me in a great mood and sends good vibrations to its listeners. It also embodies fundamental qualities found in any truly capable system: it increases the appetite for more music, stimulates the senses, and delivers clarity in rhythm and melody.

Even Ulrich Michalik, who enters the room to a rocking beat and remains seated longer than intended, testifies to the absence of any dullness in system and speakers. He would have liked to get more lower bass - at the time of this review he allows a highly explosive 200,000-DM-system to shake the foundations of his house - but he finds everything else in order. My colleague Uto Ratai and I think so as well.

For a few seconds there is disbelief written in UM's face as I reveal some of the system's data: 1) it is fully tubed, 2) it has just eight friendly watts p/c, and 3) it costs only 12,000 marks. Yessir, the whole thing. The system consists of CD transport, D/A converter, external phono stage, tuner, control

amplifier and power amplifiers. Two of them. And it includes the speakers. A pure CD based Zero system would be only 8800 DM... UM gives me a surprised look.

Now it's Udo Ratai's turn to ask questions. What would the speakers alone cost, etc. What? Only 1800 DM? Fabulous! By the way, we both prefer the speakers positioned openly in the room. Then their marvelously leisurely, colourful and detailed performance is even more open, relaxed and free, an altogether stunning experience with acoustic music of every kind. We are just about to agree that we don't care about the missing lowest octave because the most important part of the sound is in the fascinating speed and the correct acoustic size of instruments, when the Klais organ of the St. Hedwigs Cathedral in Berlin grips us with substantial pedal tones - obviously the bass requires only a quality recording to drive this Zero thing right. And it still cannot hide Peter Qvortrup's preference for classical music. I'm convinced of this when I look at the percentage of this genre amongst my daily growing pile of LPs and CDs.

Indeed it affords great pleasure when an orchestra reaches a forte passage and the Zeros allow the orchestra to vibrate with sheer intensity. Not with subsonic force, but in a rather delicate way, always presented with captivating smoothness, verve, élan and a spatial easiness which, especially at its price range, is extraordinary. Perhaps it's a side effect of the huge bass port on the back of the speakers, but it's a pleasing one. I find it suitable and recommendable.

In conclusion I'd like to make a comment regarding cables. Those who wish to can easily spend a lot more money on Audio Note's cables than on the entire Zero system. One can certainly note the sound quality difference when compared with Audio Note's good basic cable, and it is comparable to a upgrade in hardware, but the price difference is so drastic that it almost hurts. In this case it is a good thing to have Audio Note's Level scale at your service to help keep your feet on the ground.

Audio Note's Zero gems are fun anyway. Lots of fun even! From now on I can recommend a fully tubed system which is both attractive and musically authentic, and is offered at an economy price that will smooth out any frowns.

It appears, dear lay mathematicians and philosophers, as if the number zero is a "natural" number after all - at least in the world of true-to-nature music reproduction. And that's a fact for tube newcomers as well as for all other prospective connoisseurs.