

AGENDALIFESTYLE

Sounding out a hi-fi work of art

Jonathan Midgley liked his new music system so much he bought into the business. Fionnuala McHugh talks to him

DESIGN

There is a tiny factory down a tiny lane in Tokyo where a designer called Hiroyasu Condo and his five assistants assemble, by hand, what some people say are the world's finest music systems. The company is called Audio Note and the cheapest Condo-made system starts at about \$250,000 and goes up to \$2 million.

The metallic innards – the wiring and crossovers and capacitors – are all made of silver because Mr Condo was once a metallurgist and decided that silver was the best medium through which pure sound could be transferred from a recording into the air.

You might say that Audio Note is the Ferrari of the hi-fi world except that some Ferraris are cheaper – and owners of Audio Note systems consider themselves proprietors of a work of art, not a piece of hi-fi.

If you want to buy a Condo-made Audio Note in Hong Kong you have to go to a lawyer. His name is Jonathan Midgley and most of the time, he's in court defending criminals. When he isn't, he loves listening to music.

He calculates that he has probably been exposed to thousands of pieces of sound equipment in his life, searching for elusive auditory perfection. A couple of years ago, he spent a large whack of money on installing a huge American sound system at home.

"But it didn't sound really good," he says. "And I kept on hearing about Audio Note which was so underground it was like a myth. People would say to me: 'If you really like the music, not the equipment, you've got to hear Audio Note.'"

Shortly after his mega-purchase, he went to Melbourne on a business trip, idly looked up Audio Note in the telephone directory, found a listing and went for a listen. And that was that.

When he returned to Hong Kong, he rang a distributor in England and said that he wanted to buy Audio Note for the bedroom.

"I told him that I'd just bought a system made by another brand and the distributor laughed. He said: 'OK, you buy the bedroom system and I guarantee you'll throw out the other system within a month.' I threw it out within a week."

About a decade ago, Mr Condo was approached by a man who offered to do his marketing and to manufacture the system under licence in England, as a result it is possible to buy a cheaper version there.

It looks different but the quality is good and Mr Midgley equates that offshoot with Mercedes or BMW recognising the need to have a lower-end product as well as the top-of-the-range vehicle.

Mr Midgley was the first person in Hong Kong to own the Japanese-made Audio Note. And, as in all the best consumer stories, he liked the company so much that when it approached him, he decided he had to be its representative in Hong Kong.

"I'm a happy amateur, I'm not an expert, and I do it in the way other lawyers play golf or race motorcars," he explains. "It's not about lunatics sitting around in front of the speakers. It's nothing to do with isolated, sad pastimes. It's in the living room. It's part of our lives. And it's not hi-fi – hi-fi is equipment that tries to produce, and often succeeds, such high fidelity that the distributor says: 'Listen to that sound staging, that imaging, that tight bass.' But those are not criteria normally applied to live music. That's not what you say when you come out of a concert."

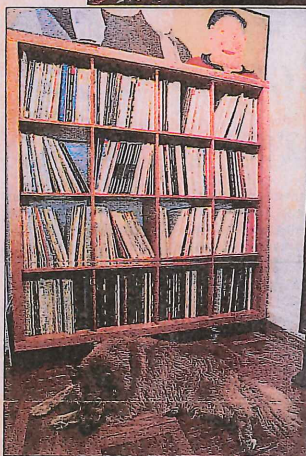
So the low-key sell often goes like this: friends, and friends of friends who might be interested in coming to the Mid-Levels flat Mr Midgley shares with his wife, photographer Charis Mundy, for dinner. And they listen to music.

"It's a crusade, it's not a sales pitch. It's like a society. The people who buy may not be interested in equipment but they say: 'I like music, I like it sounding good.' I don't want to sound pretentious but it's a form of art. It's audio art – we collect art and it's the same sort of concept whether it be hanging on the wall or hanging in the air."

If someone expresses an interest, Mr Midgley happily lends out



AUDIO ART: Jonathan Midgley with his Japanese-made Audio Note music system. Inset, his extensive LP collection



equipment, "as long as they don't look criminally minded", he adds (and he should know). He once lent a prospective client some highly expensive gizmos for four months and

was becoming slightly nervous; then the man rang to buy three because his friends loved the sound so much.

"The trick is getting people to hear it. Normally people who hear it buy it because a much more subtle and gentle thing is entering their lives." It takes a little while before converts receive their aural reward, however. On average, if you placed an order today, Mr Midgley would ring Mr Condo in Tokyo and you'd probably take delivery of your own Audio Note in about three months' time.

"[Mr] Condo has dedicated his whole life to this. He is Audio

Note. He's the son of a Buddhist monk, he's in his 50s, he's diabetic... When he goes to that great orchestra in the sky, people are going to have the equivalent of a Picasso in their homes. It's an investment in enhancing their lifestyle. The music takes over and no other equipment I've ever owned or heard has left me with that feeling before."

Mr Midgley owns 3,000 LPs and about 500 CDs ("CDs are like frozen peas, very convenient, and LPs are like peas from the pod, more work but they taste better") and he has wide-ranging musical tastes.

His favourite piece is Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto of which he owns seven different recordings, his current favourite being David Oistrakh and the Philadelphia Orchestra. His music system makes it possible to hear subtle variations of pitch and tone which might otherwise be blurred.

"And it's not just classical music. If it's rock music you should be able to hear the difference in timbre between the young Bob Dylan and the older."

This year, he has two Audio Note treats in store: Mr Condo has promised to name his new speaker

after Ruth, Mr Midgley's dog, and there will also be a bonding weekend for Audio Note's Hong Kong fans at the base of Mount Fuji in a house specially rented by Mr Condo. "First of all, we'll look around the factory and that'll take about three minutes," laughs Mr Midgley.

"Then we'll have beautifully served tea and biscuits – it's very ethereal. It's all about art and sociability and that's what I find pleasing and exciting. Otherwise I'd just stick to defending people in court."

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