



# Audio that sounds like a million bucks

By Desiree Au

**D**EFENCE lawyer Jonathan Midgley gets enough drama out of his job, so when it comes to his retreat in Mid-Levels, simplicity and subtlety suits him best.

"I work very intensely, and I don't want to bring any of that home," Mr Midgley said, petting his Chow mix, Ruth. "Here, I keep my stress level low by reading and listening to music. I prefer a very simple lifestyle."

Mr Midgley certainly toils hard for the bucks, so it isn't surprising that when it comes to spending it on his passions, money is no object.

In a spacious sitting room sparsely fitted with plain white sofas and a couple of antique chests sits an enormous centrepiece of pure audio heaven. Mr Midgley walks over and puts on a classical record and a wave of delight runs over his face.

"Listen," he said. "Feel how the music reaches every corner of the room." "Oh, I can't stand how people say you have to position yourself at a certain place near the speakers, that's nonsense."

The flowing music is courtesy of Mr Midgley's ultra expensive and rare audio system from a tiny manufacturer called Audio Note in Tokyo. The costs of this kind of setup can easily run in the excess of a Mercedes. But to those who know, an Audio Note system offers the same ecstatic feeling as driving a vintage Aston Martin.

In fact, Mr Midgley is so proud of his find that he has taken up the local distributorship of Audio Note.

"Making music sound large and life-

like is very difficult," he said. "So often people get listening fatigue because the sounds hurt their ears."

Those who blast their boom boxes or rack systems should take note. "I have tried many systems in my life, I went through the recommendations of audio magazines but they frustrate me because every month they say I should buy something else," he said. "In fact, I thought perhaps a piano will never sound like a piano through a speaker."

That theory was proven wrong when a kind salesman whispered about Audio Note to him. Mr Midgley was seeking his ultimate system after throwing out his last set-up, which incidentally already cost him an arm and a leg. "I was in Australia shopping, and this salesperson told me if I was really serious I should check out Audio Note."

He did, and the rest is history. Mr Midgley spoke with the owner, an eccentric gent by the name of Mr Kondo. It took about eight weeks for the system to arrive because Mr Kondo only has five workers. It is a single-ended triode system (which doesn't mean a thing to a novice). Most of its internal wiring is silver because apparently, it transmits music better than any other material. Mr Midgley's system cost him about \$650,000. But the sky's the limit to serious audiophiles.

Most commercial brands are just transistor systems; the sounds are electronically processed. With Audio Note, it is transmitted through a vacuum tube.

"The sounds are not processed," Mr Midgley enthused. "You are hearing music as you would in a concert hall - there is a sense of rhythm and tone."

Now Audio Note definitely demands an acquired taste. The appearance is

bland, there are very few knobs to play with, and virtually nothing to adjust.

"People want lots of gadgets to play with and they want something glossy to show off," he quipped. "Those who love (another brand) are those who like microwave foods, I love Audio Note, and I prefer my food organically grown."

Mr Midgley admits it is hard not to sound arrogant about his musical tastes, but he feels expensive things are so abundant it is hard to define what art is any more."

Audio Note is definitely art; it is made for a person whose only pursuit in life is to make good music," he said. "I would even say it is an heirloom." Audio Note has a strong following, surprisingly, in countries like Hungary and Russia. "People there are used to listening to music in concert halls, it is that rich art culture that makes them appreciate such a system."

Mr Midgley himself prefers putting on the sounds of Tchaikovsky or Miles Davis. "If you only listen to Kenny G, get something else," he said.

So far, he has found plenty who identify with him in Hong Kong. Midgley is no aggressive salesman, and people usually hear of him through friends. Often, he will invite people over to hear it for themselves, and once they have experienced Audio Note, they are immediately sold. "This is really becoming a hobby-business," he mused.

However, there are some perks in carrying out this side business. Mr Midgley is anxiously awaiting the arrival of two brand-new speakers, called the Ruthy Speakers. Made with Cherry wood, Mr Midgley said Mr Kondo named them after Ruth, his dog, because Mr Kondo also loves dogs.

"They will be originals."

