

Shindo Laboratories Sinhonia F2a Tube Monoblocks

Reviewer: Jules Coleman

Source: Well Tempered Classic w. Roksan Shiraz; Audiomeca Obsession transport connected to Audio Logic 24 MXL tube DAC via Stealth Varidig cable; *Combak Reimyo CDP 777* [in for review]; *Well Tempered Reference* [in for review]

Preamp/Integrated: JJ-Tesla 243; Shindo Monbrison

Amp: Mark Pearson EL-34 monos; *Combak Reimyo 300B* [in for review]

Speakers: Duevel Bella Luna Diamante; Wilson Audio Sophia

Cables: Stealth; P.S.C.; Audience Au24

Powerline conditioning: BPT BP-3.5 Signature and Blue Circle Music Ring 1200

Stand: *HRS MR1 rack* [in for review]

Sundry accessories: Harmonix feet, Black Diamond Racing cones, Vibrapods

Room size: 30' x18' x9'

Review component retail: \$17,800

Ken Shindo began designing preamplifiers and amplifiers as DIY projects in the 1970s. By the end of that decade, several of his designs were well known and highly respected. In 1977, he began manufacturing in earnest, establishing Shindo Laboratory dedicated to the design and manufacture of world-class audio components. One of his first Shindo Lab branded products appeared in 1979. It was an amplifier based on the original Western Electric 300B output tube and the precursor of what would become Shindo's most popular current design - the W.E.300B Ltd [below]. Now twenty five years later, the House of Shindo has become synonymous with distinctive, state-of-the-art audio equipment. Among high-end DIY hobbyists, Shindo himself has attained legendary status for the creativity and imagination of his designs while, both in Japan and abroad, he remains respected and admired by his peers for the exquisite execution of his designs and especially the musical values embodied in each of the products bearing his name.

Nor is Shindo Laboratory short on product. Indeed, it is a veritable full-function, one-stop, state-of-the-art audio manufacturer. Shindo designs and manufactures a full range of preamplifiers and amplifiers, speakers -- including the extraordinary Latour field coil (sneak peek at the only one currently in the U.S. to follow) -- turntables (a modern version of the legendary Garrard 301 including a modified Ortofon arm and a retooled SPU cartridge), as well as cables and interconnects. Shindo Laboratory has its heart in analogue playback. Judging from the lineup of extraordinary preamplifiers which includes the Monbrison I recently reviewed -- all but one of which feature phono stages, many of which also built-in step-up transformers adequate to drive low output moving coils like the Ortofon SPU -- Shindo is not embarrassed to wear its heart on its sleeve. Rather, Shindo Laboratory proudly embraces its link to the grand tradition of great tube designs. Indeed, the chassis design of the Sinhonia F2a monoblock amplifier that has graced my reference system for the past several months -- and is likely do so for years to come -- recalls the Marantz 2 amplifier of yore. Further paying homage to its roots, the Sinhonia, like other Shindo products, is painted the ubiquitous Altec green though the Sinhonia is a somewhat lighter, almost faded shade of green than the Monbrison.



Unembarrassed by tradition and heritage, Shindo is even less likely to jettison successful tested designs in favor of the latest flavor of the month. The Sinhonia F2a has been in continuous production since 1985. 1985! That makes this amplifier design nearly twenty years old. According to their website, it is also the amplifier Shindo employs in "his lounge". Though designed twenty years ago and having undergone only minor modifications since, the Sinhonia F2a exhibits none of the so-called classic tube sound. There is nothing rounded, romantic or sluggish about it. And that pleasant tube roll-off at the frequency extremes? *No chance*. The Sinhonia has an openness, clarity, transparency and extension that is absolutely bracing. Once you hear it, you cannot help but wonder how those hearing it for the first time in the mid '80s must have been taken aback by its presentation. The Sinhonia is a remarkable amplifier; so much so that its retail price of \$17,800 makes it, by my reckoning, a bargain of extraordinary proportions. If its 40 watts/channel aren't enough to drive your dynamic speakers, sell the speakers and buy something suitable.

Design and Meaning

The great Japanese designers are not, how shall I put it, into size. The glorious Kondo Neuro amplifier has a relatively small footprint as does the quite captivating Combak Reimyo 300B amplifier currently in for review. The same is true of all the Shindo electronics I've had in-house or have seen or heard elsewhere. The aesthetic is simple, functional, honest and personal. The design reflects not only what the equipment does and how it does it, but also who the designer is and what is important to him. And so while functional and simple, each design aesthetic conveys a deeply personal meaning. In Shindo's case, that meaning is expressed in the historical references -- references both subtle and intentional -- of Ken's designs. If you know tube gear and its history, you are drawn to the way in which the Sinhonia references the Marantz 2 chassis. You either get this reference or you don't. If you get it, a smile comes over your face and you are even more excited by the prospect of listening to the amplifier. If you don't get the reference, no problem. The aesthetic will be perfectly acceptable in any case. I got the reference and loved the look largely because of it.

Each Sinhonia monoblock measures 14.95" x 6.3" x 8.6" WxHxD and weighs in at 40 lb. The layout is straightforward. All the tubes, inputs and speaker connections are exposed along the front edge of the amplifier chassis. The power and potted output transformer are encased at the rear under the Altec green metalwork, shifting more than half of the amplifier's weight to the back. The only part of the chassis not Altec green is the silver top front plate. Let's take a tour. Looking left to right, the extreme front-left cylindrical capacitor and large rectangular NOS oil can capacitor behind it both feed the power supply. Next is the NOS ECL82/6BM8 triode/pentode input/driver tube which uses the adjacent interstage transformer under its small grey hood to split phase and drive the F2a output tubes. In front of the input/driver tube are two RCA inputs for preamplifier matching, with the first specified at 50k ohm input impedance, the second at 100k. (I experimented with both inputs in conjunction with the Monbrison preamplifier and detected no discernible difference in performance. With Shindo's output transformer-coupled preamps, the 50k Ohm input may provide a better match.) To the right of the RCA input sockets is a small attenuator control for adjusting inter-channel balance. This knob is not intended to control gain or absolute volume, something which is to be done at the preamplifier. The amplifiers sound their best with this trim attenuator fully open or bypassed. If required, output balancing is accomplished by backing off one or the other amplifier level control. To the right of said level control is the green light bulb that indicates power status - though the tubes lighting up is a pretty good indicator as well. Behind this bulb sit the Siemens F2a output tetrodes in push/pull configuration. To the back and between them resides a 2A slow-blow fuse. To the right of the power indicator -- and for shortest signal path, directly in front of the output tubes -- sits the barrier strip for speaker cable connections. Taps for 4, 8 and 16 ohm speakers are provided. Two NOS 6AU4GTA damper diode valves for power regulation then nestle to the right of the output tubes, in the amp under review sourced from GE. Behind these tubes exits the captured two-prong power cord. Between them and the barrier strip, the power mains toggle demurely awaits flicking by the expectant listener. The Sinhonia is configured for pure Class A operation and the manufacturer reports its output at 40 watts per amp.

Now for a little explanation

The layout makes perfect sense but not every stop along the tour will mark familiar territory (interstage transformer, F2a output tubes), and some of it may seem altogether puzzling to the modern mind (barrier strips and captured power cords). Let's delve a little deeper then, beginning with the interstage transformer. Properly executed, an interstage transformer allows almost perfect phase splitting across the entire frequency spectrum. In addition, transformers are ratio devices that we can employ to ratio up or down. What we want here is a super low impedance to drive the output tubes in a linear fashion. The interstage transformer used in the Sinhonia lowers the driver stage's output impedance as to better drive the output pentodes. Granted, transformers diminish gain but given the Sinhonia's ample gain from the 6BM8, this reduction in power output is entirely unproblematic. The F2a is a pentode or tetrode (depending on how one draws the distinction) produced exclusively by Siemens in Germany for professional applications. It is best known as the output tube in some of the most famous of Siemens' Klangfilm amplifiers. Klangfilm means "sound of cinema" or, in modern speak, movies with sound.



These amplifiers were employed for theater use and, especially by the Japanese vintage gear cognoscenti, are currently much sought after. Among the most highly prized Klangfilm amplifiers are the KL-203 and 204 models, both of which used either the F2a or F2a11 tube, albeit in single-ended configuration, thus producing about 7 watts. Shindo Laboratory uses the F2a in two of its amplifier models, one single-ended (the Cortese), one push/pull (the Sinhonia). The Cortese produces ten watts and was in fact the first Shindo amplifier I listened to extensively. In the Sinhonia, the F2a produces not only a natural sound but much of the magic of a properly implemented SET design, along with the power and grip of a great pentode amplifier.

While the F2a tube is rarely found in commercial designs, supply is ample. This is no "Trivista", "Nuvista" or "Buena vista" deal. Tube life for an F2a is an estimated 10,000 hours and given the Sinhonia's circuit, including soft start and stop, the tubes should last a lifetime. Should your tubes fail by chance, fear not - Shindo has an adequate supply in stock. What's more, these tubes are also available through the usual channels. But what about those barrier strips and the captured power cord? I have mixed feelings about the captured power cords but the barrier strip in fact is a sonically superior way of connecting speaker cables to amplifiers. With a bit of work, most spade lugs can be made to fit. Tinned bare wire works of course, but banana plugs are a no-no - as are those really thick lugs of questionable sonic merit. All Shindo amps employ barrier strips. Those on the Sinhonia are conveniently located but the fit between the 4, 8 and 16 ohm taps is tight so I recommend 4mm lugs. I was able to use the stock spades of my reference Stealth hybrid MLT which are a soft silver and relatively compliant. Though sonically advantageous, there is no denying that barrier strips can be inconvenient. I cannot unequivocally claim that they are worth the work. They did not present a serious problem for me but you may find them less endearing.

One way of distinguishing between Shindo's newer and older products is by the presence of a captured power cord. The Monbrison preamplifier is of recent vintage and fitted with an IEC; the Sinhonia has been in production for nearly 20 years and is fitted with a captured cord. Captured or not, all Shindo-supplied power cords are of the two-prong variety. Some care must be given to insure that the amp is plugged into its power source with correct electrical phase. The difference in performance is noticeable and easy to detect, experimentation child's play because both blades are identically sized. Since the Sinhonia cords are captured, I could not test the amplifiers' performance with my usual array of aftermarket cords. Of all the power cords I was able to try with the Monbrison, only the superb Harmonix Studio Master made a discernible sonic improvement. The stock cords are that good. Still, all things considered, I would prefer a detachable cord. After all, like all other Shindo products, every tube as well as every resistor and capacitor is ear-chosen by Ken Shindo himself. The inveterate tweeker may insist on some room for (foul?) play.

Into the system she goes

By the time the Sinhonia F2a arrived, the Shindo Monbrison preamplifier had dislodged the competition to become the permanent nerve center of my playback system. Sources included the Audio Logic 24MXL for digital and the Well-Tempered Classic/Roksan Shiraz combo for analogue. Speakers included the Duevel Bella Luna Diamante and Wilson Sophia. All cabling was by Stealth and power conditioning through Blue Circle's Music Ring. After-market power cords were a mixture of Harmonix Studio Master, van den Hul Mainstream and Stealth. The Sinhonias replaced my Mark Pearson-built amp using the Mullard EL-34 double getters and Cr Development Artemis Golds featuring the ubiquitous 6C33B Russian triode. I had bid adieu to all the solid state amps in house and was once again all glass. It was obvious from the outset that the Sinhonia monoblock was infinitely more resolving than any amplifier I had on hand and the equal of any I have heard anywhere, at any time. With the Monbrison/ Sinhonia combination in place, I was hearing as deeply into the system I had constructed as into the music that was being reproduced through it.



I didn't have to listen too deeply, however, to determine that the system had lost its balance. Consciously or not, I had built my reference system to showcase the Mullard-based amplifier's virtues while compensating for its shortcomings. Mullards have good weighty bass and a glorious midrange for a pentode, but the amp itself -- as I now recognized -- is a tad on the dark side. Adding the Monbrison preamplifier to the mix had increased resolution, transparency and nuance, but the overwhelming character of the system remained largely determined by the amplifier's sonic signature. Together with the very natural and relaxed Duevel Bella Luna, I had created a system of good resolution, with a natural and warm tonality, one that was friendly to an extraordinary range of recordings and types of music - involving, satisfying and easy on the ears.

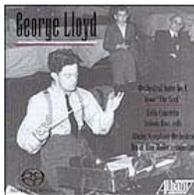
I had obviously compensated for the relative darkness of the sound in a variety of ways, something that was made abundantly clear by the Sinhonias' impact on the system. The next couple of weeks were devoted to locating the sources of the imbalance. I switched cables and cords; tried different tuning devices; spun lots of vinyl and aluminum. In time, it was clear that something was amiss with the sources. My previous transport was the major culprit. It spotlighted the presence region and was prone towards a brittle presentation. At the same time, I had unwittingly set the VTA in order to add a leading edge that was somewhat blunted by my amplifier's rounded sound.

With the Sinhonia in place, these features of the earlier playback setup were no longer compensations but distractions. I replaced the transport and adjusted the VTA. By the time I had fixed both problems, I had also inserted one meter of PSC interconnect between the Audio Logic DAC and Monbrison preamp, and had substituted for my reference Stealth a 10' pair of Audience Au24 speaker cable between the Sinhonia and both the Duevels and Wilson Sophias. With balance -- albeit a very different one -- restored, I settled in for a period of serious listening. I did so expecting glorious sound and the enjoyment of one of life's simplest and greatest pleasures: Music. I got that and more, much more in fact -- a voyage to the frontiers of music reproduction without precedent in my thirty years as an audiophile. I was about to embark on a journey that would ultimately force me to reassess what is possible in audio playback and to revise the standards by which I take the measure of audio equipment.

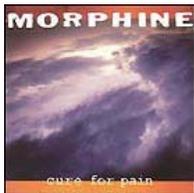
Conventional beginnings

I wasn't expecting an epiphany -- who is? -- and thus went about my reviewing the usual way. I began by choosing the Wilson Sophia for the bulk of my critical listening. The Wilson is more full-range, resolving and dynamic than the Bella Luna if less fun. I was keen to learn as much as I could about the Sinhonia and the Sophia seemed more suitable for the task. Wilson touts the idea that you can drive the Sophia with any number of inexpensive integrateds and there is no doubt that you can make music doing so - some of it satisfying. These folks know how to market their product, and I, for one, admire them for it. By reducing your initial amplifier and front-end investments, their aim is to get you into a Wilson-based system at a reasonable price.

The conventional way of approaching the relationship between an amplifier and a speaker is to ask whether the amplifier is a good match for the speaker; and an answer to that question usually involves determining whether the amplifier can drive the speaker. I didn't end up adopting the conventional view but I began that way. And so the first order of business was to determine whether the Sinhonia was up to the task. The Sophia is a well-balanced speaker. While it does not plumb the depths as the System 7 does and is a less dynamic design overall, it is nevertheless a very dynamic loudspeaker capable of producing substantial bass. And with its challenging impedance curve and nominal 4 ohm load, it is not the sort of speaker that represents an optimal match for your typical 40-watt tube amp. But then again, the Sinhonia is no typical tube amp.



It was immediately apparent that the Sinhonia is fully extended in the bass. There was no softening or loss of control in the bottom octaves, and bass was rendered with speed, proper pitch and a weighty authority that was both palpable and honest to the recording. The string and body of Anthony Ross' cello on George Lloyd's brilliant and beautifully performed *Cello Concerto* [Troy 458 with the Albany Symphony Orchestra] were reproduced with a transient attack and weight that contributed to the haunting beauty of the piece. When called for, the Sinhonia delivered the macro dynamics that Wilson loudspeakers are known for. This was apparent on everything from "Buena" on Morphine's knockout *Cure for Pain* [Ryodisk 1026] to the ripping live rendition of "Third Avenue" on Clifford Jordan Big Band's *Play What You Feel* [Mapleshade 03232]. Alan Hovhaness' majestic and powerful "Symphony No. 50 - Mount St. Helens - Opus 360" which appears on his *Symphony No. 22 and 50* [Delos 3137] is an awesome full-scale orchestral onslaught that the Sinhonia/Wilson combination portrayed with a visceral impact that shook the walls of my listening room and unsettled the furnishings. At the same time, the Sinhonia's way with dynamics meant as much to the midrange presentation as to the midbass. This was evidenced by their ability to readily convey the dynamic swings, twists and turns of Brad Meldhau's piano on his trio's 2001 release, *Art of the Trio: Volume 5: Progression* [Warner Bros. 48005].

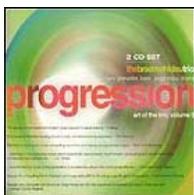


Where necessary and appropriate, macro and micro dynamics both were displayed with power and finesse. Even more importantly, the Sinhonia exhibited the same dynamic coherence and consistency throughout the frequency range that I had previously detected in the Monbrison preamplifier - indeed, a dynamic coherence that appears to be a signature feature of all the Shindo electronics with which I have had experience thus far. But then again, it was not the dynamics of the Sinhonia that caught my attention; it was its resolution and refinement. Ultimately, it was the Sinhonia's way with music -- better, its ability to get out of music's way -- that won my attention and affection.

I was unprepared for just how much out of the way a properly constructed audio system needs to and can be. Beyond natural and consistent dynamics throughout the frequency range, the key to a component's ability to disappear from the chain depends on its resolution, refinement and transparency - and all this to an extent I had not previously realized.

Resolution & musicality

Audiophiles are often divided into two groups: Those who prefer an analytic sound and those who prefer a musical one. An analytic sound comes across as hard, cold, hyper-detailed. The prevailing view is that those who prefer an analytic presentation value detail for its own sake. For these "lost souls", the outstanding virtue of an audio playback system is its capacity to resolve details. In contrast, a musical sound is said to be easy on the ears, relaxed, warm, robust, rich and comforting.



One of my closest audiophile friends insists on this distinction. He has often been overheard recounting with all due sincerity his history as a well-heeled audiophile. In the '80s, he'd pursued the path of detail & resolution, but sometime in the '90s he came to his senses, found his way and has been pursuing a path of musicality over high resolution ever since. He is just one of the many who have come to think of those who prefer a ""musical" sound as music lovers. It leaves others who are drawn to high resolution systems as misguided souls. According to this world view, they'd rather analyze than enjoy the music and hence must be written off as folks who have sadly lost or missed the point of an audio playback system. I don't buy it. However familiar and seductive the alleged distinction between musicality and high resolution may be -- and however often perfectly intelligent and well-meaning audiophiles insist upon it -- the distinction is not merely without content or merit, its persistence is both misleading and dangerous.

The resolution of detail is one thing; the tonality of presentation another. A highly resolving system can be rich, full-bodied, fully developed, warm and relaxed. Indeed, audio reproduction must be both highly resolving and tonally correct if it is to be musical. In my view, the inability of a component to resolve fine detail is the single greatest limiting factor of its ability to play music. There simply is no music without high resolution. Notes have a leading edge, a body and a natural decay. While notes do make up music, they cannot be interpreted as such if they are inadequately resolved. If the leading edge is inadequately resolved, it appears as blunted or rounded and musical dynamics suffer accordingly - there is no sense of transient attack. If the body of a note is inadequately resolved -- if its harmonic structure is not fleshed out or unraveled -- the sound comes across as either fat, undifferentiated, syrupy and oversaturated or as harmonically bleached and thin. There are many more ways of getting this wrong than right. This is not to gainsay that some ways of failing are more desirable and easier on the ears than others. Of course there are more or less satisfying ways of falling short of an ideal. Most of us probably prefer a warm and sweet sound to a thin and edgy one. But at the end of the day, the ear identifies all shortcomings as failings, the mind grows unwilling to accept them and the heart refuses to embrace them.

If there is no denying then that accurate musical playback requires high resolution, why do so many audiophiles insist on contrasting high resolution systems with musical ones? Part of the answer may be that they confuse high resolution with an analytic sound. This identification is entirely unwarranted, however. An analytical presentation highlights the leading edge of notes at the expense of their body and natural decay. But the leading edge unaccompanied by the rest of the note represents the very absence of resolution, not the paradigm of it. The notes are being indicated by their leading edge, they are not being resolved. The same can be said of music playback systems that portray sharply etched images in space. Again, these are often described as high resolution but are anything but - they fail to resolve the space between the musicians. They represent playback as separate and distinct parts when in fact the essence of a musical performance is its continuity. There is air and space between performers on a stage or in a studio. Sharply etched images create the sense of several musicians playing at the same time, but not as a group playing together. The latter is central to the very idea of music - and a highly resolving though not analytical system will portray it as such.



In saying that the Sinhonia F2a amplifier is both as musical and as highly resolving an amplifier as I have heard long-term, I mean to convey just this: It differentiates the notes from one another by marking the leading edge; it completes the notes by unraveling their harmonic structure and lets you follow their decay into the air and space of the recording. And it does this not as some technical exercise to be admired from a distance, but as an emotional experience that will not merely involve or engage you but -- if you are open to it -- in fact transport you. In a small but not insignificant way, you will emerge from every listening session with the Sinhonia a changed person.

Only the beginning

Halfway through the review process, the Combak/Harmonix Reimyo CD player replaced the Audiomeca/Audio Logic combination. Not long after that, the new Well-Tempered Reference replaced my Well-Tempered Classic. The Roksan Shiraz stayed. Fellow moonie Les Turoci borrowed my Audience speaker cables and I returned the Stealth hybrid MLT to the system.

However good the Audio Logic DAC is, there's no comparing it to the Reimyo. In fact, there may be no comparing anything to the Reimyo. And when it comes to the Well Tempered Reference, the thought that comes to mind is this: Open up an audio dictionary, look up the term analogue sound. You should find a picture of the Well-Tempered Reference accompanying it. Both the Reimyo and the Well-Tempered present music as three-dimensional, layered, relaxed and natural. The Reimyo in particular is transparent in ways that the Well-Tempered cannot match.

Perhaps no analogue setup can match the Reimyo for its transparency, the blackness of its background. Whatever their differences, both sources make music and brought new levels of transparency and resolution to the system. Just as some loudspeakers appear to have a nearly insatiable appetite for power or current -- think Magneplanar or Soundlab -- the Sinhonia F2a appears to have an unquenchable thirst for high resolution components upstream. The better the source was at sorting the musical from the non-musical details, the happier the Sinhonia was at presenting the musical message in a rich tonal palette to the speaker. To its credit, the Wilson Sophia was up to the challenge.



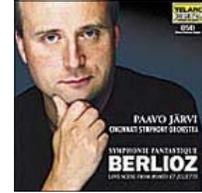
Much the same was happening to me. With the Sinhonia amplifier in the chain, I wanted ever purer and resolving components upstream. I did not want to hear a CD source that shelved down high frequency information, or one that fattened the midbass in order to present a warm, pleasing experience from RedBook. Nor did I want a turntable/cartridge combination that, at the expense of truncated frequency extremes, focused on getting the midrange right. I wanted components that worked to turn the signal into music while appearing to be doing no more than getting out of the way. I was asking a lot I know but had a right to. The Sinhonia removed all fears that something would go wrong between source and sound. To be fair, my confidence was as much a consequence of the Monbrison being in the chain as it was a result of the Sinhonia F2a.

To my ears, the Monbrison has an uncanny capacity to sort the musical from the non-musical details to present the amps with a dynamic and tonal coherence. It was left to the Sinhonia to take what the Monbrison had passed along and add the power and finesse, the energy and the life that translates a mere electrical signal into music. And this the Sinhonia did with a clarity, transparency, simplicity, honesty, refinement and depth that make it a genuinely great amplifier. But there was more to Sinhonia and I was beginning to sense that the most apt way of characterizing its way with music might well be immediate. In this regard, I was reminded of my experiences with some of the very best single-ended triode designs. No offense intended, but the truth remains that most reviewers in the American press have as little understanding of single-ended-triode amplifiers (or experience with them) as they have of genuine horn loudspeakers. If you read *Stereophile* long enough, you may come to believe that the renaissance in single-ended designs began with the Cary 805 amplifier a decade or so ago. Indeed, *Stereophile* heralds the 805 as one of the most important products in the 40 years since the publication's inception. Tell that to Jean Hiraga, Kondo-San, Shindo-San and a half-dozen other designers who will be remembered long after Dennis Had has been forgotten. Once again, the good folks at *Stereophile* have confused "news to them" with news per se. These same folks tell you that horns honk - though no well-designed hornspeaker in the last fifteen years with which I am familiar honks. This is not to say hornspeakers are colorless - but then again do you know any speaker that is entirely free of colorations?

If you believe them, you'll be convinced that 300B tubes are fat, lush and romantic; that amplifiers designed around the tube invariably sacrifice extension at both ends of the frequency range in favor of a glorious if somewhat fat mid-range. This may be true of the 300B amps they listen to - but the fact is that a good 300B tube amp can be extended and detailed. I've heard 300B tube amps that are downright lean-sounding compared to, say, a host of Mosfet designs. And if you are looking for dark, I can point you to more than a few well-known solid-state as well as tube amplifiers. And these are the same folks who will tell you that SETs are all about a romantic sound that is satisfying yet untrue to the music. In fact, the best single-ended triode designs are invariably immediate. It's the immediacy of the experience that grounds the romance, the love affair with triodes - not some slobbering fat wet kiss. The romance is based on the immediate connection to the music. What could be more true to the music than this immediacy?

The Sinhonia F2a amplifier is as immediate as any SET amplifier I have heard, with the possible exception of the Audio Note Kondo Neiro, itself a parallel single-ended 2A3 amplifier. On the other hand, the Sinhonia is absolutely dead quiet, something that is more difficult for a single-ended triode amp to achieve. This quiet translates into a dark background from which the music emerges; not just a dark background but one that recedes so far into the stage that the music is rendered with a depth of field and layering that creates the sense that one can penetrate the soundstage into infinity. There is a difference between depth of soundstage conveyed and ability to see deeply into the soundstage however deep it may be. Soundstage depth is a function of the recording and especially speaker placement in the room. The capacity to see into the soundstage, front to back as discernible yet coherently connected layers, is the essence of transparency. The Sinhonia is not merely transparent; it educates you about the meaning and value of transparency. This level of transparency, darkness and resolution creates an immediacy that is at times eerie in its capacity not merely to draw you into the music but to place you within it. It is the difference between viewing the music as a performance and being engulfed by it.

I was able to experience the special engagement with the music which this level of transparency was able to provide often - especially through the Reimyo, and especially on large classical pieces, including Paavo Jarvi's gorgeous reading of Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique* with the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra [Telarc 60578, hybrid SACD] and the xrcd recording of Ravel's *Daphne and Chloe* performed by the Boston Symphony Orchestra under the direction of Charles Munch [JVCXR -0222-2]. When you think immediacy, think single-ended but think Sinhonia as well. When you think resolution and incisiveness, think Sinhonia. When you think power, control and ease, think Sinhonia. When you think music, think Sinhonia. This, in any case, is how I was beginning to think. But there was more to come.



Life's an education

Soon after I had restored balance to my system and inserted the Reimyo as a source, I knew that I would purchase the Sinhonias. It did not take long to recognize that the Sinhonia was a special amplifier but it took much longer to "get it". I was obviously getting something as I found myself longing to put more and more highly resolving pieces in front of it. I was certain that the value of the Sinhonia could not be reduced to a laundry list -- however long -- of its musical and audiophile attributes; equally certain that its relative value could not be determined by the fact that it had more of these virtues than did other amplifiers in my experience (which, while not complete by any means, is reasonably extensive - certainly among tube amplifiers). And while I was drawn to the fact that the Sinhonia connected the dots and knotted these myriad musical and audiophile attributes together in a coherent whole, this too is not what was uniquely valuable and important. I couldn't quite put my finger on it.

Then two things happened. First, Serguei Timachev of Stealth Cable sent me a prototype of a new interconnect that he deemed just about ready for prime time: The Indra. When I visited Serguei last summer, he talked about a new "amorphous" cable in the works which, he assured me, would change the way people thought about interconnects. I had no idea how close to production Serguei was and so the memory of the day slipped. Then, as if out of the blue, one Indra appeared at my doorstep; and a week and special pleading later, another one. I placed the first Indra from the Reimyo to Monbrison, the second between Monbrison and Sinhonias. When I first met Serguei, he told me that his aspiration was to produce a cable that really did sound like nothing at all and that he had not yet done so. His not immodest view was that he had designed several cables that sounded quite good, and some which more or less disappeared - but none yet that had no sound at all. He suggested that all credible cable designers have a similar ambition. And again, to his ears anyway, no one had really succeeded. I don't know yet if the Indra cracks the code, but I can say this: With the Indra in the system, there was in fact even less system to hear.

Then a couple of weeks ago, Mike Latvis of Harmonic Resolution Systems came to my home to install the brand-new HRS M1R equipment rack. I had reviewed the HRS MR3 isolation base before. I had met Mike at CES and even though said review had not as yet published, he asked if I would like to pen the premiere review of his rack system. Judging by the incredible reception his isolation bases and racks received among manufacturers at the show, I was more than a little pleased to accept the assignment. It was midday on a Sunday when the rack was in place and my wife returned home from the gym - she'd had the good sense to stay away during setup. She walked into the listening room and stopped in her tracks as we were at the time playing Jan Garbarek's "Wichi-Tai-To" from the eponymous ECM album, incidentally one of her favorite pieces. I won't say her jaw dropped - she's too refined for that. She stood, however, as though frozen in place. After introductions were made, Mike asked her what she heard and whether she liked it. She said one word only in answer to the first question: Purity. Her answer to the second question came much later in the day when she offered to purchase the rack as an anniversary gift for me. When I told her the price, she suggested taking me to dinner in New York instead.

I won't say more about the rack now except this. There were four guests at my house that day, including two dealers and one importer, all of whom at dinner later were wondering how they could purchase one. Here's my sneak preview on the rack: Start saving your pennies now. I am. With the Indra and M1R rack in the system, all the pieces of my puzzle were finally in place: Purity - the absence of a mechanical/electrical system. I finally got it. The Sinhonia is ultimately about creating music by getting entirely out of its way. Not only does the Sinhonia lead you to look for sources and a preamplifier that can resolve musical detail and in doing so disappear from the chain, it demands of you that you find a speaker that equally gets the hell out of the way. Once pure music gets this far along, the last thing in the world you want is a speaker that acts as a barrier or roadblock. In approaching amplifiers before, I had focused on whether they constituted a good match for a speaker. There is nothing wrong with this approach. It makes perfect sense. You have a single-ended amplifier, you want a speaker that is a good match for it. You buy an amplifier, you want to know if it will drive your speaker. You buy a speaker like the fabulous Soundlab Ultimate and naturally need to know what kind of amp will work well with it. Your tweeter is extended, you want an amp that is extended but not edgy. You have a speaker with a complex crossover to correct for a million break-up modes in its Kevlar driver, well you better get yourself an amp that can drive that crossover without exhausting itself. And so on. Fellow moonie Les Turoczi and I were in NYC recently touring various audio emporiums. We stopped by In *Living Stereo* and met up with John DeVore, the designer of the very well-reviewed Gibbon 8 and the brand new and quite excellent Silverback Reference.

Les owns a pair of Gibbon 8s and was anxious to meet John. We met up and the good folks at the shop were kind enough to set up a demo for Les, John and me, of the Gibbon 8 driven by Shindo gear including the Sinhonia F2a. Les couldn't believe his ears. To be honest, I don't think John did either. I am not sure he knew how much potential his speaker had - how much music was available in that little Gibbon 8 of his. Les walked out of the store with me as we headed over to High Water Sound to check out the world of Kondo and Horning. He turned to me and said something to the effect of "my God". If the sound of the Sinhonia paired with the Gibbon 8 was something of a surprise, then, let me tell you, the times I have heard the amp matched with John's new Silverback were something to behold. There is no denying that it makes perfect sense to view an amplifier as essential to driving a loudspeaker. I would never for a second suggest that this is not an absolutely appropriate way to think about the Sinhonia as well. Indeed, whereas all the preamplifiers in the Shindo line speak with the same voice differing only in levels of refinement, resolution and relative dynamics, the amplifiers are more closely attuned to system matching and listener preference. They share the House Sound and they share a range of musical values and virtues, albeit expressed somewhat differently in each amplifier. And this makes sense since the amplifiers are based on different output tubes and differ in their output power.



Apparently, the W.E 300B Ltd. Is the amplifier of choice in Europe and Japan where it is often paired with full-range Lowther, PHY, AER, Repts and Fostex drivers in a variety of horn enclosures, as well as with older Tannoy dual-concentric designs. The Sinhonia is likely to have a bigger impact in the U.S. market because it is a stellar match for dynamic loudspeakers as diverse as Wilson. Duevel and DeVore. And where the commercial hornspeaker of choice is the Avantgarde, it's a design that to my ears requires much more power to sing than many of its owners provide it with. So much for the conventional matching of amps with speakers. I stopped thinking about the Sinhonia in this way soon after the Indra and the HRS rack were in place. It is all about system disappearance, not amplifier matching or tonal flavoring. The Sinhonia owns this level of transparency and immediacy essential to the music but also demands it of the components feeding it. This level of transparency and immediacy paints a full picture using the rich tonal palette at its disposal. At the same time, it is capable of portraying wide dynamic swings and contrasts, from the majesty of an orchestra to the whisper of a sigh. It is not an amplifier in the market to find a loudspeaker it can drive. It isn't looking for something to control; nor is it looking for a speaker to balance its virtues with.

It is looking for a speaker that will simply get the hell out of its way. By this I don't mean a speaker that disappears as the apparent source of music; I mean a speaker that disappears as a roadblock or impediment to the music. With the Sinhonia in my system, I heard speakers as potential roadblocks to sound, not as transducers. The Sinhonia conveys one clear message: Remove all impediments to the music. There are many great matches for the Sinhonia but there are likely very few speakers that will get out of its way. I may well have found one that does just that. I'll let you know in the not too distant future. In the meantime, find yourself a pair of Sinhonia F2as to listen to. They will change your view about what's possible in music reproduction in the home. I am quite sure U.S. importer Jonathan Halpern will help you locate a pair. If not, drop me an email. You can always come listen to the pair at my home. They're going to be here for a long while!

Jules Coleman, *6moons.com*, April 2004

