

Creative Imagination

Somewhat restless is how I get whenever a product from Kazuo Kiuchi enters my home; such unrest being due to the prospect of listening to music in a better and more exhilarating way. This genius from Japan derives great pleasure from breaching the bounds of the conventional to create the truly exceptional.

How do the more creative and successful think? What inspired Claudio Monteverdi to compose the first opera with his *L'Orfeo*, or Steve Jobs to take the ailing Apple corporation to the pinnacle of the business world with a series of extraordinary and highly popular products? Or how was it that the Serbian performance artist Marina Abramović almost single-handedly led her form of art to earn prominence and respect? And although a rung or two lower on the ladder of familiarity, but in my eyes still way up there from today's perspective, what drove the young researcher Koichiro Akimoto to rattle the scene by brazenly disregarding the acknowledged rules governing tonearms in order to develop his remarkable ViV Rigid Float? One answer can be found in the last question: Disregarding established rules is a requirement for bringing novel ideas to the world. Staying within our own realm, you can see that anyone who sits before such a Rigid Float arm and only compares the standard measurements of angles and percentages will simply miss the essence of the matter, to include



360° view available at image-hifi.com

the fact that the human auditory system can react more sensitively to a constant change in angles and the much greater skating force exerted on the needle holder in tonearms of conventional design, than to a somewhat greater geometric deviation involving what is an overall smoother and more undisturbed movement of the needle in the groove.

Just as it is clear to all of us that mankind is facing great upheavals, it is equally clear that we must question outmoded structures and ways of thinking, and open ourselves to that which is new. And just as a Monteverdi, a Jobs, an Abramović, and even an Akimoto did, so too does Kazuo Kiuchi, who has since become one of the most important researchers within that wondrous realm of the cultural technology of musical reproduction. Mr. Kiuchi's products are more often than not a source of amazement, whether it's those small Harmonix room tuning discs that vastly improved my listening room (his latest version of these recently delivered impressive results within this publisher's own listening room), or tuning bases no larger than a cent piece that aided the venerable Martin Logan CLS IIs to a much-improved bass, or the RF-999 spike bases which elevated the Jadis JD1 MK II CD transport to a fresh level of sound. This is why I was not all that surprised when, while visiting this esteemed fan of vacuum tubes and his local Germany partner, Virgil Warren, at this year's HIGH END show, the two

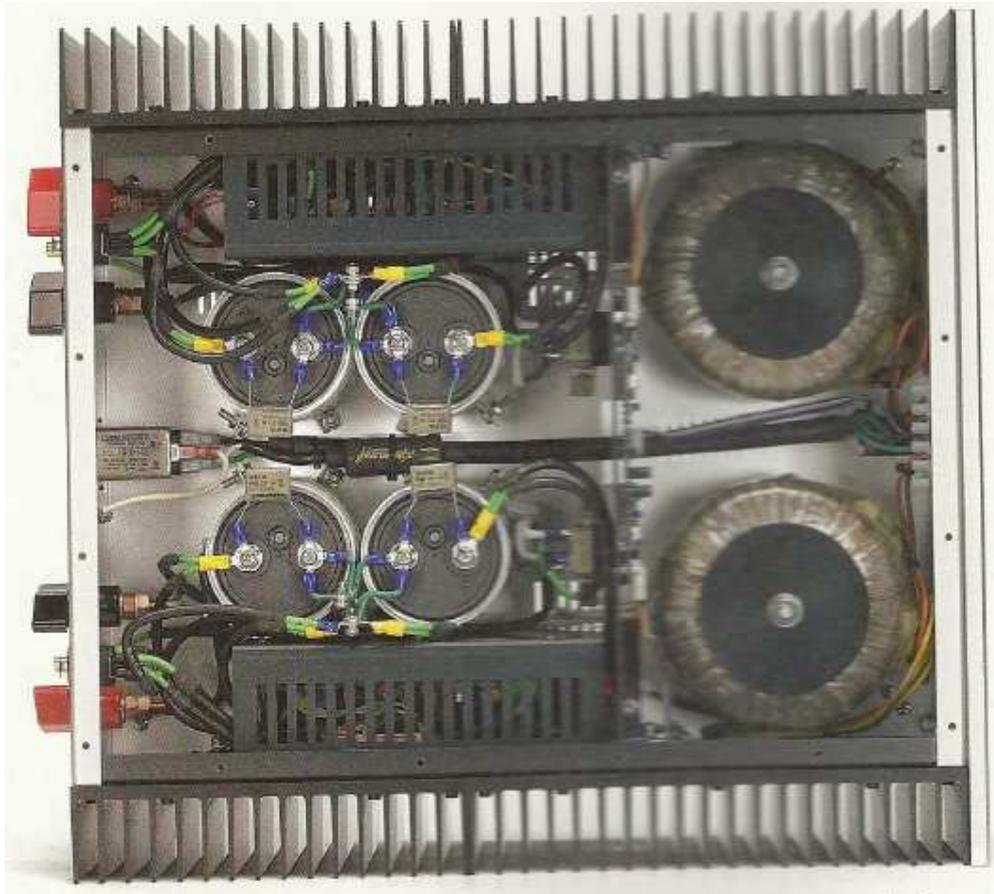
were demonstrating a new solid-state power amplifier instead of that immaculate PAT-777 300B tube amplifier.

To be sure, I was curious about this new KAP-777, but not *that* curious. It was clear that Kiuchi-san would be able to draw from it enough power to allow his Bravo speakers to finally accommodate larger rooms and spaces, and there was no doubt whatsoever in my mind that this Japanese gentleman with his incorruptible ears would manage to create nothing less than a remarkably good transistor amplifier. On the one hand, it seems to me that there are any numbers of outstanding power amplifiers on the market, which, in my view, do not fall within that more problematic category of devices, such as loudspeakers, preamps or digital equipment. Do we really need another high-performance solid-state power amp? On the other hand, all of the transistor amplifiers I had recently listened to were so hard put to

The Accompaniment

Turntable: Nottingham Deco, Brinkmann LaGrange 2 arms with tube power source **Tonearms:** ViV Rigid Float 7 and 9, Nottingham Anna II, Brinkmann 12.1, Thales **Cartridges:** Kondo I0-M, Transfiguration Orpheus L, Brinkmann EMT ti
Transformer: Kondo KSL-SF-Z **CD Transport:** Jadis JD1 Pro MkII **D/A Converter:** Jadis JS1 MkIII **Tuner:** Marantz 10B
Preamplifiers: Kondo KSL-M7 and M77 **Power Amplifiers:** Jadis JA 80 (2010), Gryphon REF One Mono **Speakers:** Gryphon Atlantis, Living Voice OBX-RW **Cables:** Kondo KSL-Vz, KSL-LP, KSL-SPz, KSL-Spc Signature + KSL-ACc/Furutech E50(R) + KSL-ACz/Furutech E50, Acoustic System Liveline LS + NF, Hovland MG-2, Harmonix Golden Performance, Adagio Audio Digital Reference, Aural Symphonics Magic Gem v2t
Accessories: Hensler Cablewave NL-7 + NP-1000, Magnan Signature power bar, Vibex, Audioplan Powerstar, Antispikes, Acoustic System resonators, Shakti Hallograph, Harmonix RFA-78i, RF-999 MT, TU-220 MT, TU-210 ZX, MY-TU-201, and RF-900 tuning spike bases, Shakti Stones, HRS base, Black Forest SoundBoards, Sound Bridges, Audio Magic Delta, Salamander Design shelves, Shun Mook valve resonators, Mpingo Discs, L'Art du Son

Preamplifier and Power Amplifier Reimyo CAT-777 MK II and KAP-777



Acting alone: The entire visible effort serves only one purpose - to provide ideal working conditions for a single MOSFET transistor per channel

compete against my enormous Gryphon Ref One Class A from the 1990s, that I really wanted to dedicate myself primarily to those products which promise more excitement.

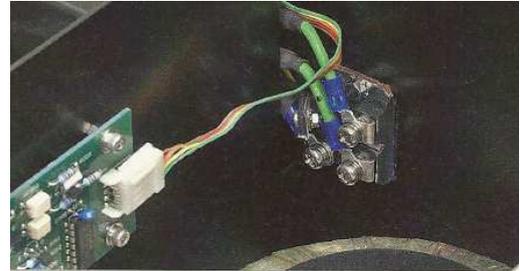
I was familiar with Mr. Kiuchi's abilities and should really have known better. After all, the KAP-777 stood not only next to the JA 80 tube monoblocks from Jadis, but atop the Harmonix TU-505EX MKII tuning feet, which I am pleased to report come with it. This new

Reimyo power amplifier was not originally connected using the new Harmonix X-DC350M2R power cord, which is also included at no additional charge, but with that outstanding Magic Gem v2t from Aural Systems in order to enable a controlled switch from the JA 80s, which also draw their power through that cord. Clearly, this could not result in a truly fair comparison, especially since the Jadis had been powering the Gryphon Atlantis speakers for weeks; abiding combinations like these always sound better than recently set up components, even when the latter have been warming up together for days in a second listening room. And naturally I was able to elicit the maximum from the Jadis JA 80 Signature edition, which Thomas Kühn has

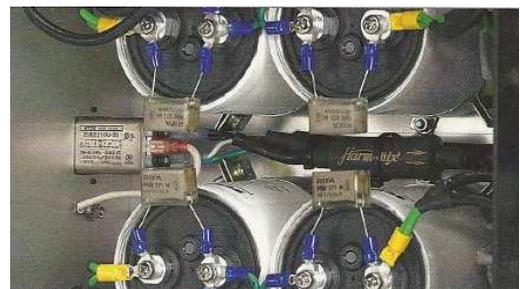
raised to a fantastic new level by using Telefunken NOS EL 34 metal base tubes, along with Shakti Stones on the power supplies, and Shun Mook power tube resonators. Not to mention the TU-201 tuning feet from Harmonix on which the JA 80s always sounded noticeably the best.

And now for the changeover to the Reimyo KAP-777. This can't be happening! I hear something that my ears have never before discerned in a high-resolution system when switching from vacuum tubes to transistors: At first it sounded almost exactly the way it did before! The way the harmonic structure of Miles Davis' trumpet in "In a Silent Way" (CBS 63630, UK pressing) makes the sounds of the air more explicit, and the metallic sparkle of Tony Williams' cymbals that play through, while urging the music forward thanks to the intrinsic energy from their medial spatial proximity – all of which sounds laboriously flat and shadowy in slightly less-harmonious audio systems. And the best part: You're now swept instantly into the midst of this musical indulgence on the part of Herbie Hancock and Chick Corea and Joe Zawinul, the latter of whom now and again appears more broadly from the background, while all of them together provide a foundation for John McLaughlin's guitar. They are making music together freely, and yet you still notice how well they hear and respond to one another. My goodness! How often have I listened to this LP and gotten the impression that they were all playing independently of each other. Besides succeeding at the most important thing, namely the inner musical cohesion, the KAP-777 also fulfils those more easily describable audiophile demands by delivering that distinctively soft tone of Miles Davis, while letting him retain his emotional vigor in a manner as energetic as the way his breath rouses the air.

Certain tonal differences gradually came to light as the first side was playing. The imaging seemed a trace slighter and somewhat less immediate, and the bass in the digital piano's lower ranges was faintly tighter and yet more assertive at the same time. The differences were so minor that it seems to make little sense to emphasize what is "more correct." And it really doesn't matter anyway in light of the literally unlikely similarity between the mono tubes and the transistor amplifier. My thoughts begin to wander as I put on Gustav Leonhardt's exceptionally detailed and demanding recording of Bach's Chromatic Fantasy & Fugue, BMV 903 (RCA SEON RL 30391), especially in terms of spatial definition and musical flow to include within the overtone range of the plucked harpsichord strings. If the Reimyo KAP-777 sounds similarly and delivers the same degree of purity, then surely nothing will



One MOSFET for the signal; the second transistor for the drive



Harmonix on the outside and an Enacom line filter on the inside



Specially made large capacitors from Rifa

have been “twisted and turned” by the use of circuitry. After all, I have heard my share of tube-like solid-state power amplifiers. One of the big things I missed with these was transparency, as they all seemed faintly opaque sounding. On the other hand, and when fully pushed, the JA 80s don’t sound “tubular,” but neutral at best. Here one has simply arrived at an almost identical and pristine ideal in terms of sound. But wait! The associated Harmonix power cord has not yet been connected.

And the manner in which the KAP-777 captures the musical structure of Gustav Leonhardt’s Zell harpsichord, through which the unleashed energy of this – Bach’s perhaps most unconstrained – composition fascinates by how closely it approaches the free rein of Miles Davis’ creative power (across the centuries, so to speak), is just as astonishing with this Reimyo as are this device’s sonic capabilities. Finally, the power cord has been replaced with the XDC-350M2R, which is included with the amplifier that was designed to use it. And sure enough: now that last iota of immediacy is also there and, which in direct comparison, sounds even more natural than before. Although this distinction – one that can be both described and objectified – may not seem very significant when taking a quick listen, it does set off a phenomenon that may prove addictive when playing the finest of recordings: the feeling of no longer listening to a recording, but being a witness to a creative process. Not only does this phenomenon have to do with time coherence, but with a complete and utter sense of consistency and integrity of the energy being transmitted. And for those

who find this description rather disingenuous: It is precisely that which permits a total concentration on the music without actually having to put your mind to it, or needing to listen around or through something.

Béla Bartók’s String Quartet No. 3 provides an impressive example of this. The recording by the Fine Arts Quartet (Saga Records XID 5204) demonstrates all the difficulties – from its musical expressiveness to the melodic escapades – inherent in this work. You can hear the glissandi and the crystalline way the passages are played, along with the hard pizzicati and the sounds generated with the stick of the bow. In addition to that, the rural life and folk culture motifs, which Bartók elsewhere uses to captivate his listeners, appear here almost exclusively as mere rhythmic figures. But with an amplifier of such a class as the Reimyo KAP-777, these difficulties seem to become quite the opposite: Its intimate, unadulterated and entirely effortless manner of operation fully emancipates this music’s sensory and physical attributes and overwhelms the listener with Bartók’s passion. Terms such as complicated and arduous, which never fail to obtrude when such music is played on bad systems or as the result of second-rate renditions, yield to the impression of music that can only be described as original, authentic and powerful. Just as it does with selections by Miles Davis and Bach, this amplifier succeeds in capturing the music in all its rhythmic, corporeal, spatial and melodic levels of expression, and at that instant makes it come alive and in turn immediately intelligible.

Whenever you have the opportunity of reviewing an exceptional product from Kazuo Kiuchi, you naturally also want to report about how he arrived at his results. And yet evasive answers always make your efforts in vain – he generally steers clear of providing any information about technical details. But in the case of the KAP-777 he did allow a glimpse into the development process: The amplifier originated mostly from within the JVC studios, where he himself also does his mastering work. Instead of modeling it using existing software, he and his staff were able to build on the knowledge of original sound sources and draw on a wealth of listening material in which he himself was involved in recording and mastering. The amplifier came about over a very long period of time – long enough as was necessary for it to reproduce the original performance as though it were live. In the end, said Kiuchi-san, he had created exactly that power amplifier with a completely balanced signal across the entire frequency range he had been dreaming about for years.

This engineering effort was fostered by the desire to create as

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Double mono: the insides of the CAT-777 MKII are designed symmetrically right down to the length of the cables

simple a circuitry as possible – similar to the single-ended circuit for a 300B triode amplifier – yet much more powerful. Mr. Kiuchi spoke about how extremely tedious and difficult it was to complete this project, despite all the engineering and technical assets and capabilities available to him as the chief executive of the Combak corporate group. What they finally wound up using was a single MOSFET transistor in what many would consider as being a vastly oversized environment. For all of those who look inside the amplifier and

discover a second transistor: This one operates in opposite phase with the primary MOSFET and gives it a push, so to speak. Functionally it resembles how a vacuum tube with the associated output transformers operates. Nelson Pass popularized this principle with his Aleph circuits.

What surprised me was that this one MOSFET per channel in the KAP-777 was given cooling fins with such an enormous surface area. Regardless of the performance demanded of this power amplifier – it is capable of a steady output of 200 watts at 8 ohms and 400 watts at 4 ohms – the device always remained cold. This behavior, according to Kiuchi-san, reflects an observation that gradually emerged over time: Changes in temperature always have detrimental effects on sound quality. These he minimized through mechanical cooling and an allegedly

permanently switched off MOSFET or one that is not always getting the full dose of voltage; in other words: a circuit similar to a Class A type, but without all the downsides of a classical Class A. Exclusively designed and manufactured capacitors ensure the unimpeded flow of energy. And even the inside wiring was apparently custom engineered for this Reimyo power amplifier. Not to mention the tuning feet – the specialty of the house of Kazuo Kiuchi so to speak – which he also specifically designed and built for securely connecting to the KAP-777.

Immensely more conventional than the new power amplifier is the revised version of the CAT-777 vacuum tube control amplifier, now featuring an MK II in its name. Here again the name bears the Japanese lucky number 7, this time in triplicate representing the three pillars underlying Kiuchi-san's equipment development activities: the art of recording and mastering, Harmonix resonance technology, and high-tech audio engineering. His path to the MK II version was not a voluntary one – the fact that sets of NOS tubes for the old CAT-777 were no longer available in suitable quantities and at reasonable prices made a change in design inevitable. In the end this led to an extension of the upper frequency limit from 100 kHz to 200 kHz, and this within a circuit without global feedback. On top of that we now have a volume control that was specially made for Reimyo by the Japanese components maker Amtrans. The other assemblies are also of only the utmost quality and include inside wiring – again specially manufactured – with extremely low impedance, in a defined signal direction, and with a minimum number of soldering points.

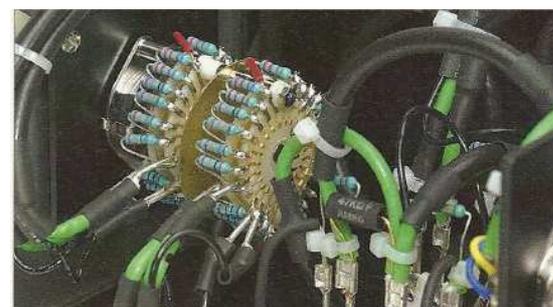
Compared to the two alternately used preamplifiers from Kondo, the vastly more economical performance provided by the CAT-777 MK II was magnificent. Tim Hardin's "If I Were A Carpenter" from his second album (Verve Forecast FTS-3022) remained virtually unchanged in terms of body and proximity, his voice exhibited a little less softness of expression, and the contours of bongos in the middle were a grain less acute. In "Red Balloon" which followed, the preamplifier displayed its remarkable ability to reproduce dynamic contrasts in all their splendor and subtlety: from the explosive lead by the guitar at the right in the beginning, which comes at you unblemished, to those times when Hardin gets really soft on the last syllable of "red balloon..." and his voice almost vanishes. And yet it doesn't vanish, but remains defined with the utmost sentience in even the quietest of moments. In its rendering of resonance and tonal qualities, this preamplifier makes you quickly forget that this ability has long



The black Enacom filters are used only to eliminate front LED interference



Hand-wound film capacitor (black jacket, yellow wrapper)



Discretely designed level control with gold contacts from Amtrans

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been an enduring problem with preamps. It seems to me that the CAT-777 has made big gains compared to its predecessor, just as earlier Reimyo devices chose to go that extra mile before they would ever consider deviating from the high road to superb tonal richness. Neither the preamplifier nor the KAP-777 know of such modest compromises, as both stand out with a truly beautiful and authentic portrayal of the full range of tonal nuances, while never sacrificing their completely transparent and unfettered reproduction.

Even with Miles Davis the attacks are marvelous once more, and there is a certain harmonic development within, and matter of course about, the way they come and go, the likes of which are rarely found using other equipment. The fascination is still not lost as Electric Miles Davis upholds the fervor, the groove retains its energy and flow down to its tiniest fiber, and the balance of expression stays true even within the lowest ranges. Although long since held sacrosanct today, this repeated great innovator in jazz was during his lifetime often accused in record reviews of droning, which in my view more often than

not reflects a shortcoming on the part of stereo systems then and now, namely a lack of expressive differentiation. Special attention must be given to the preamplifier in high-end systems. Where other devices portend making the sound flat, grainy or dumbed down, Reimyo CAT-777 MK II proves time and again to be both invigorating and powerful in expression. Bartók's caprioles in volume, for example, do not sound arbitrary, such as would otherwise threaten to rob the music of its emotionalism and make it all a cerebral matter for the head instead. Only in spatial reproduction can this preamplifier not wholly emulate its power amplifier partner KAP-777. In the case of Bartók, the quartet is not seated as widely, and the leading plane of the notes appears to not quite reach as far forward, a situation that



Built to Reimyo specifications:
the preamplifier's RCA sockets



Free to choose: RCA or balanced XLR,
terminal connectors included

somewhat diminishes the specificity of the spatial illusion as compared with the Kondo KSL M-77. Even that acoustically remarkable new album by Flying Lotus, *Until The Quiet Comes* (Warp/RTD, 2-LP), spreads out and occupies the space with more fullness, and envelopes you slightly less – whereas the mighty computer basses ensure the needed thrust with extraordinary resilience, while the subtle shimmer of the cymbals lingers in the room with superb audibility. Here you might object that one should not compare the Reimyo CAT-777 MK II to preamplifiers that cost more than twice as much – and, of course, you would be right. On the other hand, the incomparable new Reimyo KAP-777 power amplifier can indeed reproduce the artistry, and it would be wrong to keep quiet about this. With both, Kazuo Kiuchi has not only proven his consummate command of Harmonix fine tuning by raising it to a breathtaking level of virtuosity in the service of music, but also how with creative verve one can break the chains of the ordinary and familiar. For me, the KAP-777 is the first power amplifier that unifies the audio capabilities of vacuum tubes and transistors.

Vacuum Tube Preamplifier Reimyo CAT-777 MK II

Inputs: 4 x line **Outputs:** 3 x line
Frequency Response: 5 Hz-200 kHz
Input Impedance: 50k ohms
Output Impedance: 560 ohms

Special Features: includes Harmonix X-DC15SM350R power cord and built-in TU-606Z tuning feet **Dimensions (W/H/D):** 43/14.1/41.1 cm **Weight:** 13 kg **Warranty:** 2 years **Price:** 18,500 euros (includes power cord 1,350 euros and feet 860 euros)



Power Amplifier Reimyo KAP-777

Power Output: 2 x 200W/8 ohms, 2 x 400W/4 ohms **Inputs:** balanced (40k ohms), unbalanced (20k ohms) **Outputs:** 1 pair of wing-nut style binding posts **Special Features:** Harmonix X-DC350M2R15 power cord, TU-505MK2 feet **Dimensions (W/H/D):** 43/21.5/49.2 cm **Weight:** 33 kg **Warranty:** 2 years **Price:** 24,500 euros (including power cord 1,575 euros and feet 820 euros)

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