

DVD/CD AUDIO PLAYER

BLUENOTE
MINI KOALA

WOJCIECH PACUŁA

Translation: Krzysztof Kalinkowski



Looking back, I recall my first contacts with the Italian company Audionemesis with joy. Fabio Camorani, I met personally during the Munich High End 2—5 show (reportage [HERE](#)) turned out to be a splendid constructor and an interesting interlocutor. Although he presented then only the inconspicuous, small DC-1 converter, I immediately knew, I am dealing with something important. The test of the mentioned converter confirmed that (test [HERE](#)), as well as the test of the gramophone preamplifier PH-1 (test [HERE](#)), that ended with the Product of the Year award 2005 for the first one ([HERE](#)) and the Product of the Year award 2007 for the second ([HERE](#)). But somewhere in the middle of the road a downtime occurred, no new products are announced, like a set composed of a preamplifier and power amplifier (it has been promised, but it is still not there) and a CD drive to pair with the CD-1 – as if the fresh marriage and later fatherhood of Fabio would deprive him from the time necessary for his passion (because this is work and passion at the same time). I am joking a bit, but it is about delays in presenting new products to the market.

Now please don't be annoyed that I am writing about Audionemesis and in the header you see the name Bluenote – it is just about setting a background for the test. On one hand I am a bit angry with myself, that it wasn't me that discovered the latter company – this is the same spirit, passion and even aesthetics. On the other hand looking at what was happening during the last show [High End 2007](#), especially the real flood of very interesting, nicely looking products from Italy, I cannot blame myself too much – there is no way I could have seen everything. There is one more thing that binds Audionemesis and Bluenote – the (audiophile) nature does not tolerate void and if there is something missing, then something else comes it that place. And maybe the complementary element, although with higher manufacturing scale, will be Bluenote.



The Mini Koala player I want to have a closer look at is extraordinarily – as for Italians and the rest of the portfolio – cheap. And it does not look worse than the more expensive rest of the line. And although described in the user manual as a CD player, it is in fact a DVD(-V) player without a video output. This is confirmed by the writing on the front panel stating "Digital Versatile Source" that describes the player better. Although not completely. The Mini Koala plays all types of CD discs, including DC-R/RW (but does not decode HDCD) and DVD – but without DVD-Audio discs. That is its design. And while talking about design – one cannot go around the looks of the player, the front being made from acryl (like in Audionemesis), here quite thick, with a window made for the blue display and the loading tray. Both elements have the same shape and size, what leads to a certain symmetry of the accents laid on both sides of the 'eject' button placed in the middle.

Before we start with the main description lets call upon the text of the distributor describing the history and portfolio of Bluenote: „There are many companies from Italy we know in Poland since years, but it turns out, that there are still

some gems there that need to be found. One of them, maybe even most surprising, deeply hidden, is the company Bluenote. Its history starts in 1994, when the Bluenote Audio Company was formed, after several third party audio manufacturing experiences and a solid commercial infrastructure for Italy and the US in place, Bluenote began committing resources to its own vertically integrated line of affordable audio products with true audiophile performance.



By 1997, the launch of the Bluenote – Industrie Audio Vox (aka) I.A.V. offering included turntables, tone arms, CD players, amplifiers and speakers, all of which incorporated "the goals of price ratio to quality and an attractive Italian look". In late 2000, and after 3 years of continuous research and experience garnered from the budget line, Bluenote followed up with a higher-priced, more ambitious line dubbed Villa that, by 2002, had opened the doors for expanded international commerce in Europe, the US, South America, the Far East and several Pacific Rim countries. Today, Bluenote is partnered with local vendors for its own custom parts, professional assembly and packaging and remains flexible to respond to fluctuating domestic and foreign requests. This includes facilities for very quick prototyping and special product manufacture on demand.

Bluenote's main officers include president Maurizio Aterini who studied mechanical and textile engineering and holds a Masters in marketing. After working as sales manager for various mechanical companies, he joined Bluenote upon formation of its HiFi division in 1992 and advanced to the position of president by 1997 when the internal structural conversion to in-house audio manufacturing was completed. Digital engineer Dr. Luigi Ermini after short experiences with big audio companies came into Bluenote crew. He designed the super acclaimed "Zero-Clock™" device, a special digital output filter and the "Electro-Power™" an innovative system to electronically control the speed fluctuations of the digital mechanics applied in all Bluenote digital sources. In the 2005 digital engineer Dr. Aldo Alliata introduces the latest evolution of the "Zero-Clock™" and "Electro-Power™" let all the digital players Bluenote manufactures achieve maximum audio performance. Today's Bluenote manufactures some of the finest audio and video products the market offers. Bluenote proudly introduced innovations we believe they could effect our specialized field for many years in the future.

Now Bluenote offer digital and analog products – players, amplifiers, loudspeakers and accessories. In the digital sources two groups can be distinguished, concentrated around two different ideas – the Stibbert and the Koala. In 2007 the newest version of the Stibbert was introduced, named the Stibbert Tube. It is characterized by a completely decoupled chassis, supported by four pylons, similar to a turntable. The main part is made from 20mm thick acrylic black plate formed in the shape of a Ferrari Formula 1 steering wheel, just like in the top turntables of the company. This shape minimizes vibration in the structure and increases their stiffness. In the construction the proprietary developments like Zero-Clock i Electro-Power were used. The first one minimizes jitter and the latter is a current generator, smoothing the power supply of the player. The newest version of the EP does also control the drive motor and optical system minimizing the speed fluctuation below 0.0001%. The output stage of the new Stibbert contains two 6922 tubes in a symmetrical arrangement and superb passive components like MFCap capacitors and non-inductive Sfernice resistors. The second group of the digital players is the Koala. This is a product able to reproduce all types of discs except for the SACD. In the basic version Mini Koala it is equipped in a double power supply, based on the Electro-Power. The Koala and the Koala Tube have more refined electronics and the latter is equipped with tubes in the output stage. And finally the Koala HDMI Tube – a fully fledged DVD player with HDMI output.



The amplifiers are placed in two main groups – the Demidoff and the S-3 and S-1, all of them in many versions. The Demidoff is a powerful integrated amplifier, mostly hand-made (60-80% depending on the version), based on a output stage single-ended in class A (50W, 100W in the Demidoff Diamond). An especially developed preamplifier, dubbed Mirror-Amp was included, a made around a cascade circuit, differential amplifier with current sources, that provides splendid linearity and minimal distortion. The power supply of every version is done based on many transformers (the Demidoff has 12) made to Bluenote specs. Main power is supplied by four Golden transformers; the rest is to decouple the power supply of the amplifier. A separate transformer is used to power the two blue VU meters on the front panel, the volume control motor and the safety circuitry. The enclosure is made from aluminum.

The turntables are the apple of Maurizio's eye. There are three models available presently: Piccolo, Bellavista Signature and Bellagio. Piccolo is the cheapest one and has a "rigid" structure, without decoupling. A 20mm acrylic turntable was used on a 15mm plinth. One of the characteristic things is the Tulipan motor pulley, contributing to better rotational

speed control than a standard solution. Bellavista Signature does also not have a decoupled chassis, with a 22mm polyvinyl platter. The plinth is more complex. Made out of two acrylic boards separated by six messing elements, it combats vibration much better than the basic version. Even more – under the platter there are nine gold plated elements, destined to work as a flywheel and thus stabilize the rotational speed. Bellagio is the reference turntable from Bluenote. The basic elements look like in the cheaper model, but they are engineered up to the extreme. The chassis has the shape of a Formula 1 racing car steering wheel, similar to the Stibbert player. Below it, there is a second chassis, decoupled by means of three titanium springs.”

SOUND



The most important thing is: Mini Koala does not sound like a DVD player for comparable or even much bigger money. The same thing I heard with players from Theta (Compli), van den Hul (Six MPF) or even [LINN Akurate CD](#), the first two being modified DVD/multiformat players: quietness, coherence, fluency, etc. Looking inside the device, and seeing, that the output stage was not modified (this is done in the higher Koala players) it is hard to believe a DVD player can sound like that. I could also not believe that the Compli sounds like a classy CD player, but you could hear that for yourself during the [Audio Show 2006](#), when I conducted the presentations using it. Mini Koala, although at another level – compared with the Theta this is a cheap device – does the same. We get an incredibly coherent, complete transfer. Every kind of music is treated in a similar way, what ensures the consistency of the sound in every case. And I didn't start the test with an easy one, but with a strong big-band with Dean Martin from the disc *Forever Cool* (EMI Music Japan, TOCP-70324, CD+DVD). This is a similar project like in the case of the new disc of Ray Charles (*Ray Sings, Basie Swings*, Telarc SACD-63679, SACD/CD) – to the voice recording from the original artist a new background was added and in every song another vocalist sings with Martin, creating a duet. And although the difference between the voice of Martin and the contemporary musicians is audible, it is not as strong as could have been expected. Anyway, this is strong playing, with the sound spectrum spanning both ways. The Italian player played this with dynamics, fully showing the virtual sources, really nice. There was no thinning of the sound, so typical for a DVD player, lack of pace or something like that. In contrary – the bas, although not contoured, meaning without the borders being very clear, was the driver of the sound. And it reached far down. In the recordings bass guitars were used, that were a bit too much boosted in the low range. On small speakers this will not be audible, and we will even welcome some help in that area; but with full range speakers like the [Dobermann](#) it can be heard immediately. And if I would still be playing with the [Lektor Prime](#) directly connected to the [Luxman M-800A](#) power amplifier, I would probably notice that, but it would not strike me. But from some time I have the preamplifier BAT VK-3iX (at first) and (now) Leben CX-28. This has changed the system completely, and, for the first time now, I can say I am going in the “direction of the light”... But about that I will tell in some other time. But it is about the fact, that the sound is now saturated, full, and strong, without any constraints in the bass region. And due to that kind of natural sounding, (because this is hi-fi no more) this strong bass is a bit exaggerated. And the conclusion: Mini Koala showed this subrange, in terms of saturation, exactly like it should be, going in the direction of my Prime, even better than the Naim 5x.

It is similar with the rest of the sound spectrum. The treble is a bit tamed, what makes the midrange stand out. This subrange is also far from the de-humanized, technical sound. Let us listen to the choir from *Lost Love* from the soundtrack of the film *Perfume* Tom Tykwer (EMI Classic, 69535, CD) – from the Koala it will sound beautiful, through the coherence and mood keeping, and also through some kind of “linking” to the emotional side of our nature. The same way will sound the guitar, for example of Wes Montgomery, from the disc *Groove Yard* The Montgomery Brothers (Riverside/JVC, JVCXR-0018-2, XRCD). Phenomenally recorded, played and restored by the magicians from JVC the disc sounded in a little warm (I mentioned the laid back treble), full and swinging way. The contrabass was still strong, as it should be and had a perfect pulse – this could be heard on the piece opening the disc *Bock to Bock (Back to Back)*, where it is the driver. The Bluenote player mastered the playback of the quite hard to be reproduced properly music from the double disc *Hvarf/Heim* (EMI, 502566, 2 x CCD) from Sigur Rós. The accordions were fantastic. Opening the disc *Heim* the piece *Samskeyti* had depth and depth. The same with the voice, that often sounds squeaky – here we had finally a falsetto voice and not an error in performance. Here I could also confirm my impressions about the scale of sound – the Koala builds large virtual sources in a big space. This gives breath and a good perspective with every kind of music.



There is of course a catch, there is always one. The Mini Koala has only medium resolution. I am talking about the classic description of detail, meaning the separation of instrument, events among other, similar or near placed events. Now although the timbre is splendid, then the attack of the instruments is rather laid back. Like I mentioned before, one should forget about DVD, and although when one reads this comment (and not listens to the device) it sounds like a flaw typical for DVD players, but it is not connected with washing out of the edges. The convergence is not perfect, but this does not come from washing out, but from softening of the attack. This is not a device that starts and stops in the same moment. This makes the sound relaxing, but without the capability of deep drawing. The mentioned disc of Pepper and Marsh shows this best, because in one channel tenor and alto saxophones are playing, and the Koala, although brilliantly distinguishing their timbre, shows them a bit similar in terms of dynamics, does not show the contrasts as well as some good players from the same price range, like the [Cyrus CD 6 SE](#). So we have to decide for ourselves, if this set of characteristics suits us or not. But I can tell one thing for sure – buying the Mini Koala we can be sure, that we will never hear a disc sound bright, harsh and hard. We get splendid vividness and a very good timbre. Only without special resolution and clarity.

DESCRIPTION



We mentioned the front in the beginning, so I do not intend to repeat myself. Let's have a look at the back – we have analog RCA sockets here, the digital S/PDIF and an IEC mains socket. There is also a plugged space for the balanced XLR connectors, that are mounted in the more expensive versions of the Koala. When we take off the top cover, we see an image similar to that we saw in the tested by me players from [van den Hul Six](#), [Theta](#), or the [Bladelius Freja II](#) - this is a complete DVD player, with a modified power supply and clock, without the vision being routed outside. Almost the whole circuitry found place on a single PCB, normally placed under the drive. We see a big DSP chip the AML 3433 from the Chinese company AMLogic. This is and audio and video decoder, the signal from which is routed to two places – HDMI output (there is no DSP here that normally controls it) and a D/A converter from Crystal the CS4360. This is not a very recent 6 channel converter 24/192 with a 17 bit resolution. After it we have six parallel paths with the 4558 chips in the filter and output section. On the very end we see transistors, probably as part of a DC-Servo circuit. It seems that the signal is taken from the outputs of the front channels. Nothing on the PCB seems to be modified. But before it there is the power supply for the clock and a circuit stabilizing its function. Here is the Zero-Clock idea realized – a proprietary jitter reduction solution and Electro-Power – a circuit monitoring the rotational speed of the drive, allowing it to achieve an outstanding stability of 0.0001%. This solution also cares for the laser pickup precision. This kind of power supply galvanically separates the player circuits from the power lines. The signal is taken from the DVD drive. And only near the front panel we see a small impulse power supply. Vibration dampening materials can

be seen at the drive and the power supply. And that's it. The signal is led to the output jacks by a long cable. The RCA's are gold plated, but not of highest quality.

Technical data (according to manufacturer):

Frequency response:	20Hz – 20kHz +/-0.3dB
THD (Total Harmonic Distortion):	0,001%
S/N:	105dB
Dynamics:	110dB
Digital control circuitry:	Zero-Clock
Power supply:	Electro-Power 100/260Volt 50/60Hz
Dimensions:	435mm L x 100mm H x 350mm D
Weight:	8 kg

BLUENOTE MINI KOALA

Price: 2995 zł

Distribution: [Moje Audio](#)

Contact:

Moje Audio
Ul. Powstańców Śląskich 118
53-333 Wrocław

Tel.: **0 606 276 001**

e-mail: biuro@mojeaudio.pl

WWW: [BLUENOTE](#)

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