

Music, Magic & Magri

Review: Grandinote Shinai | Integrated Amplifier



by Michael Bruss | August 30th, 2020

A few years ago, a Grandinote demo at the Munich "High End" really appealed to me and aroused my interest in the brand. And now, I see this relatively compact, beautiful, integrated amplifier on the German distributor's website. A welcome, back-friendly change in my review schedule after heavyweights like the ASR Emitter I or the Avantgarde Paris Xi1100. Or so I thought.

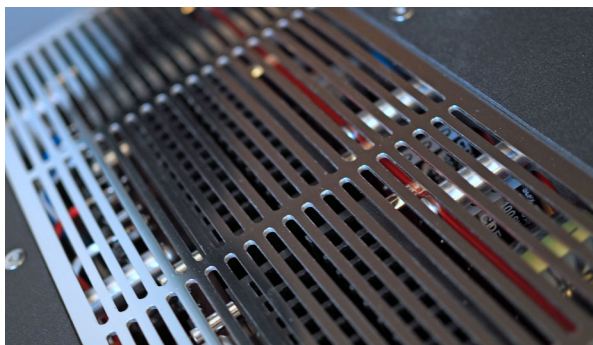
Well, I should have read more carefully. The young man delivering the Grandinote Shinai with the sack truck (!) warned me as a precautionary measure: "This is heavy!" Well, I think I will manage. And I did. Just that I needed far longer breaks on every

level to the fourth floor than my not quite so advanced age would justify. The reason: Instead of a cute lifestyle product, I got a real amplifier heaveho: First of all, the Grandinote Shinai is not as compact as I expected, but with a depth of 47 centimeters, it is quite grown-up – even though the front measures only 32 centimeters in width and 20 centimeters in height. And secondly, it weighs a net 40 kilograms. In its sturdy hard-shell transport case, it weighs almost 50 kilograms.

Space Efficiency, Italian style

The lid of the Grandinote Shinai is made of a perfectly polished steel grid plate, which unfortunately permits only a limited view of the well-used interior of the integrated amplifier. The cabinet's black extruded cast iron profiles are elegantly rounded at the edges. The base plate and the rear panel, like the lid, are also made of polished steel, and some of them have ample ventilation slots. All of this is assembled to an extremely high standard, feels incredibly stable, and completely free of wobble and vibration. The non-sunk screw heads give the Shinai the necessary industrial design touch to not let it become an optical softie. This is how I imagine the





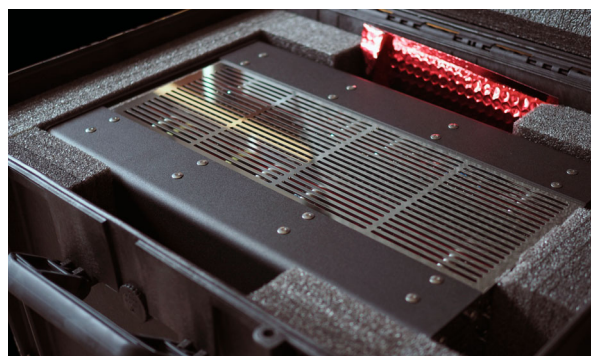
View through the vented lid of the Grandinote Shinai

best Italian handcraft. Maybe this is not by chance, because Grandinote is located in Lombardy, not far away from other positive examples of technology and craftsmanship quality like Norma Audio, Diapason or Sonus faber. This is precisely how you make the best advertisement for a location.

What immediately catches the eye on closer inspection of the Grandinote Shinai's connections are the two power sockets and the horizontally and vertically mirrored high-level inputs. Here we are looking at a dual-mono setup, which operates with two separate power supplies and, therefore, also with two power sockets. Completely consequent? Well, there still is something... Oh yes, the Grandinote Prestigio. That integrated amplifier adds one more thing to it and consists of two separate housings for the left and right channels. The Shinai adopts the basic circuits of the Grandinote Prestigio. It brings them into a single cabinet with a somewhat lower output power of 37 watts at 4 and 8 ohms per channel in-

stead of the original 60 watts each. If you're wondering where the power went missing with all the material used, the answer lies in the Class-A mode – 100%. There is no switching to Class-AB in the Grandinote Shinai and its siblings when the power demand exceeds a certain threshold – which explains the quite steep 200 watts power consumption in idle mode (Grandinote states 270 watts power consumption without further explanation).

If you switch on the Grandinote Shinai using the big, solidly clicking push button in the middle of the attractively designed front panel, the display of my Tsakiridis Super Athina (the Shinai is, of course, connected to the unfiltered outputs of the Greek mains filter) still shows a moderate 35 to 40 watts. But then the countdown starts: The Grandinote Shinai counts backward for 99 seconds, and every second, the Tsakiridis shows one or two watts more. When the Shinai's countdown is over, and its outputs are enabled, the display will increase by about 30 watts more.



The Grandinote Shinai comes in a solid hard-shell case



The backside of the Grandinote Shinai is decorated with two power connectors

The Magnetosolid Technology

Born in 1973, Massimiliano Magri, an electrical engineer, is the owner and chief developer of Grandinote. He already designed his first amplifier in 1996: a tube amp with self-developed and wound transformers, because: "It is pretty easy to achieve a relatively good sound with tubes." Like his Lombard colleague Enrico Rossi of Norma Audio, Magri concluded that true excellence with tubes was hardly possible. Nevertheless: "I asked myself: why do tubes almost always sound fuller, more musically satisfying than transistor amplifiers," says Magri. "I know the physics of tubes and transistors very



well, and I soon realized that the answer to my question had to lie in the respectively applied circuits and not in the components themselves. My studies and previous experience with output transformers then formed the basis for the Magnetosolid technology."



Transformer + Transistor = Magnetosolid, that's Magri's formula

Magnetosolid is the composition of "magnet" (referring to the ferromagnetic components, i.e., the output transformers) and "solid" as in "solid-state." Magri designs typical tube amp layouts – just without tubes. Instead, he uses transistors. As a result, according to Magri, he has created amplifiers that have the "rich" sound signature of tubes, but with a significantly extended frequency response and a much lower output impedance and thus a higher damping factor. He then developed this scheme consistently and permanently. Today, he uses capacitors only before the two output transistors, but no longer between the amplifier stages, and negative feedback must be eliminated. One result of these efforts is an above-average bandwidth of 2 Hertz to 240 Kilohertz (!).

VIP-Amps: Magnetosolid-VHP

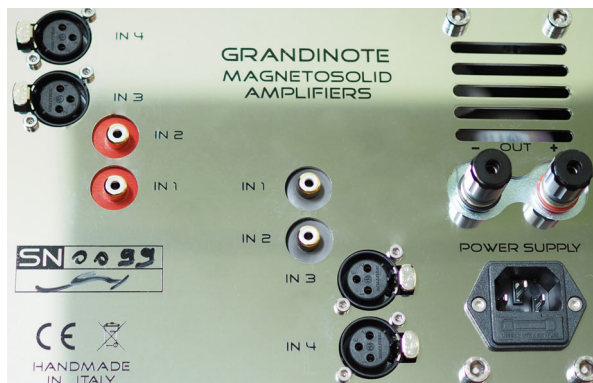
The Grandinote Shinai is not precisely entry-level. But with the Grandinote Essenza the Italians have, I shall say, a first escalation level in their program. The otherwise identically equipped Essenza has a different output stage with the "Magnetosolid-VHP" technology. Grandinote uses what it says is an exceptional super output transformer. According to Magri, this features a "special material" from which the magnetic cores are made. The cost of these unique cores is very high. Still, the result is worth it,

says Magri: "With the identical wire geometry, the primary inductance with this core is more than ten times higher than with a normal core. The damping factor is even higher, the frequency response is extended." His solution: Every non-VHP amp has a VHP counterpart and can also be upgraded to a VHP model. On this, Magri is confident: "90% of the customers who have bought a Shinai want to replace it with a larger Grandinote model at some point – and not with anything else." But that's not all: Otherwise identical units top the Magnetosolid VHP models with an even more advanced input stage. Thus, the Grandinote Essenza becomes the Grandinote Supremo. However, a later upgrade of the Essenza at this point is not possible because the Supremo has an entirely different input stage.



Focused on the Essentials

Not surprisingly, given Grandinote's "willingness to separate," neither a phono stage nor a D/A-converter or streamer are integrated into the Shinai, not even as an option. They are only available as additional devices. Also, there's no headphone jack. The integrated amplifier focuses on its job and offers precisely what it needs, nothing more. For example, a metal remote control (nice and small and with a solid feel) for the essential functions; volume, mute, and input selection. For the inputs, the user has the choice between two unbalanced RCA and balanced XLR inputs each. Internally the signal processing is – of course – completely balanced. Grandinote mastermind Massimo Magri says: "Everything in our electronics is balanced. An indispensable dogma for me is the symmetry of the circuits. The only unbalanced Grandinote product is the Celio (editor's note: phono preamplifier), but if you use two pieces in mono configuration, they each work balanced – for my peace of mind"



Exclusively analog: the Grandinote Shinai offers access to incoming music signals only via XLR or Cinch inputs

The single-wiring speaker terminal of the Grandinote Shinai is fitted with high-quality WBT terminals, which also accept 4-millimeter bananas. The Shinai's 40 kilograms rest on four extremely solid-looking metal hemispheres instead of the usual forest-and-meadow feet or spikes. Magri says: "Originally, I wanted an alternative to spikes: spikes are good because the coupling is only at one point, but they scratch the furniture. A hemisphere is a good alternative, and I have been using this solution since 2003. Our "lateral" amplifier stands have recesses designed for these hemispheres: The hemispheres inside the recesses are like joints made of steel. This is also good for the sound."

The whole thing feels like a super sports car from a manufactory to me: beautiful to look at, of high quality and lovingly finished in detail, uncompromisingly designed for performance (but not pure power!), without any frills. And with that, I would also have my annually permitted car comparison done.

Sound and Comparisons: Grandinote Shinai

I performed all listening tests with the J. Sikora Initial Max turntable with Kuzma Stogi S12 VTA, the MC pickup Transrotor Figaro and the Linnenberg Bizet phono preamplifier as the analog front end, the streaming bridge Waversa Wstreamer and the integrated D/A converter of the Norma Audio Revo SC-2 preamplifier on the digital side, as well as the Qln Prestige Three and ATC SCM11 loudspeakers. My permanent amplifier setup combines the Norma Audio SC-2 mentioned above and the power amplifier Linnenberg Liszt Stereo.

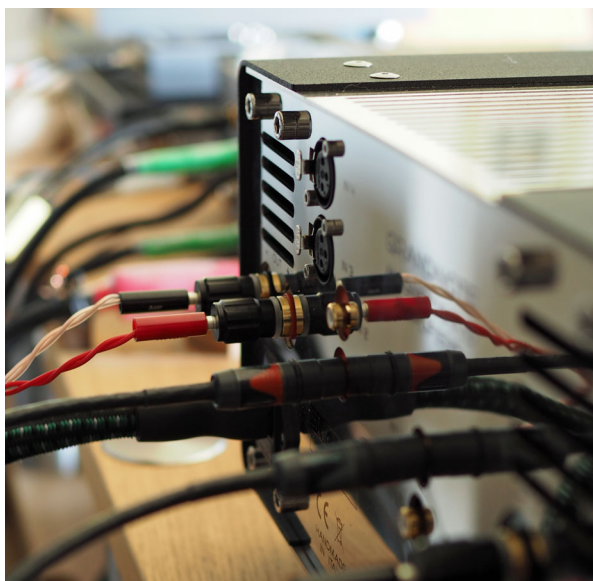
Bass

The bass is probably the most impressive demonstration of the Magnetosolid technology's influence on the sound. In fact, I have never heard an integrated amplifier in my system that sounds similar in the bass, which can be both a versatile, colorful chameleon and a solid, reliable rock. Rich, powerful, colorful, and relaxed-unexcited, the Grandinote Shinai plays the funk bass in "The Lay Down" by *DRAM* and the double bass in "Birds" by *Dominique Fils-Aimé* (album: Nameless).

The gentle assertiveness of the Shinai's presentation is not unlike that of the ASR Emitter I. The incomparably more powerful German amp creates even a bit more sovereignty and "cubic capacity" (ah, yet another car metaphor!) than the Grandinote Shinai, but has to pass when it comes to transparency, attention to detail, and relentlessly timed "speed" in the bass. The Balanced Audio Technology VK-3000 SE, on the other hand, can keep up with the Italian when it comes to impulse response but again appears less transparent and audible (we're still talking about bass).



Structured and physical, the Grandinote Shinai heaves the ultra-low rolling bass in *Nicolas Jaar's "Columb"* from the album *Space Is Only Noise* or the densely woven, wafting bass carpet in the infamous "Teardrop" from *Massive Attack* out of the Qln Prestige Three. Casually, substantially pushing, seamlessly, and slag-free, it also unfolds the bass landscape of "Variations" by the *Submotion Orchestra* (album: Kites). Even if it hurts me a little bit in this explicitness: My Norma/Linnenberg-Combo sounds comparatively clumsy, especially in the upper bass, almost plump compared to the perfectly balanced



and effortless energy distribution of the Shinai. At the same time, the Shinai controls the crisp bass drum and slap bass impulses in *Rage Against The Machines* "Take the Power Back" from the self-titled debut album, not necessarily desert dust-dry, but still rack-dry – and always punchy and more realistic (more balanced!) than all the devices mentioned above. If my memory serves me right, even the Norma-Monos-PA 160 MR can't quite deliver the Shinai's fluid elegance. Still, they do produce even more pressure out of larger transformers, and, thanks to the regulated power supplies, they have even more unwavering bass control all the way down to the bass bottom.

Despite all its bass transparency and agility, I would characterize the Shinai as tending to be on the slightly lush and tone-rich side of the spectrum. Its effortless control of the low frequencies, the undreamt-of structural transparency of overtones and



color shadings, and the absence of booming, billowing, or reverberation, no matter how boldly produced the musical material, immediately relativize this statement. I think they challenge long-cherished audiophile pigeonholing and exclusionary thinking not only to discourse but to dispute: Here, character traits often perceived as incompatible, such as warmth, tautness, pressure, control, substance, lightness, power, impulsiveness, solidity and transparency, meet without competing with each other.

Fundamental and midrange

From around 150 Hz, the Grandinote Shinai comes even closer to the traditional hi-fi ideal of the neutral amplifier. Concerning tonality, there is nothing, absolutely no peculiarity that could indicate any kind of coloration. Voices sound natural in an unobtrusive way. In comparison, my Norma/Linnenberg combo presents female voices in a somewhat more reserved, less open way than the Shinai – but I probably wouldn't have noticed that without the direct comparison. However, the reason for this is not a tendency of the Grandinote to exaggerate the upper midrange or presence range but simply again the outstanding transparency with an unobstructed view on micro information, with which it reveals even the smallest details in the articulation of singers.

The friction (the noise that the turbulence of air can create in narrow places in the vocal tract) in the throat area of Jacintha's voice in "Danny Boy" was something I noticed so clearly for the first time. The same goes for the subtle sounds that a wet tongue makes in the mouth. In SBTRKT's "Wildfire" (album: SBTRKT), the Shinai illuminates the densely interwoven voices in the second half of the piece, almost like using an X-ray machine. This attention to detail goes a step beyond nearly anything I have experienced in my chain so far. The Balanced Audio Technology VK-53SE and VK-76SE combination alone, which is more than two and a half times more expensive, surpassed this completely natural flood of details in the middle and presence range. Fortunately, all of this never seems ethereal because the fundamentals and midrange possess substance and body as well. The saxophone in Pink Floyd's "Money" comes across nicely, and Jaco Pastorius' fretless bass purrs out of the speaker's membranes with a pleasant tangibility.



High frequencies

I'm going to go out on a limb here: in the price range up to 15,000 Euros, the Grandinote Shinai produces the highest-quality treble range I know. First things first: The Grandinote Shinai sounds neither bright, sharp, crystalline or hard nor soft and romantic. It merely reproduces overwhelmingly detailed and airy. No matter if I put *Yello's* shimmering electro-plays from the album *Toy* on the Sikora Initial or listen to the delicate high-frequency webs of the cymbals in *Max Rouch's* "Lonesome Lover" via Qobuz – I can hardly believe how much micro information the Grandinote Shinai reveals. The Shinai achieves this openness with a pleasantly fine silky texture, more fluffy than hard, and completely stress-free. Depending on the music you listen to, you might get the impression that you have heard a slightly cleaner high frequency in front of a black background – but far from it: The Grandinote Shinai shows every detail, no matter how small, for example, when the cymbals of drums fade away, up to areas that are commonly associated with the noise carpet. Fascinating!

Dynamics and Impulses

It feels as if I'm moving from duty to freestyle. Because even though my earlier comments on the Grandinote Shinai may already read like a laudatory song – now it gets even better. Time and time again, I find myself exclaiming an incredulous "Ha!" accompanied by a smile as soon as the Italian integrated amplifier reproduces dynamic, impulsive, and transient musical material.

It doesn't matter whether it is the striking, somewhat effectively recorded guitar of *Al Di Meola* or the incomparably natural (duller) captured six-string



of *Bruce Springsteen*: The Shinai firstly makes the differences between the productions very clear, and secondly, it always does this with an incredibly weightless, yet not disembodied attack, which it develops with maximum "agility" in a subtle dynamic: Every millinewton more or less in Leonard Bernstein's treatment of the keys in *George Gershwin's* "Rhapsody in Blue" is perceived. And when the Grand Piano and the *Columbia Symphony Orchestra* go into full swing, its speed also helps the Grandinote to convincing broad-scale dynamics with substance and sufficient force. The ASR Emitter I may let an even more massive hammer come down, but it doesn't seem as agile, which gives the Grandinote an advantage when it comes to high dynamic demands in the mid and high range (e.g., the guitars in "Alhambra" from *Yello's* album *Flag*). The Shinai also reproduces the electronic impulses on *Yello's* album *Toy* and in "Fnktrp" (*The Floozies – Do Your Thing*). Or congas and small drums – if the recording allows it. Exaggeration is not its thing; dynamically flat recordings stay flat.

Staging and Imaging

This also applies without restriction to the spatial representation. If a recording does not show a natural gradation of depth, the Grandinote Shinai projects the events quite precisely onto the loudspeaker plane. However, if something happens in the spatial dimensions, the Shinai, despite all its impulsiveness and unfiltered speed, generally does not tend to take the impetuous attack towards the listening position. Neither with the more directly tuned ATC SCM11 nor with the QIn Prestige Three. Instead, it creates a space that seems unlimited in its depth behind the speakers, starting roughly on the loudspeaker plane and extending horizontally well over



Grandinote Shinai with the loudspeakers QIn Prestige Three

the base width and high up into the vertical. My Norma/Linnenberg pair and the above-mentioned integrated amplifiers seem more limited, especially in depth differentiation.

So the Shinai again combines seemingly contradictory elements: Immediate impulse reproduction without any signs of a limitation and a free projection that works far into the depth of the room. One generally associates the former with a forward, listener-oriented presentation – the Grandinote Shinai again does not care about mental pigeonholes. Besides, it creates a three-dimensionality that is not inferior to the high level of the BAT VK-3000 SE with its sharp-edged separation – and creates even more space between the instruments and voices on stage. Tip: As a first listening experience with the Grandinote Shinai, play a live classical or jazz recording like Jazz at the Pawnshop. I guarantee that you will feel spatially and atmospherically transported to the recording room – if the rest of the chain is able to play along.

One hint: You should give the Grandinote Shinai at least 30 minutes, even better an hour to warm up each time you turn it on. Cold – especially if it has been completely disconnected from the power supply for a while – its abilities will be limited. In this respect, too, it is an authentic Italian thoroughbred sports car.

Conclusion: Grandinote Shinai

Few audio components exceed my expectations so clearly that I almost feel motivated to summarize my findings at the beginning of a review. Simply to prepare you as a reader for a lot of praise and hardly – or in this case, none – real criticism. The Grandinote Shinai is just such a device: a no-frills high-flyer trimmed for sound quality that defines the acoustically feasible in its exclusive price range with crystal clarity. On the one hand, this makes the final evaluation easy for me; on the other hand, it is difficult to differentiate it based on individual characteristics. Not least because the Grandinote Shinai is one of the most balanced integrated amps I know. Well-balanced, mind you; it does not act at all in the sense of (too) objective neutrality but even adds a tiny pinch of additional warmth. This, however, is so perfectly integrated and so cleverly balanced by the very open high-frequency range that the tonality

passes for “inconspicuous” in the best sense of the word. Yes, probably the Shinai’s greatest strength lies in the combination of seemingly incompatible virtues, from which it composes an exemplary coherent whole.



The Grandinote Shinai hardly knows genre preferences. Limitations result rather from the typical listening habits of fans of some musical styles. With two times 37 watts – the Shinai sounding as agile and stable as it does – no volume orgies with average efficiency loudspeakers can be achieved. Whoever wants to listen to steam hammer music at maximum volume or wants to have impulses slammed directly in his or her forehead should better look for appropriately dimensioned wattage generators.

Other than that, I only foresee “danger” for the audiophile’s bliss if a chain – especially the loudspeakers – tend to produce an extraordinarily poisonous treble. One or two PA horn speakers or boxes equipped with certain French tweeters, mainly from the 1990s, come to mind. Because the Shinai transports nothing but the truth, including the truth about your loudspeakers – and that can sometimes be unpleasant. Personally, I’m preoccupied with something else at the moment, though: What should the more expensive Grandinote models do even better?

The Grandinote Shinai ...

- plays very deep, powerful, and differentiated right down into the bass cellar and controls the action better than many more powerful transistor amps.
- tends to belong to the tone-rich, minimally warm faction of integrated amplifiers.



- Weight: 40 kg
- Finish: Black aluminum and stainless steel
- Analog inputs: 2 x XLR, 2 x Cinch
- Power rating: 2 x 37 W at 4 and 8 Ohm
- Power consumption at idle: ca. 200 W

Contact

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- has a natural and very transparent midrange without discoloration nonetheless.
- performs with maximum freedom, openness, airiness, and, in the best sense of the word, high resolution without the slightest hint of crystal-line hardness.
- realizes unexpectedly full-fledged broad-scale dynamics given the moderate performance specifications, which only lacks the very last punch compared to one or another watt monster.
- has an outstanding talent for subtle dynamic differentiation.
- projects three-dimensionally tangible and with a lot of space between the actors on the virtual stage.
- casts spaciousness that seems almost boundless in all dimensions. One feels tempted to emphasize the depth of the spatial image, but then would belittle the horizontal and vertical expanse.
- is outstandingly well crafted.
- weighs 40 kilograms – much more than one would think looking at the relatively compact silhouette.

Facts

- Model: Grandinote Shinai
- Concept: Class-A Solid-state Integrated Amplifier
- Price: 11.400 Euro
- Measurement (W x H x D): 318 x 196 x 473 mm