

Banc d'essai de la série 47 Lab Midnight Blue par Marja & Henk, paru en janvier 2012, sur :



47 LABS MIDNIGHT BLUE



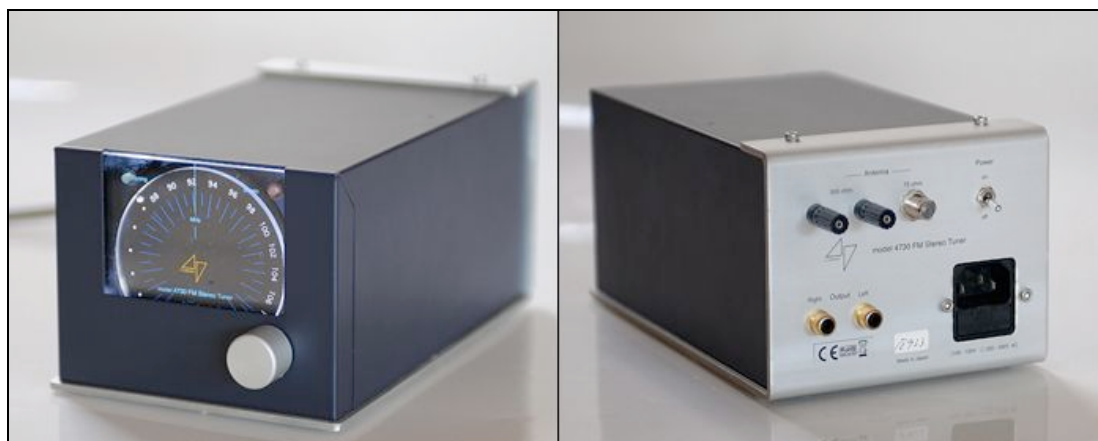
47 Labs Midnight Blue series. As a name, 47 Labs hints at an occult society, mystic's club or something. Fortunately this is not the case even though enthusiasts of 47 Labs gear around the world do form a kind of informal friend's club. That's not strange. 47 Labs is synonymous after all with audio equipment that celebrates its very own unique style to almost automatically create a kind of user fraternization or polarization. Who are these guys? 47 Labs is Junji Kimura and Junji Kimura is 47 Labs. Kimura-san originally started as an audio designer with a very strong focus on everything vinyl. Tubes, turntables and cartridges were the things which made Junji's clock—undoubtedly an analog specimen—tick. From this perspective it is easily understandable how the shy first digital developments of 1982 deeply frustrated the man. With all the faults and horrible sound of early digital it would have been far easier to continue focus solely on analog and forget about the advertised perfect sound. Forever. But not for this Tokyo resident. Instead of sticking to his analog comfort zone he took on the task of getting the best possible sound from the new medium. His technical background was put to work but even for a veteran electronics designer this was not easy.

It took several years to accomplish the self-imposed task. A 20 kilo monster of a CD player was the culmination of the project. Though not marketable as such, his associated research and results got Junji Kimura plenty of attention, albeit with an addition to the CD player rather than the player itself. To assess the CD player in progress, Junji had quickly thrown together a solid-state amplifier that turned out not to sound like a solid-state amplifier at all. For this electronics 101 side project he'd used an extremely short signal path and the barest minimum of parts. Everyone who heard the amplifier was enthusiastic. Suddenly the basis of the very marketable Gaincard was in place. Its sound quality and circuit simplicity created a serious drawback for the designer however. Many copied him and built what became known as gain clones - understandably not to Kimura's liking.

But this milestone Gaincard amplifier launched 47 Labs. Though not obvious, the digits in this company name refer to the name Kimura in an encrypted way. In Japanese the short version of the word yellow is ki. Purple on the other hand is mura. On a resistor its ohmic value is not printed as a letter or number but positional color code. A resistor with the yellow-purple or ki-mura code has a value of 47 ohms, hence Kimura Laboratories became 47 Labs. This letter and color game is typical for Kimura-san. He always thinks out of the box to come up with original ideas and solutions. Originality is one thing but it's really simplicity which is the main focus for his designs. When these two ingredients combine with good engineering, what results are minimalist designs where form follows function. The short signal path in the Gaincard and the inside-out/upside-down approach of the PiTracer transport are telling examples. Ultimate simplicity is also found in the 47 Labs cables, be they interconnects or loudspeaker cables. A rather stiff sheath holds a single high-quality solid-core copper conductor. A plastic plug connector has the wire stick out a bit which then gets lazily wrapped around the plug a few times. It's funky but works great.

Over the years the range of 47 Labs products has extended to various quality and price levels so the Japanese manufacturer now covers quite a broad market segment. Common to all are very idiosyncratic exteriors which not every potential buyer will appreciate. With the new series of Midnight Blue models the aesthetics have become tempered into something more classical to hopefully appeal to a broader range of music lovers. Whilst the outer jacket has grown more conventional—incidentally co-designed with one of Sony's top designers—the wayward 47 Labs approach to minimalism and quality remains squarely in place inside.

The Midnight Blue series counts five models at present. Starting with the lowest model number 4730, there is a genuine FM stereo tuner. Like all Midnight Blue boxes it measures just 20cm in depth and 10cm in height. What differs from model to model is width. All share the clear aluminum bottom plate which bends around the back twice. First it forms the back plate proper with all connectors and posts, then a little lip at the top. That structure is visibly bolted to the actual chassis with protruding stainless steel hex nuts. It's no surprise that the enclosure itself would be painted midnight blue.



To issue an FM tuner in 2012 shows real guts. Don't people listen to some form of digital radio by now? To the contrary. Good ol' FM radio is alive and gaining in popularity. In Japan the 4730 tuner already has become quite the success and the US apparently is following rapidly. That's because FM radio still offers a great amount of uncompromised high-quality analog audio that hasn't been completely killed by too much compression or limiting. One must find the right stations of course. For the European market the 4730 gets adjusted for the frequency bands receivable there. It might not be a surprise sight when a new owner of such a tuner climbs up on the roof to install an old-fashioned FM antenna like a laundry drying rack and plucks more signals from the ether. The 4730 comes with two antenna inputs, one high-impedance 300Ω for the well-known double wire and one 75Ω coax. Fine-tuning is easy and the sensitivity of the tuner is spot on. Even with the simple antenna we used the difference between cable and internet radio was enormous to make real believers real quick.



The Model 4733 is a multi-function device of preamp/DAC. True to 47 Labs form there is neither over-nor upsampling. For this true godfather of the NOS or non-oversampling movement it's always been best not to tamper with the original signal in any way. Accordingly a simple Philips TDA1543 became the vintage R2R chip of choice. There is no filter at its output. Such simplicity incurs a few limitations. One of those is compatibility. It's good only for 16/44.1 Redbook. With a zillion of such recordings available, the right customer won't miss support for what by comparison remains a pathetic handful of hi-res issues. Digital input is via coaxial S/PDIF around back or the frontal USB port. Analog inputs are via two pairs of RCA connectors. For output the user can get a 5 x amplified signal through the headphone socket or the same signal can be routed through the preouts. But there's more. The 4733 also has a pair of spring-loaded clips as a type of loudspeaker connection that's so often maligned already for mainstream applications, never mind high-end audio.

Paired with some nice desktop speakers the 4733 actually makes an ideal computer audio amplifier with its then ample 2wpc. European 47 Labs distributor Sead Lejlic adds that headphone usage was the 4733's intended original focus so internally the same circuitry feeds the headphone jack at the front and the speaker terminals at the back. Only one of these outputs may be used at any one time. The reason for this dual option, Sead explains, is that some high-end electrostatic headphones like the classic Jacklin Float or certain Stax models don't come with a standard 6.3mm plug.

From a computer enter via USB or S/PDIF via an M2Tech hiFace or equivalent and you are all set. But the 4733 can actually drive high-sensitivity speakers. When the speaker terminals get frequently cleaned, even the tiny contact area between clip and wire worked remarkable well. After we swapped speaker cables to have bare wire ends for the spring-loaded 47 Lab terminals on hand, the 4733 drove our 107dB Avantgarde Duo Omega speakers with ease. Granted those are 19 ohms and the bass systems of these horns are self-powered so the 4733 multi-purpose box from Japan had a very easy load to face.



As 4733 buddy 47 Labs has the 4734 power amp. At 15cm slightly wider than the tuner and preamp/DAC, it's still a Tom Thumb or Lady Thumbelina of audio but perhaps on steroids. Rated at 60wpc into 4Ω the amp can be used with many if not most loudspeakers. Input connectors are of the RCA variety while the loudspeaker terminals accept bananas, spades or bare wire. The relatively high weight of the 4734 is due to the large toroidal transformer that dominates the innards and is visible through the cooling slits.

Integrated tastes are served with the Model 4736. Here again there is the small form factor plus an extra iPod entry. Since the 4736 has no DAC it is only able to process the analog output of an iDevice. What 47 Labs did though is adjust the input characteristics to match those of an iPod output where either the headphone or dock outputs may be used. Besides the iPod input on the front there are three pairs of RCA inputs on the back. Above the frontal input selector sits the volume attenuator to control the 25wpc on hand. A pre-out and the same loudspeaker terminals as used with the 4734 complete this model.



Which gets us to 4735, a model number we had already skipped. Behind it hides a CD transport slash CD player. Again 47 Labs went for the minimalist nudist style meaning no tray with accompanying slot mechanism. Here the naked top-loader is covered by an extension of the Midnight Blue signature aluminum flip. The CD gets clamped between this lid and transport spindle whilst being held in place by a magnet. Simple and elegant. During play a part of the disc protrudes from beneath the lid to be prone to some dust from static attraction. A Furutech Destat then becomes a welcome accessory. The transport itself is no longer a Sanyo unit but sourced from Teac. Since the 4735 is also a complete CD player, the onboard DAC is once again NOS and the same no-fuss 16-bit Philips 1543 as in the 4733. Output is via RCA terminals or digital S/PDIF on coax. Basic controls are on the top.

With this plethora of small 47 Labs gear in house it was not easy to choose from the many possible combinations. In line with their design philosophy we started with the simplest combination - 4735 CD player and 4736 integrated amplifier. Interconnecting the two was a supplied length of offbeat Stratos cable. Loudspeakers on duty were either the Vaessen Aquarius eggs or the Arcadian Audio Pnoe horns. Even on the sensitive horns the player/amp combination proved blessedly bereft of any spurious noise or hum. The CD player however was acoustically noticeable whilst spinning if the listener remained at close range. At the listening position however the motor whirring was virtually inaudible. With the Aquarius the little amp had to work harder as their 12-inch woofers consume a bit of power but the 25wpc proved more than capable of putting out a realistic image if the recorded ensemble wasn't too large. Soundwise there was a lack of any distinct signature. There was no emphasis on certain frequency bands and the sound was simply clean with sufficient punch and directness.



When we swapped the 4736 for the 4733/4734 pre/power duo still with the 4735 in player mode, the added value of separates became clear. The same sound character (or lack thereof) persisted of course but details became more apparent which translated into more soundstage depth and enhanced the outlines of individual musicians within that picture. With the Aquarius speakers the extra power reserves also added more bass dynamics.

A bigger change came from converting the 4735 into a pure transport by leasing its digital output to the 4733 DAC. This substantially changed the music tonality. Perceived tone was lighter, the music seemed slower and the musicians less focused on the music they played. Overall the musical coherence changed. Probable cause was the translation from native I_S protocol (CD player) to S/PIDF (digital cable) and back to I_S (DAC). This plus the extra signal path length presumably caused the lighter-weight tonality. Whatever the ultimate reason, we preferred the 4735 as integrated player.

The 4733's DAC proved to become a true treasure when used to process PC-derived signal with XXHighEnd's player software. The absence of redundant math in favor of minimalist digital signal processing was still king. Beware though the uncompromised naturist approach when it comes to the chosen USB cable. Any flaws are brutally exposed and a generic throwaway leash becomes painfully obvious. A better than decent cable will pay back for itself in no time. We chose an ASI USB cable and liked it very much.

Though the dress code for this series is more modest and uniform (i.e. a bit less unconventional), fortunately 47 Labs is still 47 Labs. Safely tucked away underneath the Midnight Blue coats the dare-to-be-bare and dare-to-be-simple mantra is alive and well and pays off. Uncompromised analog and digital signal processing neither subtracts nor adds anything. When asked to pick the cherry of the Midnight Blue crop we must point at the 4735 CD player. What this deck is able to derive from good old Redbook CDs is more than many of the over-the-top over/upsampling multi chip combinations can do. Plain silver discs have become available at rock-bottom prices as many audiophiles clear their collections in favor of computer storage. For us roaming second-hand stores always ends up with a stack of cheap finds that with a little TLC can be restored to pristine shape.

The choice between integrated or separates here is trickier and to a great extent depends on the loudspeakers. The turning point would seem to sit around 90dB. Below that the extra power of the 4734 is welcome. Above that the integrated can provide satisfactory sound levels full of detail and all the rest. On a whole the Midnight Blue series proves that its modest boxes are no barrier to cosmetics or sound. If it was recorded it will be reproduced.

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