

Review of Grandinote' SHINAI, by Michael Bruss, 10/2020 on [6moons.com](https://www.6moons.com)



SHINAI



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klare worte. guter ton.



**Music, magic & Magri.** A few years ago, a Grandinote demo at the Munich HighEnd show *really* appealed to me. That aroused my interest in the brand. Forward to today. I see a relatively compact, beautiful integrated amplifier on our German distributor's website. After the recent heavyweights of ASR Emitter 1 and Avantgarde Paris X-i1100, I also spot a welcome back-friendly change to my review schedule. Well, I should have read more carefully. The young man delivering the Grandinote Shinai by dolly (!) warned me: "This is *heavy!*" I looked. I thought I'd manage. I did. But I needed far longer breaks on each level up to my fourth floor than my not-quite-so-advanced age would justify. Instead of a cute lifestyle product, I had signed up for a real heave-ho amplifier. First off, the Grandinote Shinai wasn't as compact as expected. Its 47cm depth adds unexpected mass to a deceptively compact front of just 32 x 20cm WxH. That means a net 40kg, almost 50kg in its sturdy hard-shell transport case. Uff.

Space efficiency Italian style? The central grill is perfectly polished steel. This unfortunately permits just a limited view on the densely packed interior. The extruded black side profiles round elegantly at the edges. The base plate and rear panel are polished steel again, the former with more perforations. All is assembled to an extremely high standard to feel incredibly tough and inert. The non-sunken screw heads add the necessary industrial touch to not turn into a cosmetic cream puff. This is exactly how I envision the best Italian handiwork. Not by chance perhaps as Grandinote *are* located in Lombardy not far from other sterling examples of tech and craftsmanship like Norma Audio, Diapason or Sonus faber. It really is how to best advertise one's country of origin.

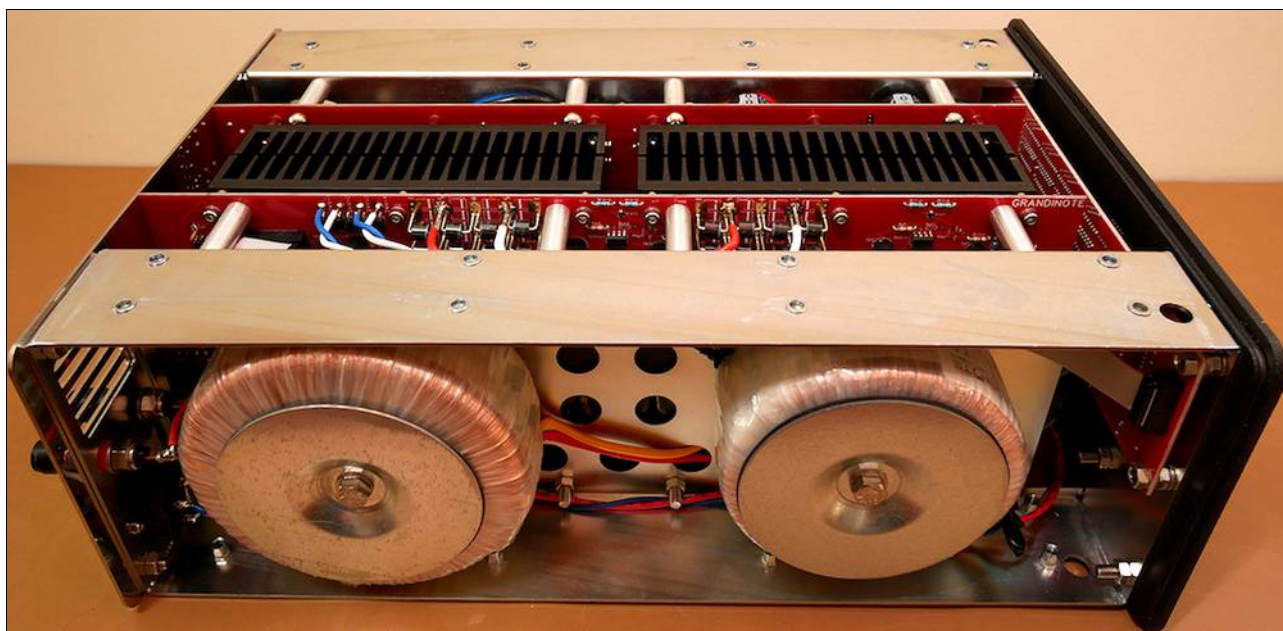
What upon closer inspection catches the eye are two power sockets and horizontally plus vertically mirrored inputs. Hello dual mono replete with two power supplies and, fully consistent, twinned power IEC. Okay, even stricter apartheid is possible with Grandinote's Prestigio. That integrated still splits out into two separate chassis. Shinai adopts the basic Prestigio circuit in a single chassis with 37wpc into 8/4½ per channel instead of 60 watts. If you wonder where 23 watts went missing given the serious weight on hand, blame full Class A mode. Like its siblings, Shinai isn't class A/B to ever even partially switch its transistors. They're always fully on to mean 200-watt idle consumption. Grandinote in fact quote 270 watts of power consumption without further explanation.



*From our prior Shinai review.*

When switched on with its big-clicking central push button, the display of my Tsakiridis Super Athina line filter to whose *unfiltered* outputs the amp connected still showed a moderate 35-40 watts. Then the countdown started. The Grandinote went backward from 99 seconds. With each second that diminished, the Tsakiridis display added a watt or two. By the time Shinai's outputs were live, the Greek display had increased by about 30 watts beyond the countdown's start.

**Magnetosolid tech.** Born in 1973, electrical engineer Massimiliano Magri is the owner and chief designer of Grandinote. He built his first amplifier in 1996. That was a tube amp with transformers designed and wound himself because "it's pretty easy to achieve relatively good sound with tubes." Like his Lombard colleague Enrico Rossi of Norma Audio, Magri nonetheless concluded that true excellence with valves is hardly possible. Still, "I asked myself why almost always, tubes sound fuller and more musically satisfying. I knew the physics of tubes and transistors well to soon realize that the answer *had* to lie in the respective circuits used, not the output devices themselves. My studies and previous experience with output transformers then formed the basis for my Magnetosolid approach."



*From our prior Shinai review.*

Magnetosolid combines *magnet* (for ferromagnetic output transformers) and *solid* (state). Magri designs with typical tube amp circuits just not with tubes. Instead he prefers transistors. As a result, he feels that his amplifiers have the "rich" signature of tubes but significantly more extended bandwidth and far lower output impedance so higher damping factor. He has developed this scheme consistently and today only runs signal-path capacitors before the two output transistors, no longer between gain stages. Negative feedback is shunned. One result of these efforts is an above-average bandwidth of 2Hz-240kHz.

VIP amps via Magnetosolid-VHP? Shinai isn't exactly entry level, just our entry into this portfolio. With Essenza, the Italians have their first escalation. Otherwise identical, Essenza has a different output stage with Magnetosolid-VHP tech. That means a superior output transformer. According to Magri, it features a "special core material" whose cost is very high. Still, the result is worth it: "With identical wiring geometry, the primary inductance of this core is more than 10 x higher. The damping factor is even higher, the frequency response more extended". His solution? Every non-VHP amp has a VHP counterpart to which the non-VHP can be upgraded. On this Magri is bullish: "90% of my customers who bought Shinai will want to replace it with a larger Grandinote at some point and nothing else". But that's not all. Otherwise identical units top even the Magnetosolid VHP models with a still more advanced input stage. Thus Essenza becomes Supremo. However, a later upgrade of Essenza is not possible. Supremo has an entirely different input stage.



Focused on essentials? Given Grandinote's willingness to separate, Shinai contains no phono stage, D/A converter or streamer. Those are only available as separate devices. No headphone jack either. Shinai focuses on its primary task and uses what's required, nothing more. For the nice, small but solid metal remote, that means volume, mute and input selection. For the latter, you have a choice between two RCA and XLR each. Internally the signal processes fully balanced either way. "Everything in our electronics is balanced. To me an indispensable dogma is the symmetry of my circuitry. The only unbalanced Grandinote is the Celio phono stage; but if you use two of them in mono, each works balanced again for my own peace of mind".

**The single-wiring terminals** are high-grade WBT to accept 4mm bananas. Shinai's 40 kilograms rest on four extremely solid metal hemispheres, not the usual garden-variety feet or spikes. "Originally I wanted an alternative to spikes because they reduce coupling to a single point. They simply also scratch furniture. A hemisphere is a good alternative which I have used it since 2003. Our lateral amplifier stands have recesses for these hemispheres to become like steel joints which are also good for the sound." To me Shinai felt like a super sports car: beautiful, of high quality, lovingly finished in detail, uncompromisingly tweaked for performance but not raw power! and without frills to hit the racetrack. With that I just exhausted my annual quota of allowable automotive tie-ins.



*From our prior Shinai review.*

Sound and comparisons. I performed all tests with the J. Sikora Initial Max turntable, Kuzma Stogi S12 VTA arm, Transrotor Figaro MC and LinnenberG Bizet phonostage; or the streaming Waversa Wstreamer bridge and DAC built into the Norma Audio Revo SC-2 preamplifier. Either front end played into QIn Prestige Three or ATC SCM11 loudspeakers through the Grandinote. My resident setup combines the Norma Audio SC-2 with LinnenberG's Liszt stereo amp. Bass was probably *the* most impressive demonstration of Magnetosolid's influence. In fact my system never hosted an integrated with bass that played such versatile chameleon yet still could do solid reliable Rock. Rich, powerful, colorful, easy and relaxed, Shinai covered with equal aplomb DRAM's funk bass in "The Lay Down" and the "Birds" upright on Dominique Fils-Aim's *Nameless* album. The gentle assertiveness of its presentation wasn't unlike that of the ASR Emitter 1. The incomparably more powerful German amp did create a bit more authority from more cubic inches (another car metaphor) but was overtaken on transparency, attention to detail and relentlessly timed speed. The Balanced Audio Technology VK-3000 SE could keep up on impulse response but was less transparent and potent.

Structured and physical, Shinai pushed the ultra-low roiling bass of Nicolas Jaar's "Colomb" [from *Space Is Only Noise*] and the densely woven wafting bass carpet from Massive Attack's infamous "Teardrop" through QIn's Prestige Three two-way tower. Casual, substantially locomotive, seamless and slag-free, it also unfolded the bassy landscape of "Variations" from the Submotion Orchestra's *Kites*.

Even if such explicitness turns minor personal slight, I must admit that my usual Norma/LinnenberG combo felt comparatively clumsy especially in its upper bass. That was almost pudgy compared to Shinai's perfectly balanced effortless energy distribution. At the same time, the Italian controlled the crisp bass drum and slap bass of Rage Against The Machines' "Take the Power Back" nicely dry, always punchy and more realistic than any of the others mentioned. If memory serves, even Norma's PA 160MR monos can't quite deliver Shinai's fluid elegance. Still, they do produce even more pressure from larger transformers and thanks to regulated power supplies, have even more unwavering control all the way down into the infra bass.



Despite all its transparency and speed, I would characterize Shinai's bass as tending to the slightly lush and tonally rich. Its effortless control, undreamt-of structural overtone transparency, color hues and utter lack of boom or billowing reverberation no matter how bold the music then immediately relativizes my statement. I think this challenges long-cherished audiophile pigeonholing and exclusionary thinking, not only in discourse but in dispute. Here character traits often perceived as incompatible or mutually exclusive—think warmth, tautness, pressure, control, substance, lightness, power, impulsiveness, solidity and transparency—all meet without competition.

**Power zone and midrange.** Above  $\sim 150\text{Hz}$ , Shinai came yet closer to the traditional ideal of the neutral amplifier. Concerning tonality, there was absolutely no peculiarity that would indicate any kind of coloration. Voices sounded unobtrusively natural. By comparison, my Norma/LinnenberG combo presents female voices in a somewhat more reserved less open fashion. This I probably wouldn't know without direct A/B. However, the reason for this was no tendency of the Grandinote to exaggerate the upper midrange or presence region. Again it was just outstanding transparency with an unobstructed view on micro information which revealed even the smallest detail of vocal articulation.



On "Danny Boy", the friction as the air turbulence in the narrow vocal tract of Jacintha's throat was something I only noticed this clearly now. The same went for the subtle sounds which a wet tongue makes in a mouth. In SBTRKT's "Wildfire", Shinai illuminated the densely interwoven voices in the second half of the piece with almost X-ray lucidity. This attention to detail went a step beyond nearly anything I'd experienced before. Only the 2.5 x pricier BAT VK-53SE and VK-76SE combination still surpassed this completely natural flood of detail in the mid and presence ranges. Fortunately none of it seemed ever ethereal because the fundamentals possessed real substance and body. The saxophone in Pink Floyd's "Money" came across nicely and Jaco Pastorius' fretless bass purred with pleasant tangibility.

High frequencies. Here I'm going out on a limb. Up to  $\bar{U}15'000$ , the Grandinote Shinai produced the best treble I know. It sounded neither bright, sharp, crystalline and hard nor soft and romantic. It merely was overwhelmingly detailed and airy. No matter whether I put on Yello's shimmering electronica from *Toy* on the Sikora turntable or listened to the cymbals' delicate high-frequency webs in Max Rouch's "Lonesome Lover" via Qobuz É I could hardly believe how much micro information Shinai uncovered. This openness had a pleasantly silky texture that was more fluffy than hard so completely free of stress. Depending on the music, you might think that you've heard a slightly cleaner treble in front of a black background elsewhere. Far from it. Shinai shows every detail no matter how small like when cymbals fade all the way into the noise floor. Fascinating!

Dynamics and energy. Now I feel like moving from duty to inspired freestyling. Even though my earlier comments were laudatory already, it got even better. Time and again, I found myself exclaiming an incredulous "ha!" accompanied by a smile as soon as the Italian reproduced dynamic, impulsive and transient material. It didn't matter whether it was the striking effects-laden guitar of Al Di Meola or the incomparably more natural hence duller Bruce Springsteen six-string. Shinai made their production differences very clear. It always did this with incredibly weightless yet not disembodied attacks to develop maximum microdynamic agility. I perceived every milli-Newton of flutter in Leonard Bernstein's keys treatment of Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*. When grand piano and Columbia Symphony Orchestra went full tilt, the amp's speed helped to deliver convincing large-scale dynamics with substance and force. The ASR Emitter 1 may have dropped an even bigger sledgehammer but didn't seem as agile. This gave the Grandinote the advantage with big dynamic demands in the mid and high registers as on the guitars in "Alhambra" from Yello's *Flag*. It also mastered the electronic impulses on Yello's *Toy* and "Fnktrp" from The Floozies' *Do Your Thing*. Likewise for congas and small drums whenever a recording allowed. Exaggeration wasn't its thing though. Dynamically compressed recordings remained flat.

**Staging and imaging.** This also applied without qualification to the representation of space. If a recording showed no natural gradation of depth, Shinai projected the events quite precisely onto the loudspeaker plane. If something happened in the depth domain, Shinai's impetuous attacks generally didn't move toward the listening position despite all its impulsiveness and unfettered speed. This was as true for the more forward ATC SCM11 speakers as it was for the more laid-back QIn Prestige Three. Instead it created a space that seemed unlimited in depth, starting roughly at the speaker plane then extending well behind it and high up vertically. My Norma/LinnenberG pairing and the other integrated amplifiers seemed more limited especially in their depth differentiation.





Again Shinai combined seemingly contradictory elements: immediate impulse response without braking and free projection that worked into the far reaches of my room. One generally associates the former with a forward projection. But the Grandinote Shinai didn't care about preconceptions. It threw a three-dimensional sound field that wasn't inferior to the high-level BAT VK-3000 SE with its sharp-edged separation, then created even more space between instruments and voices. Tip: on a first Shinai audition, 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 venue if the rest of your chain plays along. But you should give Shinai at least 30 minutes, better an hour to warm up each time you fire it up. Cold and especially when completely disconnected from the wall for a while, its abilities are limited. In this regard too it is an authentic Italian thoroughbred sports car.

**Conclusion.** Few audio components exceed my expectations such that I feel almost prompted to summarize my findings at the review's very beginning just to prep readers to expect plenty of praise and precious little to no criticism. Grandinote's Shinai was just such a one. It's a no-frills high-flyer tweaked for sound quality that defines the acoustically feasible in its exclusive price range with crystal clarity. On one hand, this made my conclusion easy. On the other, it's impossible to break things down neatly when everything's equally brilliant. Here Shinai was one of the most *balanced* integrated amps I know. It didn't exhibit clinical neutrality but added just a pinch of warmth. This embedded so perfectly and so cleverly balanced the very open treble that tonality passed for inconspicuous in the best sense of the word. Probably Shinai's greatest strength lies in the combination of seemingly incompatible virtues from which to build an exemplary coherent whole.



*From our prior Shinai review.*

Shinai hardly knew genre preferences. Limitations will result more from typical listening habits which are just into certain music styles. With its 2 x 37 watts, Shinai sounded quick and stable but won't achieve orgiastic SPL with speakers of average efficiency. Whoever wants jackhammer music at maximum loudness or to feel impulses nailed to the forehead best look for appropriately-scaled wattage generators. Other than that, I only foresee 'danger' for audiophile bliss if a chain, especially its speaker, tends to extraordinarily poisonous treble. One or two PA hornspeakers or boxes equipped with certain French tweeters mainly from the 1990s come to mind. Because Shinai messages nothing but the truth, that includes the truth about your speakers which at times could be unpleasant. Personally, I'm simply preoccupied by something else: what would a more expensive Grandinote model do still better?

### **Psych profile for the Grandinote Shinai ...**

- ∩ plays very deep, powerful and differentiated right down into the infrasonics and controls that action better than many far more powerful muscle amps.
- „ tends to the tonally rich, minimally warm faction of integrated amplifiers.
- „ has a natural very transparent midrange without discernable colorations.
- „ performs with maximum freedom, openness, airiness and, in the best sense of the word, high resolution without the slightest hint of crystalline hardness.
- „ realizes unexpectedly powerful broad-scale dynamics given its moderate power specifications. It only lacks the very last punch compared to one or the other monster amp.
- „ has outstanding microdynamic differentiation.
- „ projects a three-dimensional tangible sound field with lots of space between the performers.
- „ 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 crafted.
- „ weighs 40 kilograms, more than one would think given the relatively compact baffle.



*Michael Bruss*