

The Day Everything Changed: My Audiophile Journey

— The Appeal of the Legendary High-Efficiency Four-Way Japanese Onken Speaker

By Cyrille Guyot



In the summer of 1986, during a beautiful season in Paris, I experienced an awakening that would permanently alter the course of my life. My path as an audiophile had begun modestly at age 15. My parents were completely detached from music, leaving me to chart my own sonic course.

The true turning point—the inception of what I fondly call my "pathology"—arrived with the dawn of the Compact Disc format in 1983. Driven by pure excitement, my brother Emmanuel and I decided to take the plunge. We acquired a Philips CD Hi-Fi system paired with Martin loudspeakers, auditioned at a boutique in Paris's 7th arrondissement. For a long time, we genuinely believed we had scaled the Holy Grail of high fidelity.

That illusion was shattered the afternoon my cousin Rodolphe invited us to hear his Siare loudspeakers, driven by a Rotel amplifier and preamplifier combination. That single listening session completely upended our benchmarks. It ignited a relentless, decades-long quest to recreate the breathtaking scale and immediacy of sound I subsequently discovered at **La Maison de l'Audiophile** in July 1986 under the guidance of **Jean Hiraga**.

I remember vividly that the owner of the shop, William Walther, looked at me and basically told me to forget about ever owning such things, given their extreme rarity and eye-watering price tags! Naturally, I took that as a direct challenge. The rest is history. Today, that dream is fully realized, and my bank account has finally forgiven me. Every single day, I have the

immense privilege of listening to my own 4-way **Onken** loudspeaker system.

The Visionary Legacy of Eiji Koizumi

The narrative of Japanese high-end audio is a rich tapestry woven by visionary artisans. Few figures command as much profound reverence among horn and vacuum tube purists as the late Eiji Koizumi. His journey into audio history began in the mid-1960s, working alongside the legendary Seiya Goto. From 1965 to 1967, Koizumi served as an engineer at Goto Unit, absorbing the core tenets of ultra-high-efficiency acoustic design.

In 1967, driven by a distinct sonic philosophy, Koizumi departed Goto Unit to forge his own path. He established **Onken Seisakusho Co., Ltd.** with a dedicated workshop and atelier located in Tokyo's Nishi-Azabu district. Over the next four decades, Onken established itself as a vanguard of boutique high fidelity, globally celebrated for its uncompromising compression drivers, intricately calculated horns, and highly sought-after, meticulously modified turntables.

Koizumi's uncompromising approach quickly attracted an elite circle of discerning music lovers, including early patrons like Mr. Tamaru, whose support cemented Onken's legendary status. His career progressed in a brilliant parallel with another titan of Japanese audio design, **Professor Akihiko Kaneta**. Together, their contemporary innovations laid the groundwork for a legendary audio heritage. While Kaneda pushed the boundaries of solid-state and tube electronics through his landmark technical articles, Koizumi perfected the companion acoustic transducers and mechanical playback systems. Though Koizumi officially retired in 2009, the Onken name remains an industry shorthand for pure, effortless micro-dynamic presentation and timeless Japanese engineering. He passed away peacefully in July 2017 in Suwa at his family home.

A 30-Year Pilgrimage

Assembling a complete 4-way Onken system was an extraordinary, demanding 30-year ordeal. Lacking the optimal acoustic space during my 25 years living in New York City, I patiently acquired and stored the individual components across various locations. It was an agonizing feeling to keep them boxed up, but I held onto the absolute certainty that I would one day assemble them in my dream listening room.

Throughout this journey, I have been embraced by an incredible global community of horn enthusiasts and dedicated Onken aficionados. I must credit individuals like Jose Amengual,

Marcel Roggero, Gilles Nicot, and Dan Bellity in France for their shared devotion. Most importantly, Jean Hiraga served as the ultimate catalyst for my journey. Today, I am deeply privileged to call him my mentor, and I deeply cherish our ongoing correspondence.

Why choose Onken as a lifelong reference? The simple answer is that no other playback system has ever connected me so intimately to the physical reality of live music. The complex answer lies in how the architecture addresses the single most critical, yet frequently lost, element of live sound: **unconstrained acoustic energy**.

When sitting before a live acoustic performance—the pluck of a double bass, the projection of a vocalist, or the sudden strike of a snare drum—sound waves reach you instantly with zero compression, massive scale, and absolute physical presence. Most conventional high-end hi-fi systems operate like a filter, squashing these natural musical peaks to squeeze sound into narrow, living-room-friendly boxes. The Onken 4-way system bypasses these compromises through four core principles:



The MS-200, a large wooden low-midrange horn covering the vocal range, features a 15-cell design and boasts an imposing weight.

1. **Absolute Elimination of Dynamic Compression:** In a live setting, an instrument's sudden jump in volume (transient attack) is instantaneous. Standard speakers require immense amplifier power to push heavy cones back and forth to mimic this, causing voice

coils to heat up and "compress" the music. Because the Onken system relies on incredibly high-efficiency drivers and horn loading, it requires only a fraction of a watt—in my case, a mere 1.8 watts—to produce a massive, realistic soundstage. The system never strains, clips, or chokes on dynamic peaks, delivering them with explosive, effortless authority.



A modified bamboo enclosure designed for the Onken dual-woofer system.

2. "Aperiodic" Tactile Bass Without Boxy Boom: Standard bass-reflex enclosures often suffer from a "one-note" boomy signature because air is forced tightly through a single, restricted port. The iconic Onken cabinet architecture utilizes massive internal air volume paired with distinct, distributed front multi-slot vents. These side-slotted ports provide a massive total port area that radically lowers air velocity and mechanical resistance on the 15-inch woofers. The result is bass that behaves with the lightning speed of a sealed box, but with the terrifyingly real physical scale of an open environment. You don't just hear the bass note; you feel the texture of the instrument's wooden body and the weight of the air moving in the room.

3. The Micro-Detail of a Shared Workload: Live music is an intricate tapestry of simultaneous frequencies. By delegating the workload across four distinct pathways, no single driver is forced to multitask to its breaking point, ensuring every component operates strictly within its absolute comfort zone:

- o **Low Bass:** Purely mechanical, handling foundational authority.
- o **Mid-Bass:** Captures the visceral "thump" and snap of lower strings and drums without dragging down the lower-mid frequencies.

- o **Horn Midrange:** Floats the critical human vocal range with absolute transparency, free from the heavy burdens of deep bass modulation.
- o **Ultra-High Frequency Tweeter:** Injects the delicate ambient "air" and natural harmonic decays of the original recording space.

4. **Micro-Dynamics and Harmonic Realism:** Live acoustic music is defined by low-level details—a musician's fingers sliding across a fretboard, the intake of a singer's breath, or the natural decay of a cymbal in a room. High-efficiency horn components possess an extreme sensitivity to these micro-dynamics, reproducing tiny fluctuations in energy that standard, heavy-coned speakers completely bury. This extreme transparency transforms the system into a scenic route that requires immense work, dedication, and trial and error—but when you get it right, it becomes a beautiful mechanism that produces endless hours of pure joy.

The Eclectic Test: Seamless Versatility Across Genres

A common misconception in high-end audio is that large horn-loaded configurations are specialized tools—exquisite for intimate acoustic jazz trios or solo vocals, but overwhelmed by the raw transients and varied demands of modern music. My own listening habits fiercely contradict this notion. I am an unapologetic, deeply eclectic music listener. To me, a truly reference-grade playback system must not act as an editor of my musical library. It must be an absolute mirror to it.

The primary reason I chose the 4-way Onken architecture is its uncanny ability to maintain its lifelike presentation regardless of the genre. Because it resolves the micro-details of the recording environment rather than imposing its own signature, the system serves as a transparent window into the essence and core emotion of any musical performance, allowing me to fully experience the distinct recording aesthetics of different eras:

- **Classical:** In massive orchestral works, such as **Mahler's** Symphony No. 2, the Onken system scales effortlessly. It preserves the delicate, ghostly layering of the strings during quiet passages, yet handles the terrifying, explosive energy of full orchestral crescendos without a hint of congestion.



Nikki my Cane Corso , is my best listening buddy

- **Jazz & Brazilian Jazz:** Listening to **Miles Davis's** Kind of Blue or the brilliant 1981 self-titled fusion masterpiece by **Hector Costita**, the acoustic space is recreated with holographic realism. The system captures the free spirit, complex baião rhythms, and jazz-funk basslines of **Costita's** record. The woodwinds carry a tactile airiness while the percussion retains an organic, textured physical presence in the room.
- **Vocal Realism:** Vocal transparency is the ultimate crucible for any loudspeaker system. When listening to the gravelly, cavernous, and intimate baritone of **Leonard Cohen**, the system reveals every bit of chest resonance and micro-inflection of his spoken-sung poetry. Transitioning to the timeless, fragile, and deeply emotional phrasing of **Billie Holiday**, the Onken midrange floats her presence effortlessly. The speakers entirely disappear, translating the distinct recording textures of their respective eras and leaving behind nothing but pure, unadulterated human feeling.
- **Rock, French, & International Music:** When transitioning to the driving rhythms and soulful intensity of **Rare Earth's** anthological masterpiece "Get Ready", or diving into the smoky, atmospheric guitar work of **Chris Rea**, the system adapts instantly. It delivers the essential timing, absolute drive, and low-end speed needed to keep the performance engaging and alive. But it is perhaps in the realm of classic French chanson and international music where the system's micro-dynamics truly shine. Listening to the theatrical, emotionally charged phrasing of **Charles Aznavour** or the dark, poetic intimacy of **Juliette Gréco**, the 4-way architecture captures the exact, unique signature of the original studio tape. Every breath, subtle orchestration, and lyrical nuance is laid bare, wrapping the room in an incredibly nostalgic, life-like atmosphere.
- **Old-School Hip-Hop:** Perhaps the ultimate surprise for horn skeptics is how the system handles the heavy, synthesized bass lines and aggressive transients. Spanning from the intricate production layers of **A Tribe Called Quest** to the striking, raw vocal delivery

and punchy rhythm patterns of **MC Lyte's "Paper Thin"**, the system performs flawlessly. The deep low-end frequencies are delivered with lightning speed and a genuine physical impact—completely free of the muddy, boomy artifacts that plague standard box speakers. Ultimately, the Onken system does not favor a genre; it favors the truth. Having the ability to turn a room into a genuine time machine that transports you to virtually any musical event in history is the holy grail of audio. In my humble opinion, this is exactly what I feel in my room.



Vacuum-tube power amplifiers form the core of the playback system.

System Specifications

- **Loudspeaker System:** Custom Onken 4-Way System
 - o **Woofers:** Altec 416-16A loaded into highly modified Onken W cabinets constructed from bamboo
 - o **Low-Midrange:** Onken MS-200 drivers + 255 ES horns
 - o **High-Midrange:** Onken MS-500 drivers + 456 ES horns
 - o **Ultra-High Frequency:** Onken 5000T tweeters
 - o **Crossover:** Goto EPH-4002 (All 6 dB/octave slopes; crossover points at 250 Hz / 1200 Hz / 8000 Hz)



- **Electronics:**
 - o **Preamplifier:** Kondo M7 Line
 - o **Phono Stage:** Kondo M7 Phono
 - o **Step-Up Transformer:** Kondo SFz
 - o **Amplification:** 2 mono blocks 845 PP Komuro amplifiers (Bass) - during hot summer replaced by Kaneda 225 / 3 x Verdier 45 tube amplifiers (Highs)



- **Digital & Analog Source:**
 - o **Turntable:** Shindo/Verdier La Platine Verdier
 - o **Phono Cartridge:** Kondo IO-j
 - o **Tonearm:** Moerch DP-8
 - o **DAC:** Denafrips Terminator Plus
 - o **DDC:** Denafrips Gaia (Synchronized with Terminator Plus)
 - o **Memory Player / Streamer:** Laufer Teknik

- o **SACD Player:** Esoteric DV-50

 - **Cabling & Infrastructure:**
 - o **Speaker Cables:** Duelund
 - o **Interconnects:** Audio Note SOOTTO RCA / Xangsane Silver RCA
 - o **Digital Cables:** Mad Scientist USB / DIY Oyaide BNC
 - o **Equipment Racks:** Arcici / Herzan isolation
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I feel incredibly blessed to experience such a playback system. Above all, what I love most is sharing these listening sessions with fellow music lovers. It is wonderful to see more and more young people embracing this approach—putting their screens away and simply being present in the moment.

Although I still consider myself "young," I feel a strong desire to begin passing on what little knowledge I have. I want to give the next generation a chance to experience the immense joy of a truly realistic playback system. Achieving this level of realism is an enormous, demanding task, but the reward is entirely worth it. I look forward to many more years of welcoming people from all over the world to share this passion.

Last but not least, I want to dedicate this article to Mr. Eijiro Koizumi. Thank you for your incredible work and research, which has allowed me to experience your legacy in my own home.

Vive la Musique!

Cyrille Guyot

