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The Audiophile Voice

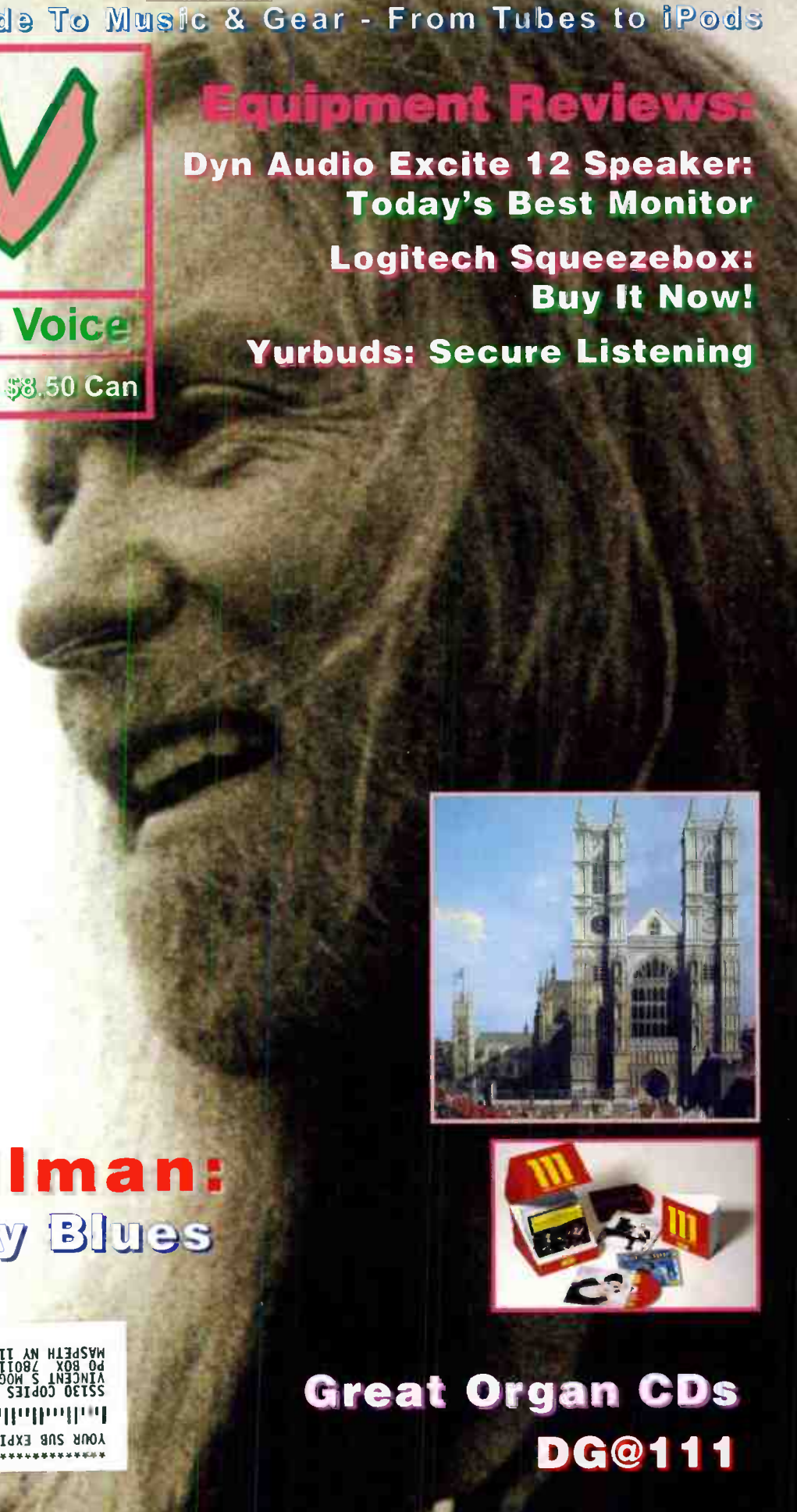
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VOLUME XIV, ISSUE V

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incorporates several new design technologies together with the reworking of older methods to meet the most critical expectations of high-end music enthusiasts. While tube amps are known to provide amplified audio without the harshness too often found in solid-state amps, these same tube amps often add distortion at loud listening levels. The basic answer for a designer of tube amps is to give them a power supply with very high levels of voltage and current; the result is usually a hot, heavy, huge unit. To deal with the problem, APL has used the newest switch-mode technology in a power supply that is not only considerably smaller in volume but also does not add distortion. APL achieves 200 watts across the audible output range with less than one percent distortion, and they have kept the signal path clean of any capacitors and solid-state devices, using tubes and coupling transformers exclusively. Another example of the firm's innovative technical thinking is a microprocessor with a color LCD interface that does periodic auto-biasing of all the tubes in the amp, together with providing auto start-up and shut-down sequencing of the power supply subsections. The basic design uses 833C triodes in push-pull with no negative feedback, and the firm believes their amp is the only such design being manufactured commercially currently

Price: \$175,000 per pair.

Data: www.audiopowerlabs.com

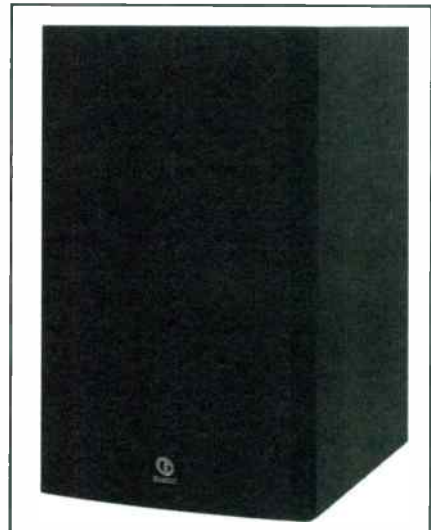


The Boston Acoustics CS26 Loudspeaker

is the lead entry-level speaker system in the firm's new Classic Series II, reaffirming the company's ability to offer first-class sonics at moderate prices. The CS26 is a two-way bookshelf system with a 6½ woofer. The speaker's Kortec soft-dome tweeter uses woven polyester with a special stiffening agent to produce the extended frequency response ordinarily associated with metal dome tweeter, but without their harshness or distortion. The graphite-injected woofer features the firm's Deep Channel Design making use of a deeply grooved pole plate enabling the voice coil to travel further without bottoming, for greater output. Given their size, use in a video-oriented system is an obvious application, and the design includes magnetic shielding to prevent interference with the TV picture.

Price: \$149.99.

Data: www.bostonacoustics.com



the audiophile voice

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THE AUDIOPHILE VOICE

was founded in 1992 by The Audiophile Society under President Hy Kashalsky and purchased by Guts & Elbow Grease Publishing Ltd. in 1995.

The Audiophile Society may be contacted by phoning Recording Secretary David Nemtzer at 347/834-6412.

Inquiries regarding reviews should be made to the Editor via e-mail or phone.

SUBSCRIPTION SERVICES

Postmaster: Please send Form 3579 for change of address to P.O. Box 43537, Upper Montclair, NJ 07043. Periodicals Postage Rate has been paid at Montclair, NJ 07042 and additional mailing office.

Changes of Address: Please send an e-mail to audiophilevoice@verizon.net. Include both old and new address. Allow one issue for address change to take effect, but please notify the publisher if a replacement copy needs to be sent. Please notify the Publisher of subscription difficulties by writing to P.O. Box 43537, Upper Montclair, NJ 07043 or by sending an e-mail to him at: audiophilevoice@verizon.net.

U.S. subscriptions are \$12 for six issues, \$24 for 12 issues, or \$36 for 18 issues; Canadian subscriptions are \$39 (U.S. dollars) for six issues and \$65 for 12 issues; overseas subscriptions are \$66 (U.S.) for six issues and \$110 for 12 issues. If you prefer to use a credit card, see the Paypal portion of our web site www.audiophilevoice.com.

The Audiophile Voice Vol. 14, No. 5; publication date, September 30, 2011. Dewey decimal number 621.381 or 778.5, ISSN 1522-0435, is published quarterly by Guts & Elbow Grease Publishing Ltd., 605 Valley Rd., Upper Montclair, NJ 07043. Printed in U.S.A. The *.pdf files (and editorial solace) are by Satellite Advertising & Design, Montclair, NJ.

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PRODUCTION OFFICES

605 Valley Rd.,
Upper Montclair, NJ 07043
973/509-2009

E-mail: audiophilevoice@verizon.net

Web site: www.audiophilevoice.com

Back Issues are available;
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STATEMENT OF OWNERSHIP, Management, and Circulation of *The Audiophile Voice* magazine required by 39 U.S.C. (Postal Service form 3526, October 1999) Publication title: *The Audiophile Voice*. Publication number: 018-639. Filing Date: September 20, 2011. Issue frequency: Quarterly. Number of issues per year: 4. Annual subscription price: \$12.00. Complete mailing address of known office of publication: 605 Valley Rd., Upper Montclair, N.J. 07043. Complete mailing address of headquarters or general business office of publisher: 605 Valley Rd., Upper Montclair, N.J. 07043. Full names and complete mailing address of publisher, editor, and managing editor: Publisher, Eugene Pitts, III, The Audiophile Voice, 605 Valley Rd., Upper Montclair, N.J. 07043.; Editor, Eugene Pitts, III, The Audiophile Voice, 605 Valley Rd., Upper Montclair, N.J. 07043; Managing Editor, none. Owners: Eugene Pitts, III, and Sharon Pitts, The Audiophile Voice, 605 Valley Rd., Upper Montclair, N.J. 07043. Known bondholders, mortgages, and other security holders owning or holding one per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities: None. Tax status: Not applicable. Issue date for circulation data below: Volume 14, Number 5 (September 20, 2011). Extent and nature of circulation (net press run): a) Total number of copies: Ave. number of copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 13,700; Number of copies of single issue published nearest of filing date: 13,400; b) Paid Circulation: 1) Mailed outside-county paid subscriptions stated on form 3541: Ave. number of copies each issue during preceding 12 months, 9,159; number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 9,276; 2) Mailed in-county paid subscriptions stated on P.S. form 3541: Average number of copies each issue during preceding 12 months, 0; number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 0; 3) Sales through dealers and carriers, street vendors, counter sales, and other non-USPS paid distribution: Average number of copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 1,919; number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 2,036; 4) Requested copies distributed by other mail classes through the USPS: Average number of copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 1,000; number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 1,000. c) Total paid and/or requested circulation: Average number of copies each issue during preceding 12 months, 12,078. Number of copies of single issue nearest filing date, 12,312. d) Non-requested distribution; 1) Outside-county as stated on form 3541: Average number of copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 1,000; number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 500; 2) In-county as stated on form 3541: Average number of copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 0; number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 0; 3) Non-requested copies mailed through the USPS: Average number of copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 0; number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 0; 4) Nominal rate copies distributed outside the mail: Average number of copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 500; number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 500; e) Total free or nominal rate distribution; Average number of copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 1,500; number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 1,000; f) Total distribution: Average number of copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 13,578; number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 13,312; h) Copies not distributed: Average number of copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 122; number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 88; i) Total: Average number of copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 13,700; number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 13,400; j) Percent paid and/or requested circulation: Average number of copies each issue during preceding 12 months, 89 per cent; number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date, 92 per cent. Publication of statement of ownership is required and will be printed in Vol. 14, No. 5 issue, to be published in September 30, 2011. Signature and title of editor, publisher, business manager or owner: Eugene Pitts, III, publisher. September 22, 2011; I certify that all information furnished on this form is true and complete.

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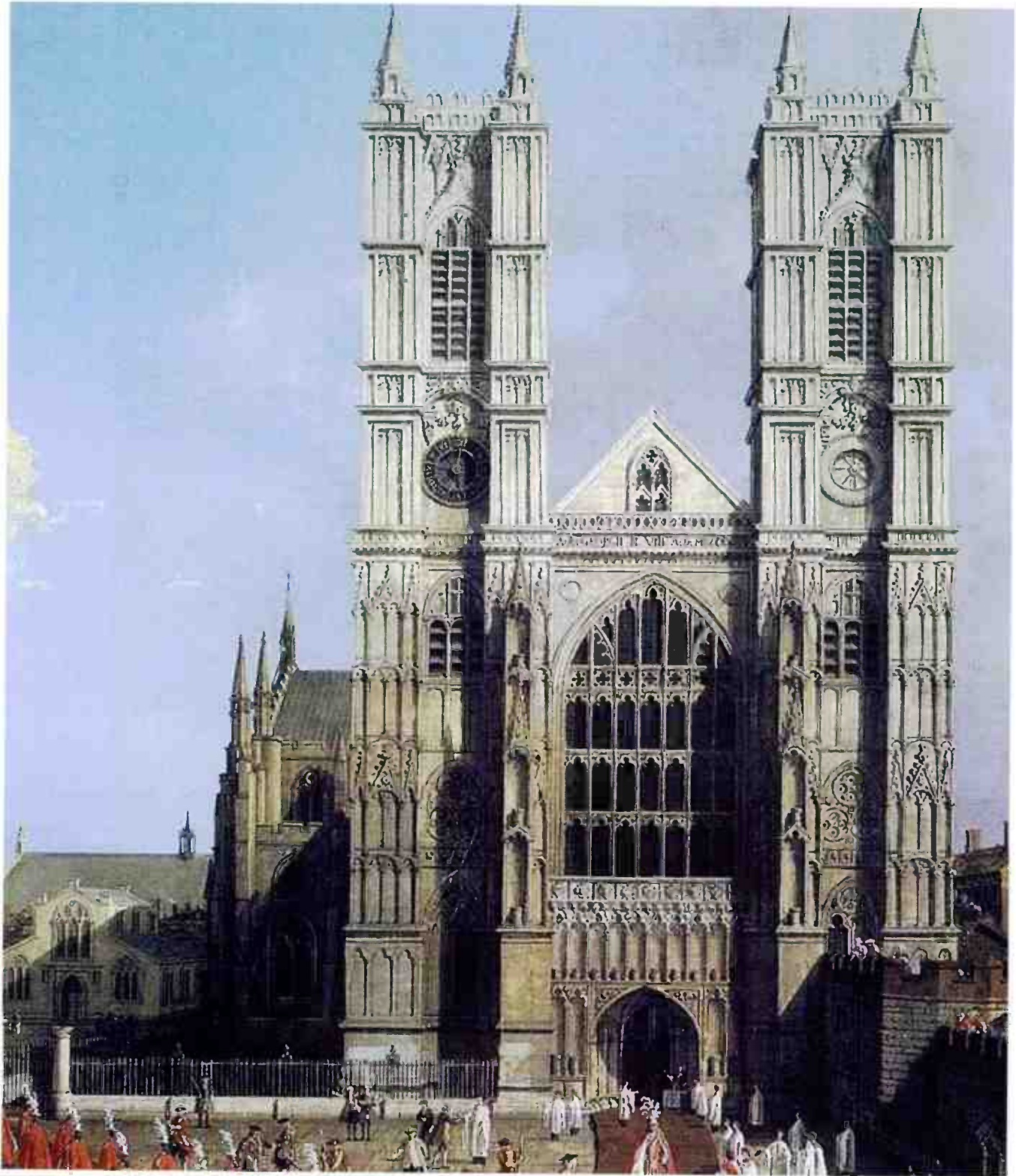
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Westminster Abbey by Canaletto, 1749

Super Organ CDs



Don Scott



On April 29, 2011, Fleur de Lis Recordings released a highly enhanced and cleaned-up recording of the 1937 Coronation of King George VI and Queen Elizabeth II. This was a timely two-disc release to correspond with the recent Royal Wedding, which also took place in Westminster Abbey and used the same basic organ. If you have experienced listening to old mechanical and electronic recordings, you may have noticed that sometimes the trueness of the performance sneaks through despite clicks, scratches, and surface and electronic noise. The ear/mind can tune out the imperfections and the music flows with analog magic.

the Coronation. The voice restoration is surprisingly good, especially on a bonus track: "A Message to the Empire from H.M. King George VI," broadcast from Buckingham Palace on Coronation Day, May 12, 1937. This selection is akin to a modern-day recording with no noise, clicks, or buzzes. On the point of musical enjoyment, I found no other content for the audiophile to gush over. An exception is perhaps the ending of the last musical selection on disc 2: Recess, "God save the King," where the might of the Harrison & Harrison organ (a revamping of the Hill organ of 1848, installed for the 1937 occasion), still sneaks through.

Details of the organ in Westminster Abbey.

Good organ recordings are tough to find. Inspired by the British Royal Wedding, Fleur de Lis has issued CDs of historic remastered 78-rpm discs of the 1937 Coronation of King George VI and Queen Elizabeth II.

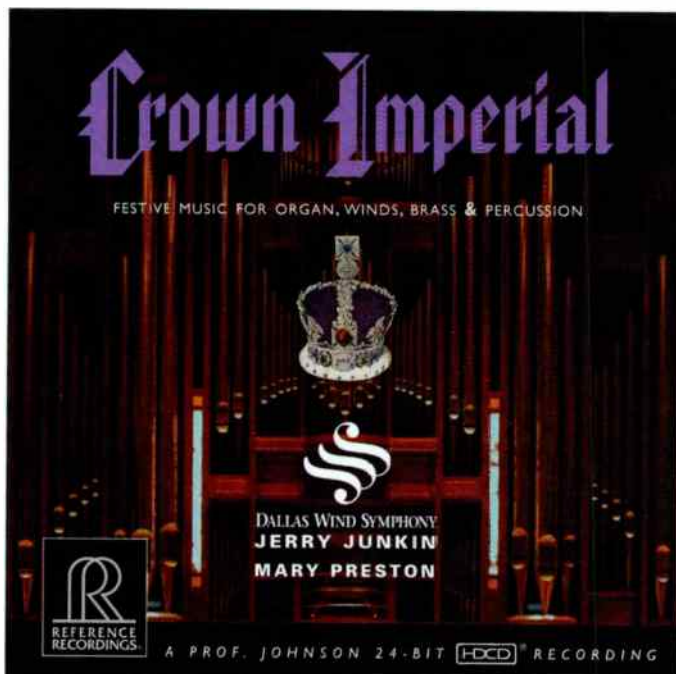
In this recreation, Ward Marston, a pioneer and master in the field of audio restoration, applied his skills with finesse and pomp over the aged circumstances to remove those unwanted artifacts. The results are sound quality of limited merit for the audiophile, all electronically sifted

Westminster Abby was the site of the wedding of William and Kate earlier this year, as well as the 1937 Coronation of King George VI and Queen Elizabeth II in 1937.

from a set of original issue of 28 78-rpm records sold shortly after

Overall, the two-disc set is an excellent revisited preservation of a historical event with a side-line of a few blurbs of audio nirvana. It is available at www.fdl-recordings.com. For comparison, you may wish to listen to a copy of the original 78 of the King's speech; for this, and to see other Coronation footage, go to www.britishpathe.com/record.php?id=49839.

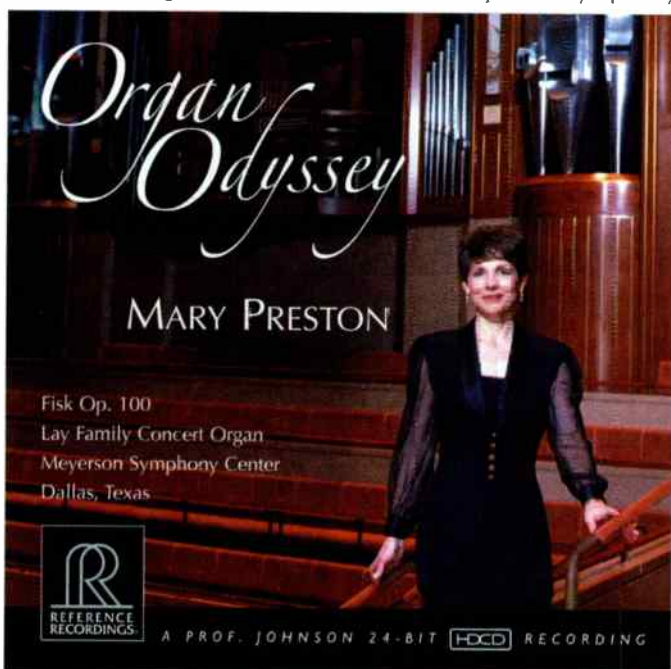
A little about Mr. Marston: Ward was born blind, began playing the piano at age four, and later gradually developed jazz-playing skill as well. As a teenager, he studied organ with Pierre Cochereau, the organist of



Notre Dame, Paris. Interestingly enough, he managed the college FM radio station at Williams College, which I often visited a few years later in the early 80s as a broadcast equipment salesman. At Williams, Marston developed skills as a recording engineer, which led to further projects at Columbia Records, the Franklin Mint, and Bell Laboratories, where he restored the earliest known stereo recording (1927). In addition, he would sometimes jam with big-band artists and formed the Ward Marston Orchestra, which still performs at private parties. But all along, he was developing listening skills: What should a restored recording really sound like and by what electronic means can that “real” aural image be transferred onto a hard drive?

Back Home

On a trip to Dallas in April 2011, I could not resist making a visit to the Morton H. Myerson Symphony



Center, one of the better concert halls anywhere. I hit it lucky: The place was empty and the guard on duty let two family members and me explore to our hearts' contents. I did the hand-clapping experiment to check out decay times with the place empty and with most of the massive adjustable concrete slab reverberation chambers and panels closed. Only moderate (Ricola-type) echo came back. My thought is that this is a great place for full orchestra even with a full house, but lacks the longer multiple reflections and longer decay times of larger European cathedrals that augment massive organs. With this thought in mind, here are two recordings of required listening to prove my point — the first for full orchestra, the second for solo organ.

(1) Grab a copy of the 2007 Reference Recording (RR-112) and listen to the last selection of Michael Daugerty's "Niagara Falls" (1954) featuring the Dallas Wind Symphony directed by Jerry Junkin and Mary Preston on Organ. The recording engineer was Keith O. Johnson, who without his skills this would have been just another mediocre recording, but it is not. It is wonderful. It is a confluence of skills that will take you on a ten-minute thrill ride in and around and over the falls. There is always an edge of excitement and an undercurrent of irresistible energy, with a few periods of peacefulness just before the barrel breaks open and exposes you to the fury of the falls. In this recording, Mary Preston does her magic by adding monstrous low-frequency foundation and power to this recording using the Lay Family Organ — well-played, Mary. To me, this is the most enjoyable piece of classical music I have ever experienced, perhaps because I have a picture of the might of the falls cemented in my mind. If you have ever been to Niagara Falls or plan on going, you will understand and most likely agree: the musical representation is vivid.

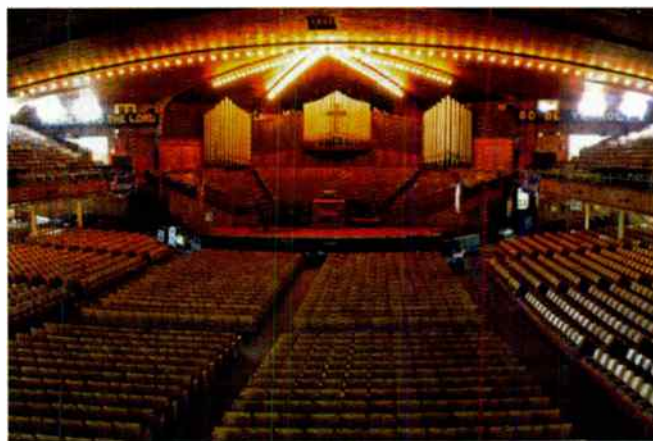
(2) On a separate, slightly less squeaky-clean Reference Recording (RR-113), also recorded by Keith O. Johnson, Mary Preston gives a fine rendition of Charles-Marie Widor's "Symphony No.5 — Toccata," with an accurate, exciting, and energetic performance of this selection. She was restrained at the times where that is needed and forceful where it is not, yet all the time painting a picture of beauty, with masterful strokes of hands and feet. In this selection, I was most mindful of her skills rather than of the particular instrument she was playing or the hall acoustics. I should say that the other musical selections are notable too. One thought I had was that the same organ in a stone-walled cathedral would sound much better. This is due to the frequency shifts and different time relationships of the multiple reflections (decays) in such a cathedral, which change pitch and add and subtract to a given fundamental note and contribute heavily to the overall tonal signature of a particular organ. Without these laws of physics, an organ can sound uncomfortably “dry” and not musical at all; one cannot live without the other. Here are two thriller selections on YouTube that demonstrate the importance of acoustics and organ as musical mates: Daniel Roth plays Widor — Mache from 3rd Symphony St. Semin, Toulouse, France. The main sanctuary of St. Semin is 378 x 203 x 67 feet and features a monster Cavaille'-Coll organ, basically built in 1888. My other listening suggestion is McNeil Robinson plays Dupre at St. Mary the Virgin Church, which is on 46th Street, just off Times Square. This is a 1970 record-

ing of "Ave Maris Stella IV" from Marcel Dupre's Op.18 "Vesperes du Commun". The low-frequency growl of this organ is amazing and is no doubt acoustically amplified by the standing waves being additive as ideal reflections in the sanctuary. The church has frequent concerts featuring the organ (now updated); consult its website for schedule: www.stmvirgin.org.

Full of Wind

Since my days as a child, and before I could walk, my mother used to carry me with her to hear the Great Organ in the auditorium of the Ocean Grove (NJ) Camp Meeting Association. (There are scheduled organ recitals during the summer: Check http://www.oceangrove.org/pages/ORGAN_RECITALS11). Then, at age six, I would just camp next to the organist at the Asbury Park Convention Center and become fascinated by the Wurlitzer's unique sounds. Since then, I have frequently been entranced by the impressive sound of what is currently the largest church organ in the world in the Cadet Chapel at the West Point Military Academy. Three summers ago, the north tower of the chapel and organ were hit twice by lightning, and the strikes cleaned out most of the miles of control wiring, console controls, and a few blower motors. At my last visit on April 3, 2011, about 80 per cent of the 874 speaking stops and 23,236 pipes (and counting) were restored. Thanks to W. Grant Chapman, Curator of Organs, USMA, and others, the organ is regaining and refining its might into an instrument as good as any good organist wants it to be. Since the chapel (especially when full) lacks the long, multiple decay times of large European cathedrals, the "big" sound is created by duplicate ranks being played both at the front and rear of the chapel. Sit in the right spot along its 275-foot interior and the sound is immersively captivating — surround sound without electronics.

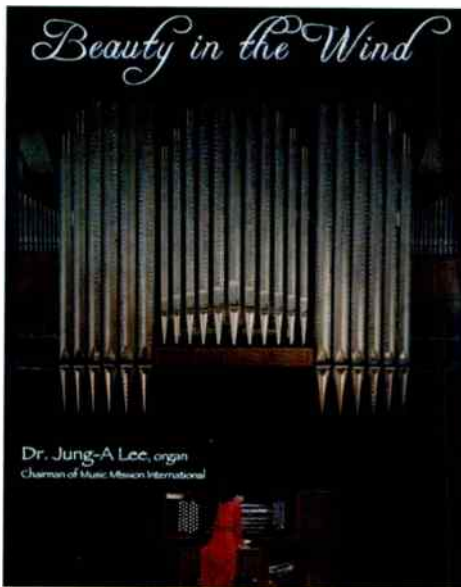
During my last visit in April to West Point, the featured organist was Dr. Jung-A Lee, who is a well-known and a highly sought-after performer. She is a Korean-born and received a good share of her musical education at Yale. She is currently an organist at St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Newport Beach, CA, an adjunct professor at Vanguard University, and holds a multitude of other positions to promote music. To add depth to her desire to especially promote organ music, she founded Music Mission International in 2009, and she is chair of that non-profit organization which has 12 board members. A full list of her education and many achievements is best read at www.musicmissioninternational.org. Also, her recording can be purchased on this site, along with viewing her bi-coastal concert schedule. Because I appreciated her fine performance at West Point of Widor's "Allegro (Symphony No. 6 in G)," I simply had to meet her after the concert. As a result of that meeting, Dr. Lee kindly sent me a copy of her latest DVD/CD set, "Beauty in the Wind." One selection especially fascinated me because of the skill which it required to play on the organ: "A Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy" from The Nutcracker Suite by Tchaikovsky, recorded at the Geneva Presbyterian Church, Laguna, CA. The fairies were indeed dancing with unusual delicacy. In contrast on the same organ, "Prelude in Classical Style – G," Jung-A presented a quite robust performance, but needed just a few more Wheaties from her to polish it to a higher level. Other selections



that I found worthy on the disc were "Sinfonia from Cantata No. 29, 'We Thank You, Lord, We Thank You' " by J.S. Bach, especially the let-it-all-loose ending on the organ of The First Baptist Church, Santa Ana, CA. Additional perfection is "Trumpet Tune" of Purcell, recorded at St. Andrew's and in a duet with David Washburn; each artist enhances the other. David Washburn holds the position of Principal Trumpet with the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra and the Los Angeles Opera Orchestra and has been the principal trumpet on several movie soundtracks. Also on the like list is "Theme and Variations from Hommage à Frescobaldi by J. Langlais." The pace and timing just seem to flow in the correct order; I was not agitated and didn't anticipate anything, just experienced calm listening in peace. Overall, I was pleased with the DVD/CD set. No, it is not a block-buster or woofer-smoker. In fact, the sound suffers some digitus, with rather harsh limiting snafuing the music's wide extreme dynamic range, but the audio quality is still good enough to appreciate the artist, who is exceptional. (Note: I am being super critical.) The DVD duplicates many of the preferred cuts, and appears to have an edge in audio quality. The CD is 5.1 surround, the DVD is a two-channel mixdown from 5.1. The video playback quality is excellent.

On November 20, 2011 at 3:00 p.m., Felix Hell, a most prominent organist, will be giving a recital at the





West Point Cadet Chapel. This should be a spectacular event and worthwhile attending. Search: West Point Cadet Chapel, then go on to "Events." Felix Hell's CDs can also be purchased from Reference Recordings: www.referencerecordings.com.

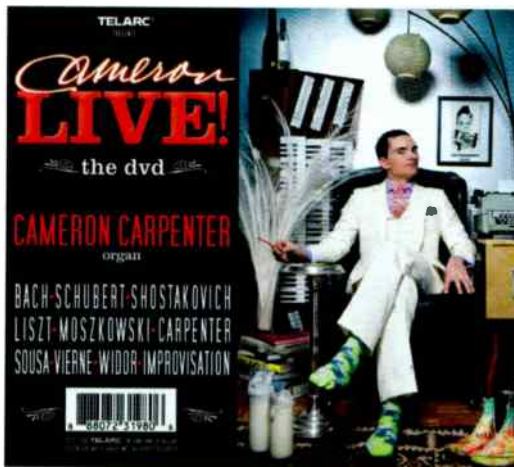
Moving On

On the subject of DVD CD sets, I received a copy of Telarc's "Cameron Live, the DVD." Cameron Carpenter is a something of a controversial artist in that he uses his own idiosyncratic interpretations of Bach, in particular, perhaps to make his recordings more energetic and appealing to the non-organ or non-Bach listener. The editor tells me that he is reminded of Virgil Fox in this regard, but Bach is able to weather such adaptations. Frankly, I don't care much for Bach by Carpenter, but I was pleased to find one selection on the DVD that is fascinating in its creativity: An original 1988 piece by Carpenter entitled "The Clockwatcher." This short (3:40 minute) selection played on his personal practice Wurlitzer organ is sheer story-telling by musical expression. There is no sonic bashing without reason, just pure genius. The background has clock-ticking at an unchanging pace. The music builds from a sweet, normal metronomed pace to a more excited one, then it slows down from the peak on a bell-shaped curve of excitement, and returns to the more normal metronomed rhythm. The end is climaxed by a few drum beats, a clang, louder drum beats, then nothing — death and the clock stops t i c k i n g .

C a m e r o n describes this piece in the video interview section of the DVD as

telling a story and that it is "a study in the ominous (impending danger, a threatening)." However, the atmosphere of the music seems a little mild for that harsh thought: Rather I think it is life: being born into innocence, changing to a more hectic pace as man tries to squeeze in too many things before death, then life slows down, and finally death. The constancy of the clock ticking runs a dual theme: Man cannot alter time, he only thinks he can. The video illustrates how precisely the artist adds feeling to his own creation and how skilled Cameron is at stretching his hands to simultaneously play three of four manuals on the Wurlitzer. Still for the audiophile, both Bach lovers and those who don't care for his music, the rest of the two-disc set is worthwhile; give it a listen, as there is no doubt that Carpenter is of exceptional talent. The disc number is Telarc 39180-00, www.telarc.com.

Lastly, four suggestions to hear why this magazine, Jung-A Lee, and I are enthusiastic about promoting the cause of reviving and cultivating listening to classical organ. (1) Again visit YouTube with your best-dressed audio card, audio driver updates, audio environment programs, best sounding player software, amp, and speakers to "CM Vidor – Symphony No.6 – Allegro – Matteo Imbruno." This recording was from Concert Breda Grote Kerk, 1995, on a Flentrop organ in the Netherlands. I include this selection, not because Matteo Imbruno is a better organist than Jung-A Lee, but because its artist, organ, cathedral acoustics, and recording techniques all sum and are interdependent to make one fantastic recording. (2) Another fine example of organ on YouTube is "Saint-Saëns, from St Quen." Here Johannes Geffert plays the "Fantaise in E Flat" on the Cavaille'-Coll organ in Quen Rouen. This organ is considered the finest organ in France (built in 1890 by Aristide Cavaille'-Coll.) Of particular note is its superior, super-powerful 32-foot Contra Bombarde. The total organ signature is smooth and pleasant; it just doesn't scream at you, yet it can rattle your innards without strain. I have heard live, in person, the Great Organ of Saint Eustache, in Paris, but prefer the less brilliant sound from Quen Rouen. (3) Another mind-boggling adventure into preserved fidelity via YouTube is an offering, which came from an early digital recording sold on an 80's Mitra LP, then copied to cassette, and finally it made its way to the video. The sound quality is staggering, except for a few record clicks that really don't get in the way. This is a live must-hear organ, if I ever get to northern France. (4) The last entry I found of interest on YouTube is "Louis Viene – Finale from the 1st Organ Symphony". It uses the "sound" of the organ of the parish church of San Vincezo, Martine, in Nole (near Torino, Italy.) The organ was built by Gardini in 1922; however, the church collapsed on November 15, 2006 and destroyed the organ. The amazing sound heard on this YouTube selection is from a NDB-based virtual organ program. The organist, Frederico Piglione, who must have an incredible musical memory, similar to Ward Marsten mentioned earlier, saved samples from similar sounding organs, primarily Shirokuma's Notre Dame de Budapest as the main base, plus added the best from a few other favored organs, and recreated as close to his aural memory the sound of the destroyed organ in a computer program. "Wow!" is the word; just give a listen. And "Oh yes," I do like Dave Baby Cortez too.



Deutsche Grammophon Over A Century Old

Larry Jaffee



CLOCKING IN at older than a century, Deutsche Grammophon is one of recorded music's enduring brands, so venerable that in 1877 its German founder Emile Berliner was the second or third individual to capture and play back sound. (The first, a Frenchman named Charles Cros, actually beat Berliner and Thomas Edison by about six months with a similar invention, but was not commercially minded and failed to patent the invention. Meanwhile, Berliner and Edison each insisted they were first.)

In late 2009, DG commemorated its 111th anniversary, releasing a barrage of products, including everything from two "Collector's Edition" boxed sets of 55 and 56 CDs, respectively (adding up to 111, of course) for completists to a coffee-table book, *Deutsche Grammophon: State of the Art: 1898 - Present. Celebrating Over a Century of Musical Excellence*. For classical fans who prefer to be entertained visually, there's also a DVD boxed-set containing 13 discs.

DG and its familiar yellow logo are synonymous with quality classical music, and its rich archives no doubt could be plundered for years ahead to repackage an infinite number of collections. After all, we're talking about recordings that date back to the beginning of recorded sound.

Deutsche Grammophon – State of the Art (book, Rizzoli)
111 Classic Tracks (promotional USB, 028947781684 / Universal Music Group)
111 More Classic Tracks (six CDs, 002894779235 / Universal Music Group)

While neither massive music set was made available to us for this article, DG and the Universal Music Group, which now oversees the label, provided the initial primer collection *111 Classic Tracks* set on a promotional USB stick (not available to the public), containing all the music (albeit MP3s) found on the six CDs, which still can be purchased. We also received another 111 tracks on Volume 2's six-CD collection (aptly titled *111 More Classic Tracks*) released in 2010, carrying the extremely reasonable list retail price of \$24.99).

The six-CD collections are various artist compilations, whereas the *Collector's Editions* contain complete artist-specific albums that can also be purchased individually. Both the boxed sets and smaller collections were originally billed as limited editions that "wiped off shop shelves within a few weeks of release," according to DG. So due to popular demand, all four collections, as of this writing, are back in circulation in CD form. The two volumes each of *Collector's Edition* (list price: \$169.99) and *111 Classic Tracks* are also available for download as LossLess (CD-quality) files from Deutsche Grammophon's online web shop, <http://www.dgwebshop.com>, as well as from iTunes. A separate website, <http://www.dg-111.com/>, tells the label story in cyberspace.

The *111 Classic Tracks Vol. 2* CD cover art of a red background with three ones painted in yellow (the first volume reverses the colors) cleverly recalls the Beatles' *1* compilation from 2000, demonstrating that the classical world's paying attention to the marketing ploys of the popular sector.

According to the press materials, DG's "philosophy has always been the greatest recordings by the greatest

artists in the world" – something clearly borne out by the formidable catalog. The talent roster runs from Caruso and Richard Strauss at the beginnings of recording history to recent arrivals Alice Sara Ott and Yuja Wang. New music is represented by the likes of Steve Reich. Opera staples too: Pavarotti sings Verdi, and of course, a version of "Carmen" are present.

State of the Art – Rizzoli's handsomely packaged coffee table book, which lists for \$65 – traces recording back to the days of Berliner, who established the company in 1898 in Germany even though he had already emigrated to the U.S. in 1870. Eight years later he invented and patented his first disc and player, and used American-made hydraulic presses to produce the shellac discs for the Gramophone Company, whose discs became more popular than Edison's cylinders (first format war!), resulting in an industry standard. Gramophone's manufacturing ingenuity, coupled with well-tooled, commercial-minded English and American partners, resulted in the first doubled-sided discs in 1907.

Like Berliner, Edison also attempted to lock up talent; they unwittingly became the first entertainment practitioners of vertical integration (i.e., single company owns both audio playback mechanical device and content). Sony would buy its way into Hollywood and the American music business in the late 1980s.

The book does a good job chronicling the evolution of the company through every recording technology development along the way (i.e., 78s to LPs to cassettes to CDs), and how turn-of-the-century talent like Caruso became hot properties among early industry players on both sides of the Atlantic. Berliner hired American Fred Gaisberg to be an in-house producer; Gaisberg personally financed Caruso's productions.

World War I hostilities had a negative impact on Deutsche Grammophon because of its German roots, and raw materials became scarce; history was repeated less than three decades later. Details abound regarding record specifications, their materials composition and how they evolved over the years.

Vintage posters, advertisements and artist photographs illustrate the book's text throughout, and include such revelatory items as a copy of the formal order from the Gestapo demanding the confiscation of recordings made by Jewish artists and a photograph of a company factory in Hanover, Germany lying in rubble after an Allied bombing.

Post-WWII, Deutsche Grammophon settled into what it did best: Aggregator of the finest repertoires, composers, conductors, soloists and orchestras. Interviews and contributions from the artists, historians, producers, engineers and employees who have played a vital role in the label's success represent about 80% of the content of the 224-page book, which includes two sampler CDs of label recordings. Considering the company's rich history that harks back to long-bygone eras, oddly none of the 38 tracks date earlier than 1961.

That's not the case with Volumes 1 and 2 of the 111-track sets. A 1911 performance in St. Petersburg of Mussorgsky's "Proshchay, moy syn/Boris's Death" by Feodor Chaliapin & Orchestra (found on *111 More Classic Tracks*) is the earliest recording of what was made available to TAV, and sounds a bit hissy, which could be expected no matter how much state-of-art restoration might have been applied.

The recordings made available are top heavy with selections from the past few decades; the exceptions also being tracks recorded originally in 1921, 1927, 1928, 1930 and 1934. By the way, the USB's music sounded way better coming through my Teac all-in-one unit – which I originally bought to turn my vinyl into digital files but I still haven't figured out to use the darn thing – than through my MacBook.

To the classical music neophyte, the *Classic Tracks* collections are a treasure trove, providing staples of all the major composers; well-known names such as Beethoven, Mozart, Debussy, Chopin, Bach, Dvorak, Strauss, Schubert, Ravel, et. al. show up track after track. The history of music that stands against time can be certainly intimidating to the uninitiated. After all, the American public education system dropped music appreciation long ago. I have fond mid-1960s memories of periodically being in my grade-school auditorium watching Leonard Bernstein's "Young People's Concert" series. Anyone who remembers his childhood but hasn't kept up with enriching himself with musical cultural might still recognize snippets like Brahms's "Hungarian Dance" from a classic Bugs Bunny cartoon.

Where the DG primers fall short is providing some sort of context of how and why these collections were assembled, besides the arbitrary anniversary. The *More Classic Tracks* booklet offers details of composers, performers, pieces, years and places, but not much more in terms of liner notes, which probably says more about the releases' relatively low cost. A musicologist's essay could have helped putting it all in perspective. Well, maybe that's the book's purpose.

Also disconcerting is seemingly haphazard track order, as it switches genres (opera to symphony) and decades with no apparent rhyme or reason. It took a while for me to figure out that each track is listed alphabetically by the featured soloist/performer's name (as opposed to composer). It seems to me that a better approach might have been a grouping by style of music, or influences (i.e., how one thing led to the next).

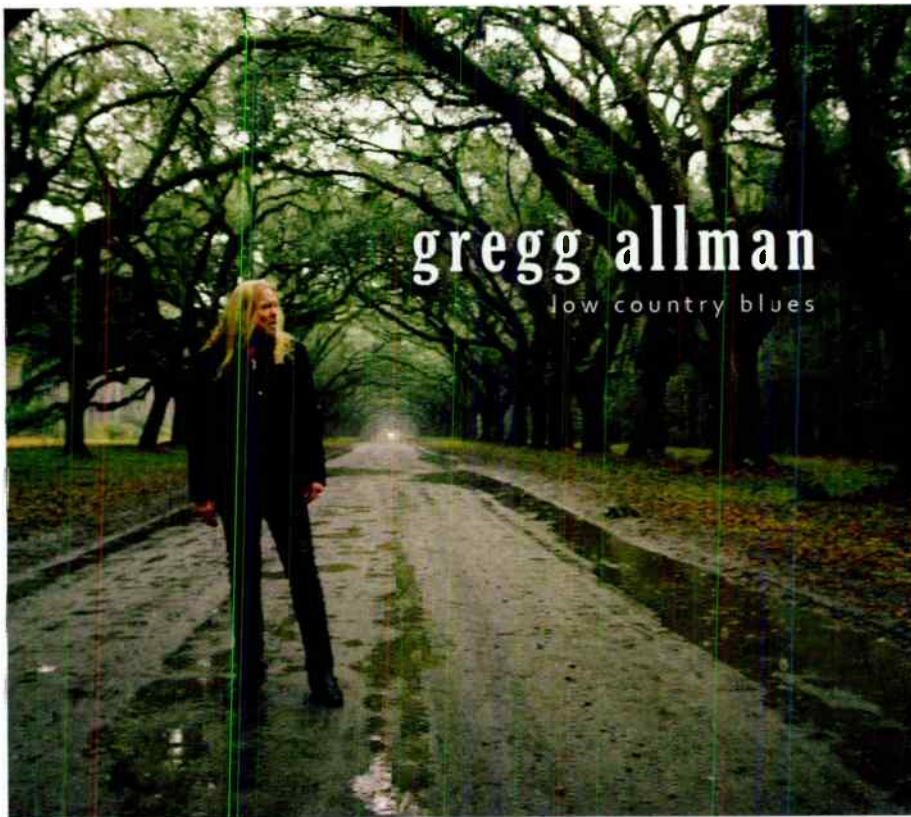
There's also the abridged, slice-and-dice nature to the proceedings that the purist might find frustrating. Does a 2:01 taste really do justice to Tchaikovsky's "Nutcracker Suite"? (In any case, Vol. 1 offers the "Dance of the Sugar-Plum Fairy" as played by the Berliner Philharmoniker and conducted by Ferdinand Leitner in 1959 in Berlin.)

More Classic Tracks also offers rock star Sting stretching beyond his comfort zone, singing a John Lowland (1563-1626) composition, "Fine Knacks for Ladies." And John Denver's "Annie's Song" gets a classical treatment, courtesy of contemporary crossover flautist James Galway, leading the London Symphony Orchestra.

It begs the question whether one label alone can really present the world's greatest music in one place? Do consumers really shop buy by label, or is it the music contained within which dictates whether an album is purchased or not?

To the connoisseur, no doubt classical experts can suggest better performances and recordings from other labels, but DG is certainly not a bad catalog to try to aggregate in one huge helping. After all, the mere appearance of the DG logo conveys an esthetic that promises and delivers quality more often than not.

Larry Jaffee



Blues

Gregg Allman *Low Country Blues*
Rounder 1161-2215-2

BEFORE YOU EVEN HEAR a note, coupling of Gregg Allman's guitar and singing with production from T-Bone Burnett seems like a match made in heaven.

It's as if the ownership of a baseball team, bent on winning, breaks the bank to lure over the best offensive and pitching free-agent talent available in the off season (Phillies anyone?) to bolster an already imposing lineup, and they easily triumph through the regular season, sweep all opponents in the playoffs and make a championship look like kids' stuff.

It's a wonder that these two stellar talents haven't crossed paths prior to doing *Low Country Blues*, which is the best album I have heard in the first two months of 2011. It will, most certainly, rank right up there at year's end.

That's not surprising since everyone who works with Burnett sounds better, and this has been the case for the past quarter century. But it was the release of his soundtrack for the Coen brothers' 2000 film *O Brother Where Art Thou?* that the producer gained a permanent position in the zeitgeist of popular culture and the music business.

Allman also is firmly positioned in those heavy-weight annals. He was, of course, the kid brother/front man of the Allman Brothers Band, which courageously carried on following the October 1971 motorcycle death of older brother/lead guitarist Duane. His demise came a month after of the band's essential *Live*

At The Fillmore East, recorded March 1981. Gregg, 13 months younger than his sibling, reluctantly took the reins of the band, and 40 years on, the road, indeed, goes on forever. (The ABB was booked for a near month-long Manhattan residency at the Beacon Theater during March 2011. After a festival gig in April, Gregg then takes his solo band on a tour through the south and Europe, booked solid through the fall.)

However, Allman has sporadically recorded in the past two decades, and *Low Country Blues* is his first solo record in 14 years. He and Burnett reportedly bonded over T-Bone's plans to build an exact replica of Sam Phillips's Sun Studio in Los Angeles. Allman was sold on Burnett, who promptly assembled a crack studio band for them to record in Los Angeles, and picked several dozen blues standards for him to consider.

Right from the lead track's opening acoustic bass notes of Sleepy John Estes' "Floating Bridge" and Allman's unmistakable gruff vocals a few seconds later, we know we have a winner. Three electric guitars, courtesy of Burnett himself, Doyle Bramhall II and Hadley Hawkensmith, and a rolling piano from Dr. John (listed in the notes under his real name Mac Rebennack), who plays throughout (and actually sat in with the Allman Brothers Band on guitar when they performed at Duane's funeral), combine for a sound reminiscent of Tom Waits' *Rain Dogs* era.

"Little By Little" picks up the tempo a bit, with Dr. John doing a fill worthy of Jelly Roll Morton. On Skip James' "Devil Got My Woman," Allman and Burnett retire to the Delta Blues swamp, with nice slide work from Bramhall. Muddy Waters' standard "I Can't Be Satisfied" sounds like it could have been an outtake on the Rolling Stones' *Exile On Main Street*, with Burnett injecting lots of reverb in the proceedings, and adding his own guitar as well, along beside Bramhall's.

since it's sort of an update on "Midnight Rider," one of the band's classic staples, done by Allman in several different styles over the years. But "Just Another Rider" is not as spooky.

The four-piece horn section carries Amos Milburn's long-lost 1950 blues composition "Tears, Tears, Tears," with a notable horn arrangement by Darrell Leonard. That's followed by a female quartet of soulful female back-up singers who make "My Love Is Your Love"

At the end of 2011, *Low Country Blues* will likely be considered one of the year's best.

When Gregg was 21, he already sounded like an experienced old man, so it's not surprising his voice is grizzly. But his tone has ripened, and one can visualize Burnett behind the control room glass giving Allman vocal direction. This is especially true on "Blind Man," in which Allman fools you that we're listening to Ray Charles. Did I mention Allman's always been a great blues singer with impeccable timing? On this track, Burnett's crack session men weave in and out of Allman's lead vocal growls, as the horns punctuate particularly dramatic moments.

The only original is "Just Another Rider," which Allman co-wrote with Warren Haynes, guitarist in the ABB, which he has played in off and on since 1989. The song could have easily fit well on an ABB album,

memorable. It's followed by some blues testosterone on Otis Rush's "Checking On My Baby." The traditional "Rolling Stone" caps the set, and Allman's trademark Hammond B3 organ is prominent in the mix; he plays the keyboard on eight of the tracks.

There's not a bad track among the dozen on *Low Country Blues*, and its entire 52-minute vibe smacks of a rustic "Unplugged" VH1 session, or at the very least, another trademark Burnett production that no doubt next year will win a Grammy.

For Allman, the success of *Low Country Blues* is all the more poignant when considering that in June 2010 he had a liver transplant, and he wondered whether he would live to see the release of these tracks. The man's a survivor in more ways than one, and you owe it to yourself to hear this album.

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George Witterschein

Classical Grass

Mike Marshall Trio *Mike Marshall's Big Trio*
Adventure Music AMA 1051 2

A LISTEN TO MIKE Marshall's Big Trio CD might just do you some good. For one thing, it might cure you of the "there's no good new music anymore" blues. The tracks on this CD – all save the intro to one of the nine was composed by Marshall himself – will grab your attention, put a smile on your face, get your toes tapping, and also distinctly fail to insult your intelligence.

For another, it might get you into the relatively new genre of music which I call "Country Classical." If you haven't discovered this brand of music, you really ought to give a listen. It emerged in the 1990s as the brain-child of superstar classical/bluegrass (which is crossover, I guess) violinist Mark O'Connor and to a lesser extent his colleague, bassist Edgar Meyer. They concocted a new blend of country-bluegrass, jazz, and European Classical music, and sometimes rock-pop. It's proven to be a hit with the music public (and certainly with this reviewer).

On this disc, Marshall plays mandolin, its bigger brother the mandocello, and guitar. Joining him are O'Connor-trained Alex Hargreaves on violin and Meyer fan Paul Kowert on bass. They're as tight and intuitively together as you'll ever hear a string trio get.

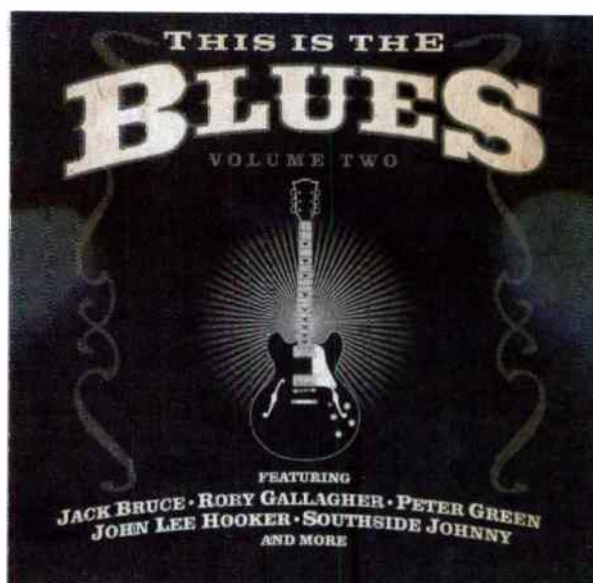
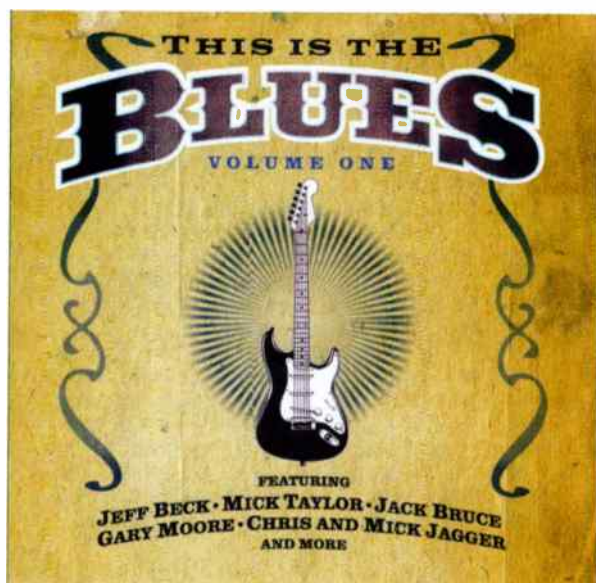
Of course, the string trio has been around since at least the time of Mozart, who in 1788 composed a masterpiece for such a group (K. 563 in Eb). Beethoven worked wonders in the medium, too. It's a flexible and very useful ensemble, whether as violin-violoncello (Mozart/Beethoven) or Marshall's lineup here.

This disc has some signs of classical music in several places. For example, track 3, "Three Dragons," seems to me to be written in something like classical variation form. (It also features some Mark O'Connor-like pyrotechnic playing in bluegrass style from Hargreaves' violin.)

And track eight, "The Princess," is sufficiently moody and dissonant to qualify as "Modern Classical Angst-Ridden Music". I would easily have believed that this was written by a bluegrass relative of Bartok or Martinu. One might fantasize more accurately about a bluegrass Shostakovich, if such could ever have existed. And track nine, "Sweetmill" is a nicely introspective and contrapuntal piece with very clear textures, reminiscent of classical chamber music of the last century, though not at all as dissonant as track eight. So if you like classical music, there's definitely material on this CD for you.

And if you don't? Don't let me scare you off! This album is totally accessible. Most of the music is folksy and irresistible. For example, track five, "Sleeping Giant," after a brief introduction, morphs into a splendid train song. This might almost have come off a Doc Watson record!

The sound is clear, harmonically accurate, and appropriately lively. It lets the music reach you very effectively. I'd be happier if the soundstage and image were a *lot* larger. But that shortcoming aside, the CD pleased me greatly. I recommend it.



Blues

Various Artists *This is the Blues, Vols. 1 - 4*
Eagle Rock ER201742, ER201752, ER201762, & ER 201772

Gene Pitts

THERE ARE QUITE a few collections of blues around, some of them extremely good. The best are terrific introductions to those new to the music, but also can be even better to blues lovers like myself, who have listened and collected for decades. I am older than I like to admit in print these days, but when I graduated from college, the first Dailey was Mayor of Chicago. And that was where I lived, at the north end of Wells Street, in Old Town, above a dry cleaner's store and next to a bar named Vieux Carré, where Lincoln took off to the northwest. There was a string of clubs on Wells to the south, not to mention the ones in other parts of town. My favorite was Big John's, about three blocks down Wells from my apartment. My ears and taste got tuned up by regular attendance there and I was lucky enough to hear Muddy Waters, James Cotton, Paul Butterfield with his wonderful team of guitarists Mike Bloomfield and Alvin Bishop, et al.

Be the history as it may, there are still many really fine blues musicians I haven't heard live or even

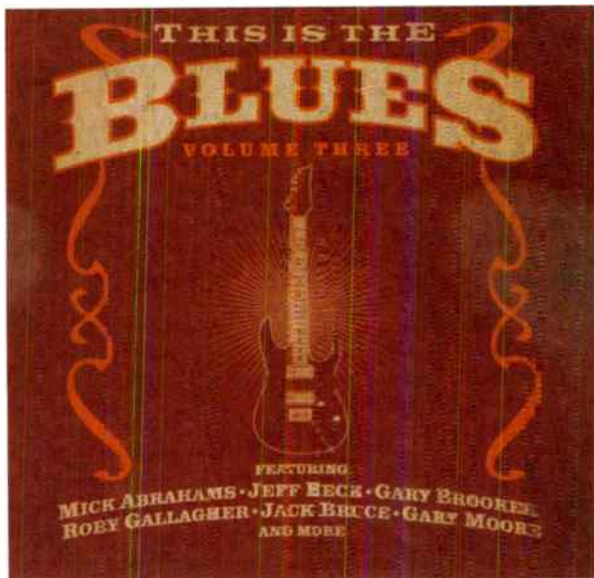
heard of. And that's one more reason for having collections. Us ol' folks need to be educated, too. Or maybe it's more like a first introduction to the kissing cousins of our favorites. Or admitting that there are other parts of the country, and maybe the world, where great blues is made and played.

Before I tell you what I think about this new set from Eagle Rock, let me quickly mention a few of the collections that are milestones, at least to me. The best, I think, is the 14-volume *Blues Masters* set from Rhino, each CD specializing in a particular form, e.g. Chicago, Delta, Jump Band, etc. The first set I ever ran into was Vanguard's *Chicago / The Blues / Today*, which originally was released on LPs, though I bought the CDs later on. Alligator's *Living Chicago Blues* comprises excellent recordings from about the same period and artists as the Vanguard set. Arhoolie offers a large number of first-rate blues CDs, as does Columbia / Sony, but they basically don't title the discs *Vol. 1*, *Vol. 2*, etc. What's usually done on these two labels is that they focus

on either an individual artist or on a particular instrument or style. I purely love Arhoolie's *Lightning Hopkins* and Columbia's *Roots N' Blues* series including *The Definitive Blind Willie McTell*, *The Complete Bukka White*, and *The Slide Guitar / Bottles, Knives & Steel*. You should intuit from this discussion that I think that the Eagle Rock set stands in there with these above.

This is the Blues from Eagle Rock comes up as a set of four CDs with stand-out performances from musicians one to four decades younger than the "ol' folks" covered in the sets above. They may not be as well known or famous as, say, B.B. King, but as the initial press release says, the songs "sting, burn, and hurt so good." I've often thought that hot blues is like really hot bar-be-que, burns you in a way and place that you can't scratch or quench with a sweet fire you just want to keep on burning.

There is a lot of music in this set of four CDs, as each has 15 songs and is about 70 minutes in length. Frequently, these recordings are covers, rather than original tunes,



but that's not a bad thing here. I like Muddy Water's version of "Little Red Rooster" better than Savoy Brown's, but I am glad to have Brown's and I will listen to it, often. Same deal with "Crawlin' King Snake" done here by the Peter Green Splinter Group. There are about five earlier versions out there, and I haven't got the time to go see whose got to the record bins first. In the end, that sort of question ignores

the more important query; is this good music, worth listening to? And maybe more important, is it worth buying all four CDs? In a word, yes!

There are too many lead musicians to list them all, so let me just list a few songs with the main musician: "Hobo Blues" from Jeff Beck, "Going Down Mobile" by Savoy Brown, "Long Grey Mare" by Harney Mandel, "I'm in the Mood" by Jack Bruce, "Leaving Town

Blues" by Rory Gallagher, "Red House" from John Lee Hooker, "Traveling Riverside Blues" from Peter Green and Nigel Watson, "This is Hip" from Mick Taylor, "Man of the World" by Ian Anderson, etc.

If you seriously like listening to blues, then you owe it to yourself to seriously consider buying this set. It may not turn out to be the most played set you own, but it might.

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Classical

Stile Antico
Puer natus est
 Harmonia Mundi SACD HMU 807517
Song of Songs
 Harmonia Mundi SACD HMU 807489

STILE ANTICO, an English choir specializing in Renaissance polyphony, is my favorite singing group, period. They're so good that I'm actually reluctant to review them for fear you'll think me a gushing groupie. But for your sake, my readers, I'll force myself; I'd hate for anybody to miss out on the profound pleasure of hearing these singers.

Let's consider their recent SACD on Harmonia Mundi, *Puer Natus Est: Tudor Music for Advent and Christmas*. On it are works by John Taverner, William Byrd, and others – Renaissance stalwarts all.

Thomas Tallis's *Mass Puer Natus Est* ("A Boy Is Born") is the featured work. It's wonderful; I own three recordings and treasure them all, but this is the one I hear in my dreams.

Stile Antico separates itself from the pack with the extraordinary beauty of its sound, and also with its unique conductor-less approach (they interpret on the model of the string quartet, "horizontal" collaboration being the operative notion).

Their beautiful sound is really their incomparable blend of voices, and it immediately strikes the ear. I heard of a classroom in a prestigious graduate music school where the professor started playing one of their recordings, and within seconds every student's jaw hit the floor. There's really no way to describe how good this group *sounds*, even compared to such other stellar British Renaissance groups as the Tallis Scholars, The Cardinal's Music, the Sixteen, etc. Twenty seconds into track one is all it will take to convince you.

As interpreters, they handle Tallis's numerous repetitions of *Dominus, Deus Sabaoth* ("Lord God of Hosts"), in the *Sanctus* (track six) to perfection. They control the

volume with both restraint and passion, as you would hear from a good string quartet, and as a result a build to a powerful climax.

The effect is spellbinding. Like a string quartet, they draw us into the intimacy of their music-making. One is almost rocked to a heavenly sleep, which I am thinking was Tallis's objective: To give us a taste of eternity, in music, in the here and now.

Very similar comments apply to their *Song of Songs* SACD, also from Harmonia Mundi. This disc offers us settings by various Renaissance composers of well-known Biblical texts celebrating the love between Solomon and Sheba in graphic physical terms. Again the singing is celestial, and Stile Antico makes it easy for us to understand how the Middle Ages and Renaissance could regard these songs not as "smutty," but rather as *sublime*, a metaphor for the love between God and the human soul.

On both discs, Harmonia Mundi has served the art well with first-rate SACD sound. I've said before in these pages that SACD treats choral groups very kindly. Like really good vinyl, it lets you hear the "verticality," if you will, of the standing singers, probably by accurately reproducing the nuances as the sound changes from deep in the belly through the chest and throat, mouth, lips, and finally into the ambient air.

Both of these discs are among the best Renaissance vocal releases of recent decades, so much so that even if this is not the kind of music you normally listen to, you might want to treat yourself to them. Say to yourself, "My ears deserve this." You could even play them as background music as Christmas parties – I am not such a snob about music that I would object. I don't think your guests would, either!

Yurbuds Earphones

Jim Frane



SOMETIMES YOU CAN use a piece of electronic gear and know right away it is among the best of its genre you have tried. When that happens, you can't help but smile. My first audition of the Ironman Yurbuds gave me such an experience. It is particularly exciting and surprising when such an item is relatively inexpensive and has a broad application across the user spectrum. You don't have to know anything about sound quality to appreciate what's going on with the Yurbuds. You don't have as your alter-ego Iron Man, the Marvel Comics hero who wears an armored suit during the movie about him, nor do you have to compete in the Ironman Triathlons of long swims, long runs, and long bike rides. All you really need is a desire for your earphones to stay in your ears during *any* sort of activity.

The Yurbuds come packaged in a cardboard box containing the earphones, cables, and soft plastic covers made of medical-grade silicone that fit over the earphones. For storage or traveling, there is also a pouch with a zipper and a belt loop. All these items are a bright red. A "Quickstart" card is included with instruc-

tions for installing, using, and caring for your Yurbuds. There is a 90-day warranty for parts and labor.

The CEO of Yurbuds, triathlete Seth Burgett, had the idea for the custom-fit cover for earbuds while participating in an Ironman competition. The company's literature says that Yurbuds were created by athletes, audiologists, and engineers to avoid pressure points in the ear, to stay in place, and to provide a pain-free yet good listening experience. I would say, "Goals accomplished." And then some.

The key to the very clear listening experience of the Yurbuds is the smooth, tapered and flexible plastic slip-on pieces that fit over standard earbuds. The user also slips these partially into the ear canal. This design makes for better quality of sound than the usual in-ear designs that do not fit as well as the Yurbuds. These soft, pliable plastic covers direct virtually all of the sound from the small speaker in the earbud to the listener's ears, as well as keeping out extraneous or background noises. Be aware that when you are wearing the Yurbuds, you may not hear potentially dangerous outside sounds quite so well. In other words, pay attention if you are running in the street.

With the more common 5/8-inch diameter rigid earbuds, I have a hard time achieving a good fit, even if they have a foam collar or cushion. They are just a bit too large for me, whereas the smooth, pliable Yurbuds were very comfortable over extended listening sessions as well as being easy to use.

The big plus of the Yurbuds for me was that the flexible, tapered plastic sleeves that provided a good fit *into* my ears, making for a better listening experience. I recommend giving the Yurbuds a try.

NOTES

Yurbuds Ironman Earphones, \$49.99. Sold at Best Buy stores nationally or on the web at www.yurbuds.com.

Dynaudio Excite X12 Loudspeakers

Joel Shumer



DYNAUDIO, a Danish company whose origins as a producer of raw speaker drivers go back more than three decades, has become a designer and manufacturer of entire speaker systems, performing all work in house at Skanderborg, Denmark. They have developed a wide range of systems ranging from modestly priced mini monitors to mammoth towers with sticker prices more usually found in car dealerships.

The Dynaudio Excite X12 mini monitor is part of a family of Dynaudio speakers that includes the Excite X16, a slightly larger monitor that also requires stands; the Excite X32, a two-way, floor-standing model, and the Excite X36, a three-way, 41-inch tower which offers

double the power handling and sensitivity of the X12 with a factory-claimed bass extension ± 3 dB to 35 Hz. There is also the Excite X22 which is intended as a center-fill unit in a five-channel home theater system.

Dynaudio lists the msrp per pair as follows: Excite X1, \$1,200; Excite X16, \$1,600; Excite X32, \$2,800, Excite X36, \$3,800, and Excite X22, \$850 (each). High gloss white and black finishes cost a bit extra. The X12s are 11.2 inches high, 6.7 inches wide, and 10 inches deep. They work well on 24-inch stands. Each X12 weighs a bit less than 15 pounds and has a build quality and appearance on par with the best. A one-inch silk dome tweeter handles everything above the 2000-Hz

crossover point and is flat into the realm where only your dog will appreciate its capabilities. Although the midrange/bass cone is only 5.7 inches in diameter, it provides enough excursion to play loudly and surprisingly deep. With the help of a rear port, the speaker can provide a flat response down to 50 Hz \pm 3dB according to the accompanying spec sheet. Dynaudio rates the speaker's output at one meter as 86 dB SPL for 2.83 volts input. The system's power handling capacity is rated as 150 watts, and Dyn says this will allow a pair of speakers to reach 110 dB SPL levels at a distance of one meter, quite enough to sound loud even in a moderately large room.

Comparison: Rogers LS3/5a

In July of 1978 I brought home a pair of diminutive LS3/5as as hand luggage on a return flight from London. Four years earlier the BBC had licensed Rogers to manufacture the speaker whose design evolved from the BBC's need for small on-site monitor speakers. When this system became commercially available, the audio press on both sides of the Atlantic published review after review, filled with praise and a degree of awe that such a small box could produce high-quality "life-like" sound. The LS3/5a has never really disappeared from the market place; it is currently being made by Stirling Broadcast with a "BBC LS3/5a" name plate attached to the speakers' back panel. Current price in the USA is about \$1,700 per pair.

I've had my vintage LS3/5as in only two rooms in all these years where they have been used on a regular basis but almost always as part of the background. I guess I had gotten used to them and pretty much take their sound for granted. What a shock when I critically compared them side by side with the Excite X12s. Only slightly smaller in size, the LS3/5as when A/Bed with the X12s produced a tiny, closed-in sound that took me by surprise. The X12s could play much, much louder with a considerably broader and more natural dynamic range. Where the X12s seemed open and exhibited a neutral tonality, the LS3/5as now seemed nasal and rolled off. I had always forgiven the LS3/5as lack of anything below mid-bass but again, by comparison, the X12s were able to produce a fast, solid, and rhythmic bass line that seemed to reach out and bring me into the music.

I've returned the LS3/5as to the far end of my office where I am now working on this review. Carl Neilson's *Helios Overture* is softly playing on WQXR. The sound is really quite OK. But now I know it is also light years away from what Dynaudio has been able to do with a box of about the same size.

Comparison: Dynaudio Excite X16

The Excite X16 is slightly bigger, slightly heavier, has the same tweeter, and almost the same crossover, a slightly larger cone speaker, and costs an extra \$400 per pair. For this, you get a 1-dB gain in sensitivity and, according to the factory, a \pm 3 dB response down to 40 Hz, 10 Hz lower than with the Excite X12. Impressive for a small monitor!

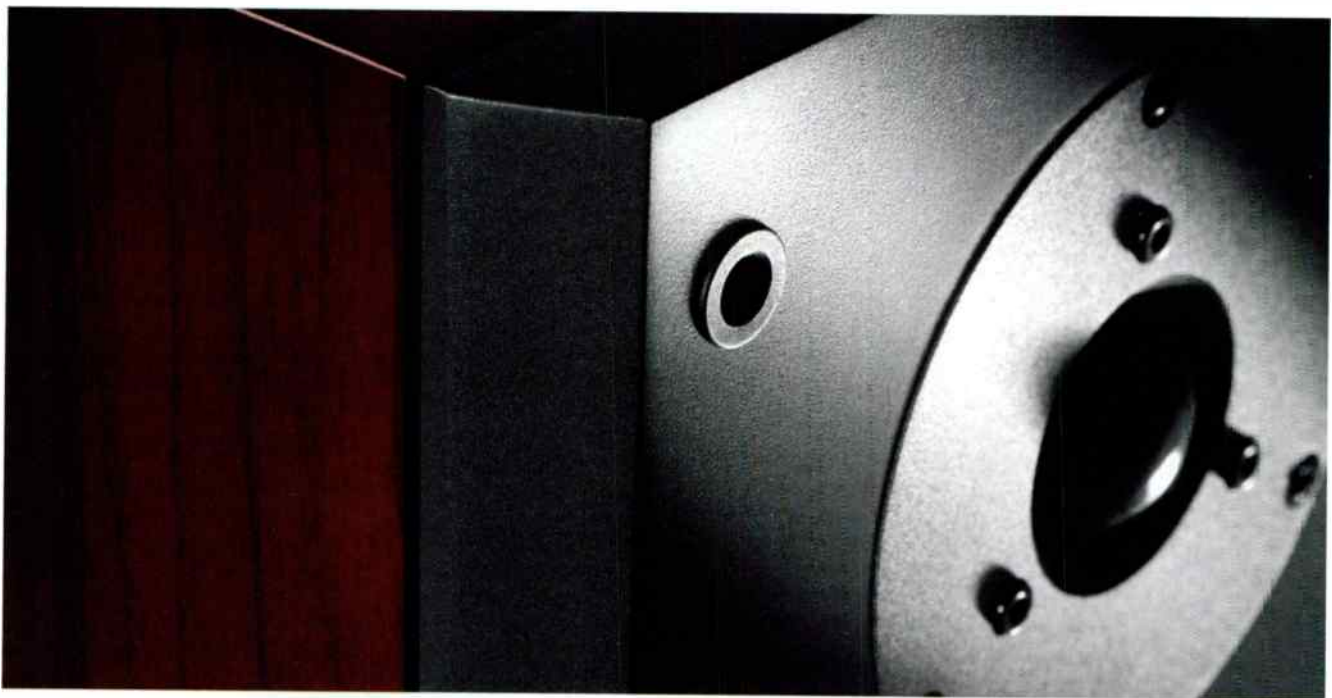
I really liked the Excite X12s and thought the flat response to 40 Hz would make a significant difference. So, I purchased a pair of X16s for myself.

Out of the box they sounded dull, dry, and even irritating at times. Dynaudio warns in their owner's manual

that "... several weeks running/playing to reach optimum performance capability is required." It seems so. When I received the X12s, they sounded terrific, but they had been thoroughly broken in before they arrived. The X16s were brand new, but with time they improved remarkably.

So how do the X16s sound when compared with the X12s? Actually, after break-in, there is not much of a difference. Tonal balances and the lack of coloration are pretty much the same. The additional 10 Hz of bass extension is not as audible, as I had thought it would be even with a full orchestra or a small jazz ensemble with double bass. And the X16s' bass is not quite as fast or as tight sounding as the X12s. If the X12s were to be used with a subwoofer that could be switched out of the circuit when not needed, or if having a little less bass is not a concern, I think the X12s would be the better choice.





Comparison: Modified Quad 63

These antique Quads, although somewhat lacking in bass extension and macro dynamics, sound remarkably like current production models. The Excite X12s come close to the utter transparency and attack speed of the Quads but they fall just a bit short. Listening to female voice, guitar, or piano, the X12s sounds quite natural but when ABed with the Quads, they lack the delicacy of the micro dynamics and natural sounding timbre exhibited by the Quads. But the X12s are more efficient, can play much louder, and have better macro dynamics. When listening to orchestral music or for that matter any large instrumental ensemble, I preferred the X12s.

With most vocal music, I preferred the Quads, but in many ways it's an unfair comparison. The Quads cost several times as much, are much bulkier, and need to be pulled further from the rear wall. The Quads need 40 inches of air behind them. The X12s can get by with only 18 inches.

Summing Up

The Dynaudio Excite X12 is a remarkable speaker. It will not produce sound waves that tingle the skin and it lacks deep bass. That said, it has a naturalness that I have not heard in other speakers in its price range and not found in many much larger and more expensive speakers. Everything is right about the speaker.

Listening to dozens of LPs and CDs, I never found myself saying, "this doesn't sound quite right" or "this is lacking" or "now the speaker is exhibiting a character of its own." Instead, within the limitations of not providing deep bass and very high sound pressure levels, the Excite X12s consistently sounded uncommonly natural over a broad range of acoustic music. The bass is so fast, clean and rhythmic that I found myself disconnecting the subwoofers. They tended to blur the clarity of the X12s' bass line.

It seems pointless to list some of recordings representing a variety of genres, soloists, and ensembles used for this review because the comments would be pretty much the same. Instead of the speakers calling attention to themselves, they let the music come through. Many times I became sidetracked forgetting that I was reviewing the X12s and just enjoyed listening to favorite CDs and LPs. I was often aware of differences in how well the recordings were engineered but less so of the X12s and the rest of the system. In sum, the Excite X12 adds or subtracts very little from the recording it is reproducing. It's a speaker that I could easily live with indefinitely.

Anyone interested in two-way monitor speakers should add the Excite 12s to their short list of "must audition" components. But before listening, do ask if they are well broken in.

NOTES

Dynaudio Excite X12 two-way mini monitors, \$1200 per pair. Dynaudio North America, 1140 Tower Lane, Bensenville, Illinois 60106; phone: 630/238 4200; Fax: 630 238 0112; web site: www.dynaudiousa.com

Associated Equipment

Linn Sondek LP 12/Lingo turntable, Ekos arm, Koetsu Rosewood Cartridge with Audio Research phono preamp PH3 Special Edition; McIntosh MCD500 SACD/CD player; McIntosh MA2275 and Krell KAV400xi integrated amplifiers; Modified Quad Pro 63 speakers (See TAV Vol. 4, No. 1 for a description of the modifications.) Rogers LS3/5a speakers; Sunfire Signature subwoofers; Music Metre single ended interconnect, Audio Research balanced interconnect, and Tara RSC Master Generation 2 Speaker Cable; ASC Tube Traps, and Target 24 inch sand-filled stands.

Logitech Squeezebox Touch Music Server Client

George Graves



WE REVIEWERS are often a jaded lot and we're certainly a lucky bunch of stiff. We get to play with the latest and the greatest technology, make decisions based on long-term, day-to-day living with a piece of equipment, and generally get to keep our grubby little fingers on the pulse of all things audio.

The latest "thing audio" is being highly touted as the hobby's future. At least, that's what they keep telling me. Well, it is convenient, it is neat, and it does work well. What is it? It's a "music server client."

"What's a music server client?" I hear you ask. That's a device which connects your broad-band Internet connection/computer and your stereo system via either "Wi-Fi" (wireless 802.11 b, g, or n) or via Ethernet CAT5 hard wiring. There are a several versions on the market, available at all price points up to and including four figures. This one is just \$300 and has a somewhat unusual moniker of "Squeezebox Touch." Its pedigree is pretty good, however, since it's marketed by the experienced computer peripheral manufacturer, Logitech.

Logitech is best known for its rather large line of computer mice, trackballs, and keyboards. They also make and market the Harmony line of programmable, universal remote controls. The Squeezebox line of internet music appliances has been sold by Logitech for several years now, and includes a stand-alone radio with its own amp and speaker, called the Squeezebox, and the server client called the Squeezebox Touch.

What does it do?

The Squeezebox Touch is a complete Internet/computer appliance for connecting your computer-based music collection as well as Internet radio programming to your stereo system. Physically, it's a very unimposing

screen of the Touch is a capacitive touch screen and it never failed to register my touch, and all of the direct interface with the unit is accomplished through the touch screen (or the remote control wand). After setting up my favorite radio stations, I went on to the second phase of the Squeezebox Touch setup — configuring my computer as a music server.

Music Library Access

To access one's computer-based music library, one needs to set their computer up as a Squeezebox music server. To do this, it is necessary to go to Logitech's web-site (the manual does give the URL) and download

**Don't hesitate one second!
Buy a Logitech Squeezebox Touch immediately!**

little device. It consists of a thin (1.25 inch), 4- by 6-inch "frame" surrounding a 4.3-inch "widescreen" color LCD screen with capacitive touch capability. This little display and surrounding frame are connected to a foot-like stand that sticks out the back of the unit another 1½ inch. It allows the unit to sit almost upright (it leans back at about a 20 degree angle which is fixed and cannot be adjusted). There are no switches or other physical controls on the unit anywhere.

As plain and simple as the front panel on this unit is, the back panel is just festooned with I/O. Starting on the left (as seen from the rear), this small, 6-inch wide rear apron sports a standard mini-headphone jack, right and left stereo audio outputs, a Toslink digital output, an RCA coax digital output jack, an RJ-45 Ethernet jack, a USB 2.0 connector, and a power connector for the supplied wall-wart power supply. Rounding-out the unit's I/O is an SD card slot on the right-hand edge of the Squeezebox Touch's case. This allows one to insert an SD card containing music or even pictures.

In addition to the unit itself, the Touch comes with the aforementioned wall-wart power supply and a small infrared remote control box.

Set-up

In spite of a manual that is near worthless in at least six different languages, and therefore imposingly thick, the Touch turned-out to be simplicity itself to set up. I took it out of its box and plugged it in to the extension cord which powers the reading light over my listening chair, and the unit came on at once. Since I already have an 802.11n Wi-Fi network alive in my house, I didn't need to concern myself with the Internet connection. It was there. Following the on-screen instructions, I was led, step-by-step, through the process of finding my local Wi-Fi network, setting the WEP security code, and signing on. Then, still following excellent on-screen instructions, I set up an "account" with Logitech (for warranty purposes, I suspect) and then proceeded to find radio stations. Before even connecting this little gem to my stereo system, I was able to browse all of the literally hundreds of internet radio stations all over the world by genre, pick the ones I'm interested in, and transfer them to my "Favorites" list. It was that easy! The

a piece of software called "Squeezebox Server," and install it on either your Mac (both PPC and Intel versions are supported) system 10.3 or later, or your PC (W2K, XP, Win7, or Vista) or Linux/BSD/Solaris/Other Unix running Perl 5.8.3 or later. Supported formats are MP3, FLAC, WAV, AIFF, WMA, Ogg Vorbis, HE-AACv.2, HD-AAC and Apple Lossless Compression (ALC). The interesting thing is that this server software also supports Apple iTunes! That means if you have ripped your music collection to iTunes on either the Mac or the PC platform in order to manage your iPod or iPad, you don't have to re-rip anything in a non-proprietary format. The Touch will simply see all of your iTunes ripped music complete with album artwork! The Touch will also support high-resolution playback up to 24-bit/96 kHz - about which, more later.

On the Wi-Fi interface side, the Touch only supports 802.11b and g, but that doesn't mean that you cannot use an 802.11n router. Wi-Fi is clever and will handshake at whichever speed the client device requires (in other words, an 802.11n router will handshake to either "b" or "g" specs, and if you have only a "b" or a "g" router and an "n" client, the "n" client will step down to 802.11 "b" or "g," as required).

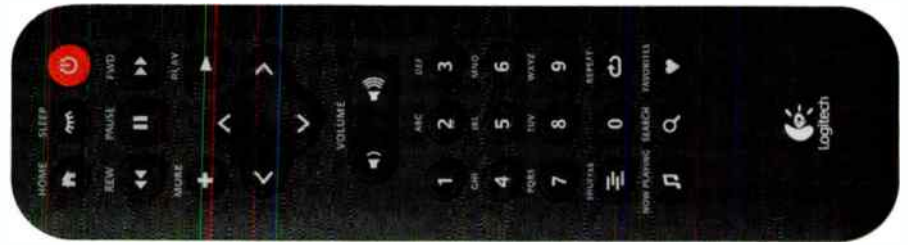
Use

This thing is an absolute pleasure to use. Touch the "on button" on the screen (or remote) and the Touch changes from a very nice digital clock with a large display (showing time and date) to give you the Touch home screen with all of your options on it. Scroll down to "favorites" for instance, and you'll get a list of all the radio stations that you have put in your list. Scroll down to the one you want, touch it and it connects to the station without further ado. You want to play something from your ripped music library on your computer? Just select "My Music," and from the home screen, select "Artists," "Albums," "Genres," "Years," or "New Music," depending upon how your library is arranged. If yours is an iTunes library and you select "Albums," all of your cover artwork will appear next to the album name. Selecting an album with your finger will bring up the individual tracks. You can select one or play the entire album with a touch.

Having a USB connector on the back of the Squeezebox Touch and an SD card slot on the side means that you can actually plug-in either a "key-chain" flash memory module or a USB hard drive or an SD card. This means that you can actually have your library "local" to the Touch if you like. Logitech seems to have thought of just about everything.

Sound

How does it sound? The Touch contains a built-in digital-to-analog converter which will output left and right stereo output to either the stereo headphone jack or to the RCA jacks on the back. I briefly listened to the analog outputs through my stereo system and found them to work fine. Sometimes late at night I connect a headphone extension cord to the headphone outputs and listen with my AKG K-340 hybrid "electret" electrostatic headphones. The Touch has plenty of drive to power these phones to a more than sufficient level, and the sound is excellent — nothing to complain about here. I have an integrated amp with very good built-in 24-bit/192-kHz DAC and I also have an excellent up-converter that takes 16-bit/44.1-kHz material and up-converts it to low-jitter 24/96. Thus, for most listening, I use that. The difference between the built-in DAC and my outboard equipment is very subtle. The up-converter/24-bit/192KHz DAC sound a bit more spacious and a bit smoother on the high-end, but other than that, there's little to choose between them except on direct comparison. I connect the Touch to my up-sampler using Toslink. This makes it easy to feed my DAT recorder to record from the Touch. WCRB in Boston is one of the best classical FM stations in the US, and they regularly broadcast live feeds of the Boston Symphony, the Boston Pops, and the Tanglewood Festival, as well as guest artists from their own performance studios. Since "live" (as opposed to commercially recorded or "canned") is still the best way to experience great music (in my not-so-humble opinion), the ability to record these performances digitally is a great boon to me. WCRB's Internet feed sounds great and so do the DAT tapes that I'm able to make from them.



Compressed Digital Audio vs. Broadcast FM?

In general, FM hasn't been a really great way to access live performances, or hi-fi sound for that matter, since mono days. Stereo FM is noisy, subject to multi-path distortion, and fraught, these days, with too much signal compression and "fi" destroying signal limiting. Plus, if you don't have a decent FM station in your area, you're out of luck.

With Internet "radio" all one needs is a broad-band Internet connection and a music server like the Squeezebox Touch or the Apple TV box, or one of a dozen or so similar appliances available to be able to have, at your fingertips, access to literally hundreds of radio stations all over the world in every musical genre imaginable. While essentially all of these use MP3 to encode the music and save Internet radio bandwidth, and while there's no doubt that MP3 does have artifacts of its own, they're very different artifacts than the analog type that plague modern over-the-air FM.

For one thing, most of these stations take a connection right off of their "air feed" and direct it into their Internet server equipment and thence out onto the Internet. This means that frequency response can be wider than that afforded by FM (which is limited, by the broadcast methodology to from about 50 Hz to 15 kHz) and the audio going out on the Internet bypasses the signal processing (dynamic range compression and modulation limiting) equipment necessary for today's competitive and legal broadcast requirements.

At the receiver end, you eliminate multipath distortion, and the signal-to-noise ratio is much better than broadcast FM. One is surprised by the spooky velvet-black silence from which most music emerges via "Internet Radio." The "lossy" characteristic of MP3 uses a computer algorithm to decide how much of the music can essentially be discarded, without the listener noticing

it. It turns out that this can be quite a lot. For instance, the "standard" data rate for most Internet radio is 128 kbps which converts to a compression ratio of about 11:1. Put another way, the amount of data storage or transmission bandwidth needed to hold or transmit a given piece of music at CD quality can be reduced by more than an order of magnitude, ostensibly without the toughest listener ever noticing that more than 90% of the data has been discarded!

Of course, nothing is free, and you can't just squeeze a quart's worth of music into a shot glass without something being lost. Even the Genie in the Arabian Nights tales is always a bit testy after being let out of the bottle or magic lamp. He doesn't take well to "compression" either! Needless to say, compression artifacts can be heard occasionally on MP3 or other lossy compression schemes. Artifacts are anomalies that are not present in the original recording but are added to the music as a result of throwing much of the original waveform away. The rules of thumb are that the lower the data-rate, the more these artifacts become audible, and the greater the number of people who can hear them. The result is that 64 kbps, generally the lowest data rate used in Internet radio (although, occasionally, you'll run across 32 kbps), is pretty hard for most audiophiles to listen to, but many non-critical listeners seem to not notice it at all. Further, 128 kbps or higher is generally what's used on most Internet radio stations, and at those data rates, the compression is considered "transparent." Your mileage may vary, as they say.

Artifacts are generally more likely to show up on percussive sounds like solo piano, acoustic guitar, triangles and bells, etc. The reason for this is because these types of sounds are difficult to compress due to their randomness. Compression works by predicting where the frequency and amplitude domains are going to go

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next. This is called precognitive coding. Randomness and sharp, percussive sounds tend to throw curve balls at this process. Often, this is heard as pre-echo, and is most easily heard on audience applause.

On balance, these artifacts are generally an improvement over the analog artifacts that plague over-the-air FM and are a lot more tolerable than such things as signal fade, multipath distortion, fringe-reception noise, and the generally poor quality of today's FM audio. In short, good-quality Internet radio simply is overall better than over-the-air radio under most circumstances. Plus more programming!

Music Server Performance

I have an iPod and I use iTunes on a Mac to "manage" it. I was eager to find out how well the Squeezebox Touch server software worked with iTunes as well as with high-resolution downloads not stored in iTunes. iTunes handles CD resolution files in various MP3 data-rates as well as Apple Lossless Compression (ALC) which is what I use, and non-compressed formats. Currently, without a (expensive) third-party "helper" app, iTunes does not handle high-resolution audio formats, and even then it only handles PCM audio, not SACD.

I downloaded the aforementioned Logitech software package from their website and installed it on my Mac. After doing some set-up in the preferences panel, I was set to go. A quick reboot and an adjournment to my listening room where both my stereo and the Squeezebox Touch were located and I was set to check out the list of albums that was supposed to be there when I select "My Music" on the menu. Voila! Everything was there. Every album that I have ripped to iTunes was present and accounted for. When I selected an album or a tune, they played instantly, and flawlessly.

I also have an original Apple TV box which also works as a music server. The difference between the two, other than the fact that the Apple TV requires that one's TV be on in order to do anything (and the Touch has its own display), is that the Apple TV has a built-in hard drive and one stores one's music library locally. The Squeezebox Touch, on the other hand, streams music directly from your computer

in real time. Since, in iTunes, one decides which music titles one wants to transfer the Apple TV's local hard disk, and they play from there, you need not have one's computer turned on in order to access one's music library. Unfortunately, the Logitech device streams the playing music on the fly as it were, and therefore one's computer needs to be on at all times (not true, though, for Internet Radio. It streams directly from your broadband Internet connection through your wireless router to the Touch, bypassing your computer, entirely).

One thing that the Squeezebox Touch does that the Apple TV server or iTunes does not do is handle 24-bit/96-kHz directly with no third-party software required. What is a bit awkward is that if you designate your iTunes library as your music folder, the Logitech server software cannot be made to look elsewhere for the high-resolution music files. In order to have your hi-rez music show up in your Squeezebox Touch "My Music" playlist when using iTunes as the source, it is necessary to make a shortcut ("alias" on the Mac) of all of your hi-rez files and place those shortcuts/aliases in your iTunes folder. Of course, if you aren't using iTunes, you can just make a folder on one of your computer's mounted volumes and put all of your music, whether MP3s or high-resolution files, in that folder.

Another way to handle high-resolution music files is to store them locally on the Squeezebox Touch itself. This is possible because the Touch has both a USB port on the back and a SD card slot on the right-hand edge of the case. This means that you can put your high-resolution music files on a USB "thumb-drive" memory or an SD card. You can either do this via "sneaker-net" from your computer, or you can access the volumes on your Squeezebox Touch indirectly from the Logitech preferences panel on your computer. Alternatively, one can use a USB hard-drive. I have a small 20-gig portable USB drive that I use for that purpose. It just needed to be formatted to a standard FAT16 PC volume. You can then put all of your hi-rez music files on such a drive and plug it into the Touch. Once you have scanned for the drive, you will be able to access its contents through the menu.

Undocumented Features!

Once, I accidentally touched the center of the screen while an Internet radio station was playing, and the screen changed from the station "ID screen" to a graphic "spectrum analyzer" showing the music's frequency distribution in 1/10th octave steps. I touched the screen again, and the display became a pair of very realistic looking "analog" Vu meters. These two options were not mentioned in the manual. I, personally, have no use for the former, but I do think the Vu meters are pretty cool.

Conclusion

It's obvious that one can spend lots of money for a music client. Some cost several thousand dollars. There are even models that don't need a computer and operate totally independently of anything save a broadband Internet connection. One merely inserts one's CDs into the front of the unit and it "rips" the CD to the device's own, internal database. One can buy a Mac Mini and use it as a stand-alone music (and video/picture) server, Apple even supplies software and a remote control wand that let's one see only the server interface, not the computer OS or keyboard/mouse. Then there's Apple TV, a cheap (cheaper than the Squeezebox Touch) solution that works well, but in its latest incarnation also lacks local storage (i.e. it streams everything from the computer in real time), but unlike the Squeezebox Touch, cannot have local storage added to it, and requires a 720p TV display to navigate and operate the unit.

Overall, the Logitech Squeezebox Touch is the best stand-alone music server client that this reviewer has seen. No, it doesn't pretend to do high-definition movies, or big-screen digital slide shows, but it does support 24-bit/96 KHz high-resolution downloads from places like HDTracks, Linn Records, iTrax, etc. It's easy to set-up and use, and it's flexible and versatile. It can connect via Wi-Fi or through a hard-wire Ethernet connection, it can use its own built-in DAC or it can play through an external one. It can connect to local storage via either USB or an SD card and has a comprehensive remote-control wand for navigating. When not in use, the Touch looks like a tasteful digital clock with a large, easy to read display.



There are just a couple of small things about the unit that I find off-putting. First of all, the manual that comes with the unit is worthless. This problem is alleviated in great part by the easy-to-follow on-screen set-up directions and by the fact that a more complete, and thoroughly comprehensive set of documentation is available online at:

<http://www.logitech.com/assets/30072/documentation.pdf>

My second criticism is that the "foot" that holds the unit upright is not adjustable. If you need to set the unit on a shelf that's higher than eye-level, you'll find the touch screen pointing more at the ceiling than at the user. Performance-wise and sound-wise I cannot fault the Squeezebox Touch at all. Just buy one. Don't think about it, just do it. You won't be sorry. This one is very highly recommended.

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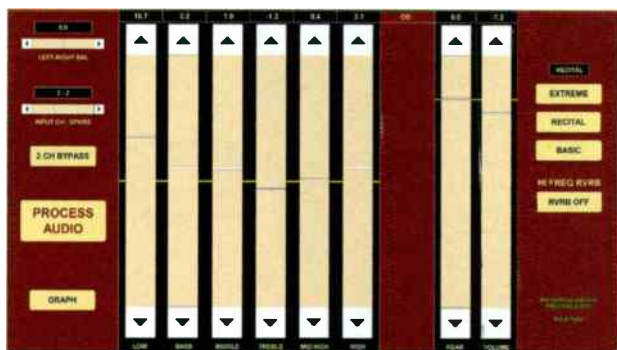
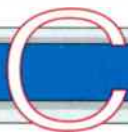
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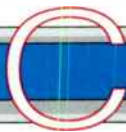
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Photos Never Lie!

Another "Who?" and "Where?" contest...

Actually, this is more of a what city and what district of that city contest. If you are the first person to correctly let me know via e-mail where I photographed this lady playing her barrel organ, the first I'd ever seen live, you will get a one-year extension to your subscription; if you can tell me which section of that city, you will get a two-year extension.

The sound of this hand-cranked street instrument is ... well, funky, or maybe just hard to define. Here is the url for a YouTube video of a guy named Bert Gilbert playing his equally charming instrument: www.youtube.com/watch?v=PaEMbqq6As8&NR=1 I have to say that I would hire her to play a concert at, say, the Rocky Mountain Audio Fest or the CES in Las Vegas.

Gene Pitts, Editor, *The Audiophile Voice*
audiophilevoice@verizon.net

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