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George Graves

2012 Dagogo Bay-Area Hi-fi Show

This is the third year that Dagogo publisher Constantine Soo (Dagogo, apparently, is Mandarin and loosely translated, means “Big Brother,” which is what Constantine’s family called him) has presented the San Francisco Bay Area with a real, old-fashioned hi-fi show and the second year that yours truly has attended. The show was held, this year as last, at the Crowne Plaza Hotel in Burlingame, California just south of the San Francisco International Airport.

The show covered three floors of the hotel this year; the second and third floor had companies exhibiting in suites and the ground floor used the various ballrooms and meeting rooms as demo and display venues. This show did something that I’ve never seen before, and it’s a damn good idea. Usually, suites are tooth-and-jowl next to one another causing each demonstrator to raise his volume in order to be heard over the room next door. The resultant cacophony is irritating and ultimately pointless as no one can hear anything presented properly. This show did it differently. Up in the suites, each demonstration room is isolated from its neighbor(s) by the simple logistical tactic of having an empty suite between them! That means that there is a demonstration only occurring in every other suite. From what I observed, it looked like the “empty” suites were being used by the exhibiting personnel as sleeping quarters. This is a great idea because, ostensibly, they wouldn’t be occupied while the show was going-on anyway. The

result was that this was among the quietest shows I’ve ever attended. Without the need to compete with one’s neighbor’s sound, the demonstrators saw no reason to raise the volume any higher than needed. Very nice.

Warning: reviewer opinion coming – if you don’t want to read it, skip down to the next paragraph. At any rate you’ve been warned), I was not happy with the selection of music being used as demo material in most rooms. In my view, it was generally appalling! Most usually, it was overproduced pop and rock material that has about as much to do with high-fidelity as did railroad trains rumbling through the exhibit rooms in the early days of stereo! Very few rooms were playing any music that would actually show-off the equipment’s strengths. I realize that this stuff is what most modern audiophiles listen to these days, and I won’t comment on its musical worth, but it certainly sounded dismal to this attendee.

On Saturday, this writer attended a pretty good seminar on music and its effect on audio equipment and vice versa. The panelist consisted of Bruce Brisson (of MIT Cable fame) His son Tim, composer and musician Tony Weber, National Sales Manager for Cary Audio, Recording Engineer Paul Stubblebine, Cookie Morencio of Blue Coast Records, as well as Marcia Martin and the redoubtable J. Tamblyn Henderson of Reference Recordings. Quite a lineup. Tony Weber started things off with a great presentation on how we hear music,

and to show how even august reviewers like yours truly can *still* be taught, I learned, finally, one of the main reasons why reproduced music, especially brass, no matter how good the equipment, never fools me into thinking it's real! Trumpets, saxes, and other brass instruments have among the most complex harmonic structures of any instrument. Trumpets, for instance, have significant harmonic output to beyond 15 KHz. Audio systems, especially speakers, just can't move enough air at those frequencies to mimic the real thing. I'm not even sure that the best microphones can even

and their magnificent CLX system is the most transparent speaker I've ever heard.

Next stop was **Burwell & Sons Speakers**. These folks have managed to find what seems to be a large cache of new-old-stock **Altec Lansing A7** "Voice of the Theater" components. Using the 15" woofer from this system and the notorious Altec treble horn driver, they construct a new speaker) out of fine hardwoods called the "Homage" (\$80K/pair). One of the most impressive changes from the original was that Burwell replaces the terrible and midrange forward Altec multi-cellular cast

Do you know why recorded brass rarely fools the listener into thinking it's the real thing?

capture it. It was really an eye opener. The rest of the seminar was taken up discussing the various high-resolution recording options with the conversation split between DSD (Direct Stream Digital - the SACD recording format) and high-resolution PCM (24-bit/96 to 192 KHz). Bruce Brisson, who is a delightful fellow, opined that for audio to be realistically recorded, it must be captured and played back out to the seventh harmonic, which requires at least a 355 KHz sample rate! He maintained that even though humans can't hear that far out, they can feel it and that it affects sub-harmonics in the audible range. None of the others on the panel had a comment on that assertion, and as a recordist of some small note myself; I'm just going to say that I'm skeptical.

Next, Blue Coast records had a rather unique "Live-vs.-Recorded" demonstration. They had a guitarist/singer perform several songs while Blue-Coast recorded them on a software-based DSD system and used a Korg MR-2000s as a backup (I, on the other hand am so poor, that I use a Korg MR-1 as my main recorder (DSD, of course) and use a lowly Zoom HR2n as a backup (in 24/96 mode)! The demo recording was then played back on monitor speakers set-up next to the performer. The similarity between the live and recorded performances was impressive to say the least.

On To The Equipment

Starting, as is my wont, on the top floor of exhibits, I worked my way from room to room over two days. On the top floor, I stopped in at the room of **Soundstage Audio and Video** of Santa Rosa Ca. They were exhibiting **Martin-Logan** speakers, but curiously, there were no electrostatics present! They were, instead, demonstrating what turned out to be the world premier of the new Martin Logan "**Motion 20**" Loudspeaker. These slim thirty-some inch tall towers contain two 5.5 inch woofers topped with a bespoke (for M-L) **AMT "Folded Motion"** Heil Air Motion Transformer tweeter. At \$1,500/pair these speakers were quite spectacular in their ability to produce a wide dynamic range with incredible bass. The midrange and highs as produced by the AMT driver were clean and articulate all the way to above the upper limit of audibility. Very impressive but I hope this doesn't mean that M-L is moving away from electrostatic speakers. Theirs are among the best,

aluminum horn with one made up of beautifully crafted hardwood. This wooden horn tames the infamous Altec midrange, and shows what a good component the Altec compression driver actually was. The cabinet for the woofer is equally attractive and is about half the size of the old A7 cabinet (which was gray painted plywood and was *huge*) but sounds much better with much deeper bass (this writer's first speakers as a teenager were a pair of A7's salvaged from a local movie theater that was being torn down). The results are spectacular! Gone was the forward and oddly honky midrange and the lack of bass below 50 Hz. These speakers with their modern crossovers and new cabinet design sounded great while still maintaining the 100dB/Watt at one-meter efficiency that the originals enjoyed.

Next was **Bob Hodas Acoustic Analysis/The Tape Project**. Hodas treats rooms both professional and domestic, and he had treated suite 330 of the hotel. Since all the rooms are about the same size, it was easy to hear the difference in this treated room and the resultant sound (and silence) was amazing. The Tape Project had moved its studio playback equipment in Bob's suite to great effect. The equipment consisted of a 1970's vintage Otari MX-2020 tape deck with custom electronics, feeding VTL amplification and a pair of Focal Grand Utopia EM speakers. They played a 15ips copy of the master of the Minnesota Orchestra playing some Rimsky Korsakov. While I have heard (and recorded) digital that sounded as good, I've not heard anything *better*! There's no doubt that as a consumer product, digital CDs are better, but it's hard to beat the sound of an analog master tape, or even a first or second generation copy of one. Anyway, a year's subscription to **The Tape Project** costs \$3000 and for that you get 6 -10.5" reels of music at 15 ips, half-track stereo, or about \$500 per tape. If you want ultimate fidelity, this is certainly one way to get it.

Next stop was a Japanese company named **Acoustic Zen**. This company was showing a huge pair of **Triode** brand **TRX -M845SE** monoblock power amplifiers using two paralleled transmitter tubes (845 triodes) in single-ended class-A configuration to produce 50 watts each (\$22,500/pair). Acoustic Zen was driving a pair of their own speakers called the **Crescendo**. This large 3-way speaker, consisting of two 8" woofers, a pair of 5" midranges and a horn-loaded ribbon tweeter sounded

excellent and is available in a number of lovely hardwoods such as ebony, rosewood, walnut burl, and mappa burl. The Crescendo speakers are somewhat of a bargain at \$16,000/pair. Similar speakers from Usher and others cost much more.

Down the hall from The Acoustic Zen room was the Hong-Kong based firm of **Dared** (Pronounced Dar-ed). This ambitious tube company is building some very interesting equipment. With all tube products, they were showing a line of amps, pre-amps and integrations. Everything was covered from single-ended class-A amps using 845 transmitter tubes all the way up to 250 watts

(\$65,000 each!). A **VTL TL7.5 Series III** Preamp with a **VTL TP6.5 Signature** phono preamp did the amplification duties while sources were provided by **dCS' "Scarlatti"** digital playback system and the new "**V12**" turntable from German firm **AMG** sporting (yet again) the new **Claraudio Goldfinger Statement** cartridge.

Long ago, I realized that audio shows are difficult enough to form opinions about without having to add the variable of unfamiliar source material to the strange (and often unsuitable) rooms, noise pollution (from other exhibitors) and the crowds. So I usually take my own recordings. When I say "my own recordings", I

I have to tell you that I have never heard such sound as that which issued forth from the Wilson Alexandrias!

per channel monoblocks using *eight* KT-88s per amp for outputs! The most unusual product was a small stereo table radio called the **Dared RD2**. This radio tunes in the FM band as well as DAB and DAB2 with 15 watts output/channel. The radio looks *exactly* like a mid-fifties German **Grundig-Majestic** table radio and the only thing that gave it away was the OLED digital display where the multi-band slide-rule dial would have been in the 1950's!

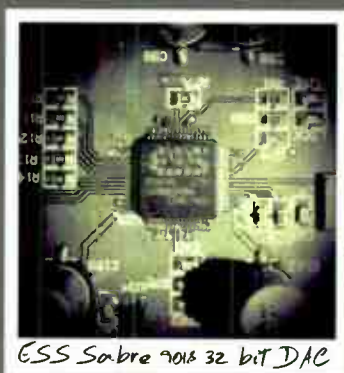
That brings me to the ground floor and the big ballroom exhibit rooms. The Bayside room housed **Audio Image**, a large Oakland-based dealer. In their room they were demonstrating the new **Magico S-5** speakers, which at \$28,600 for the pair sounded superb, *among* the best in the show. These were being driven by a pair of **Valve Amplification Company's (VAC) Statement 450** monoblock amplifiers (\$78,000 for the pair) and a **VAC signature Mk2a** preamp (with phonostage option) at \$19,200. All of this was connected using **MIT cable** including their **Oracle MA-X2 Super HD Speaker "interface"** at \$42,000 (gulp!) This ensemble was rounded-out by an **Accuphase DP-700 SACD** player at \$27,000 and an **Auraliti L-1000** music file player (controlled by an iPad) and an **Aestetix** high resolution DAC/CD player (\$7000). But the most interesting component in the room was the **Kronos Audio** counter-rotating dual platter turntable (\$28,000), the **Graham Phantom Supreme 12"** tone arm, and the new **Claraudio Goldfinger Statement** cartridge at \$15,000! The turntable uses two heavy 12" turntable platters, one of which turns in the correct clockwise direction while the other platter, below the first turns in the opposite direction! The idea here is that the unused platter turns backward at exactly 33.3333 RPMs and the recording platter is constantly being compared to it. The weight of the record and the drag of the stylus through the groove are thus nulled-out. Very impressive.

Lastly was the **Music Lover's Audio** of Berkeley in the Plaza II ballroom. Here was the crowning glory of the show! Undoubtedly the best sound at this year's event. The speakers were a pair of **Wilson Audio's \$195,000 Alexandria XLF** speakers along with a \$28,000 Wilson "**Thor's Hammer**" subwoofer system. All three speakers were being powered by **VTL's** huge "**Siegfried II**" mono power amplifiers (800 Watts and

don't mean recordings that I have purchased, I mean recordings that I have *made*. This show was no exception. I took along three CDs that I recorded "live" and therefore know intimately. One was a fairly recent recording that I made of a jazz concert by a very fine university big band in a legendary hall. Along with that I took two symphonic recordings that I made of a world-renown civic symphony orchestra and a famous conductor. The first is Ravel's entire ballet "Daphnis et Chloe," complete with large chorus, and Rachmaninoff's "Piano Concerto #3" with a very famous French pianist. I wish I could be less cryptic, but legalities make it impossible for me to divulge specific names, places or dates. I hope you will forgive me for being somewhat vague about the details.

I asked the attendant in the Music Lover's Audio room to play a cut or two from the jazz concert disc. This performance was recorded using a large-capsule stereo mike set to the "cardioid" pattern with the capsules arranged at ninety degrees to one another and placed downstage from the ensemble and recorded to DSD. I have to tell you that I have never heard such sound as that which issued forth from those Wilson Audio Alexandria speakers! I knew they were good from the moment I walked into the room, but after I heard the first few notes from my jazz concert disc, I knew that I was in the presence of greatness. This recording and this band sounded almost exactly as I recall it sounding from sitting in the audience during dress rehearsal. Never have I heard the scale of a recorded ensemble reproduced so realistically! The band sounded big, just as it did live! The only thing that kept it from breaking through the "reproduction" barrier all the way to "real" was that the brass instruments didn't quite convince. Oh, make no mistake; I've never heard brass reproduced as well as this. It's almost convincing. But anyone walking by that room while this disc was playing would not say to himself or herself as they passed the open door, "live music inside." No, not quite, but almost. To say I was impressed would be an understatement. It's too bad that the price of admission to this level of reproduction realism is as much as a couple of new Ferraris. But alas, that's the reality of it. But whatta way to wrap up an audio show! I'm already looking forward to next year.

Remember when HiFi was fun? It is again.



Outstanding

"This was one of the best and smartest systems of the show, in my opinion, because it offers sound that an audiophile can love while providing the simplicity and versatility that everyone wants - all at a real-world price."

Stephen Mejias on stereophile.com June 2012 Newport

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RMAF - 2012



Photos: Chuck Bruce

Chuck Bruce and David Schwartz

Fan-Ya Lin at the Steinway piano. She's a Weber State student and was sponsored at the RMAF by Kimber Kable.

THIS YEAR'S Rocky Mountain Audio Fest in Denver's Marriott Tech Center in Aurora, Colorado, was again a large and interesting show. Now in its 8th year, RMAF was again lots of fun, and my editorial colleagues and I found there was more gear to look at and more music to listen to than one could easily schedule during the 2½ days of the RMAF.

Congrats to the producers, especially to Marjorie Baumert, and exhibitors alike. Featuring over 160 demonstration rooms and 300 brands, plus a good amount of live music, it was a good, old-fashioned, all around audio show. For the "traditional" audiophile, there were two-channel stereo systems, vacuum tubes galore, LP turntables and phono cartridges, while the *neuvo sonophile* could enjoy the latest in desktop (can head) audio, which was alive and kicking at RMAF. The

country's financial times may be tight, what with the fiscal cliff not far away as I write, but enthusiasm for our wonderful hobby is well intact. Action in the retail marketplace during Black Friday and Cyber Monday was brisk too, with lots of equipment, LPs, CDs and other goodies being snapped-up.

The big news at the show was digital. With better than CD quality downloads (PCM up to 24/192 and SACD's DSD) and better USB drivers, improved DACs followed. There were many new USB DACs capable of 24/192. **Avatar Acoustics** demonstrated the \$299 iDAC and **Wyred4Sound** showed the \$499 µDAC-HD as well as their \$1099 mPre DAC preamplifier. **April Music's** \$3200 Eximus DP1 DAC preamplifier offers switchable upsampling. **Mytek's** Stereo192-DSD-DAC and **Benchmark's** \$2000 DAC2 HGC DAC-preamplifiers

can play DSD in addition to 192/24 PCM.

DEQx demonstrated their \$4500 **DEQx Mate** digital signal processor. Unlike their other devices, it is not a preamp or electronic crossover. Instead it connects between the pre-amp and power amp and corrects a speaker's frequency, phase and time response, and then deals with the room's acoustics. In addition, it provides extensive programable tone controls.

One of the better jazz LP replays we found at RMAF was via a pair of mid-size **Pro-Ac Response D40/R** tower loudspeakers (\$14,000 per pair in rosewood cabinetry) sporting ribbon tweeters. They were driven by North Carolina-based **Sonus Veritas** electronics including the tube & solid-state hybrid "Venice" phono preamp (\$22,000), and a balanced & single-ended "Genoa" line stage (true differential configuration), the "Modena" 24/196 async D/A, and pair of new 40 wpc, Class-A, KT120-based switchable triode & ultralinear mono-blocks, the "Florence." Indeed, this was a real music making ensemble.

Dali's new Epicon 8 tower loudspeakers (\$19,000 per pair) were sporting one 6-inch midrange and two 8-inch woofer drivers (per tower) with wood fiber diaphragms and motor elements featuring (SMC) soft compound, moldable magnetic material. These were augmented by interesting hybrid soft dome & ribbon super tweeters. But the sound was what made the room, very delicate, detailed, and dynamic with source material from **NAIM** electronics. Overall, it was indeed a very nice, very genteel, very musical presentation.

Emotiva, one of the new value lines which exhibit top-tier performance at moderate prices, was at RMAF with a complete stack of their latest gear including solid-state preamps, CD players, DACs, power amps, loudspeakers and their own cabling. Their new tower loudspeaker, the Model XRT-6.2, is a three-way system, and it offered most impressive sound for just \$999 per pair. Indeed, each item in the **Emotiva** stack carries an MSRP of less than \$1k. We were told that a control preamp/surround processor is on the way and it will utilize a built-in TacT room analysis and correction system. Operatic soprano Katherine Jenkins's CD captured our



The Cabasse "L'Ocréan" loudspeakers were quite striking in appearance and in sound.

rapt attention in this room, an example of top-tier music making in my experience.

Cabasse "L'Ocréan" loudspeakers were paired with **Esoteric** electronics and a **VPI** turntable using **WireWorld's** latest cabling, including their **Platinum Starlight USB** cable for computer music interconnect. This total rig was said to have a price tag of \$159K. The exotic-looking, high-sensitivity, four-way, stand-mounted, spherical-style **L'Ocréan** speaker system uses a coaxial driver and has its own digital adaptive preamplification. While there was an out-of-this world appearance, the system projected down-to-earth sonic realism. I hung around for quite awhile, as my involvement with the music and sound was that good.

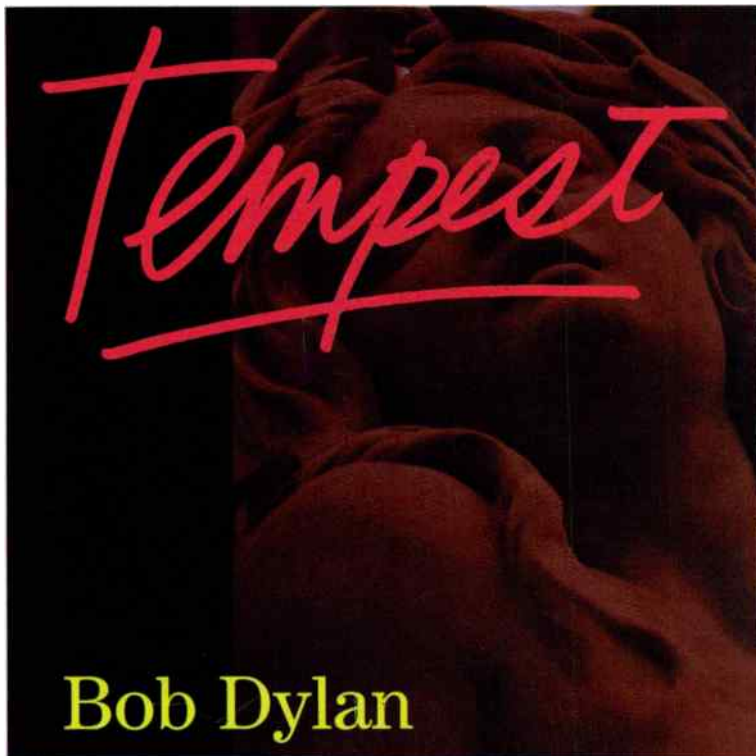
Zesto Audio was showcasing their tube electronics paired with the **TAD Ref 1**, a two-way, stand-mounted loudspeaker, all connected up with **WyWires**. Of special interest was the **Zesto Andros PS-1** phono preamp, one that was transporting listeners sweetly to the time and place of original LP takes. In this case, we time-travelers were escorted by Miles Davis and his stellar ensemble on his *Kind of Blue* "space ship" with highlights of "Flamenco Sketches" and "So What" among other monumental cuts along the way. Much "Zest" from **Zesto** and their demonstration!

Other systems of interest were the **Nola "KO,"** a new mid-size floor-stander featuring the well-

proven open baffle configuration for the multiple mid-drivers and tweeters (four + four each per side), and a pair of woofers in each cabinet. These speakers were paired with the latest in **Audio Research** reference electronics and top-line **Nordost** cabling and were priced at \$9,800 per pair, a reasonable entry into the competitive high end. Their presentation was big and spacious, very musical and engaging.

Another attention getter was the **Gershman Acoustics "Black Swan,"** a three-way floor-standing loudspeaker, priced at \$30,000. They were paired with the latest **VAC Sigma 160i** tube-based integrated amplifier and the duo produced much music enjoyment. **Wisdom Audio**, the thin-film, planar-magnetic specialists, were demonstrating their impressive 75-inch tall line-source towers, the Model L75, pairing them with separate subs. Price was \$29,000 per pair. These speakers projected one of the most impressive and "life size" soundstages we heard at the show, and had a sense of scale second to none. The nine-foot grand piano was in the room.

All in all, this year's RMAF was a very fine show with some remarkable "discoveries" in good sound from a variety of brands. I can scarcely wait for next year!



Michael Tearson

Rock

Bob Dylan *Tempest*
Columbia 88725-45760-2

BOB DYLAN'S *Tempest* was released September 11, 2012, 11 years to the day his "*Love and Theft*" appeared the same day the World Trade Center towers came down in New York City. Shortly after, Dylan began a long tour with Mark Knopfler opening, and as I write this a month into the tour Dylan performed "*Scarlet Town*" from *Tempest* on opening night and since then nothing from the new album. I take that as a clue, but precisely what it means I don't know.

The songs of *Tempest* are a varied bunch, nearly all of them sounding like they were ripped from some earlier time. Dylan's voice is perhaps the roughest it has ever sounded, and he's taken a ton of heat for that from critics. But haven't they been saying that for 50 years now? Rough or not, Bob Dylan is still a wonderfully expressive singer.

The album's band is the unit out on the road with Bob: Tony Garnier on bass where he has been for over 20 years, George G. Recelli on drums, David Herron on guitar, and sundry other instruments and guitarists including Stu Kimball and Charlie Sexton augmented by Los Lobos' David Hidalgo on guitar, accordion and violin. Their vivid playing brings the songs to life. Dylan again under *nom de guerre* Jack Frost is producer, and the sound he's gotten is transparent enough that it never gets in the way of the songs.

"Dukesne Whistle," a co-write with Robert Hunter, opens the show as a rollicking, joyous number. It begins with a subdued guitar interlude that sounds as if it was

recorded in 1951 until the drums kick in and the rhythm takes off. Hard to miss the smile on Bob's face as he sings the opening line "Listen to that Dukesne whistle blowin'." It's a fun-filled opener promising good stuff ahead.

Next "Soon after Midnight" sounds like a 50s doo-wop ballad which in my mind's ear, I can hear Clyde McPhatter singing. "Narrow Way" is a rocking look back at relationships that didn't pan out as it limns some pretty rough scenery. "Long And Wasted Years" takes place at crisis point for a crumbling relationship with a lilting melody with a catchy, descending riff at each verse's end. Cute at first, it wears out its welcome as the riff's repetition gets annoying. Dylan's delivery here drips insincerity and contempt for whoever the song is directed at.

"Pay in Blood" has another catchy melody loaded with guitar hooks as Bob sings of the prices life demands and other stinging betrayals. Here, too, Dylan sounds like he's having a great time singing it. Strong lyrics, but in the end this one feels slight.

"Scarlet Town," the only song Bob's done in public at this time, is one of *Tempest's* best. It may be the darkest song here, surely one that haunts me most profoundly. There are hints of antiquity in the line of Sweet William on his deathbed recalling the age-old ballad "Barbara Allen" and the Little Boy Blue reference. The song finds no forgiveness in the air and no redemption anywhere.

"Tin Angel" is just as dark and even more perplexing. On one version, it is a modern adaption of the betrayal/murder ballad "Matty Groves." Many of its 28 verses are dialogue between the Boss, the Wife and Henry Lee and parallel the "Matty Groves" story. But here Henry Lee kills the Boss, a reversal of Lord Darnel killing Matty Groves. Then the Wife kills Henry Lee and then herself. Nothing but death here. Powerful stuff, but it does feel overly long.

However, if "Tin Angel" is overlong, it is compact next to "Tempest" which in about 45 verses relates the story of the Titanic going down. Dylan freely mixes fact, dreams and fiction, some of the latter from the film *Titanic* as Leonard DiCaprio makes a couple cameo appearances. Yes, it is a mammoth piece of work, but is Dylan's least endearing epic, certainly no "Desolation Row" or "Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands." It really compares best to "Highlands," the impenetrable epic that closes *Time Out of Mind* and even more "Cross the Green Mountain," the Civil War epic Dylan wrote specially for the film *Gods & Generals* and which is in the Bootleg Series release *Tell Tale Signs*. "Tempest" has a singsong melody that got really old for me long before the song was anywhere near finished. While preparing to write this review, the bizarre thought came unbidden to me that you can sing "Casey at the Bat" perfectly to the melody Dylan's concocted here. Impressive yes, but for me unnecessary.

"Early Roman Kings" continues Dylan's latter day tradition of taking classic blues songs and grafting new lyrics onto them as he did on *Modern Times* with "Rollin' and Tumblin'" and "Someday Baby." Here he takes the central riff of Muddy Waters' "Mannish Boy" (also Bo Diddley's "I'm a Man") which itself is recycled

from "Hoochie Coochie Man." Yes, "Early Roman Kings" is a macho strut but done with sharp wit. Fun!

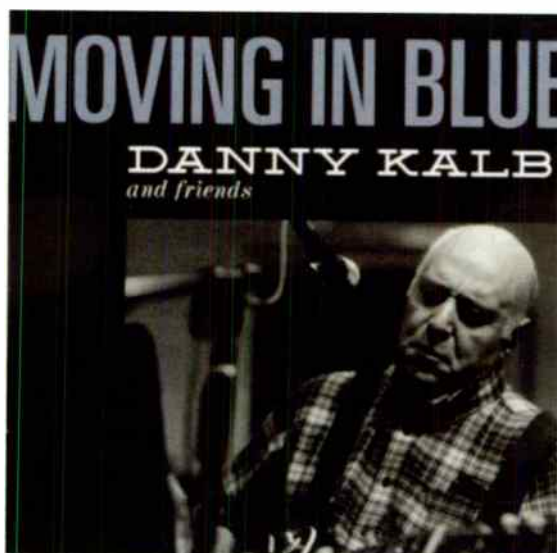
The album's finale is "Roll on John," a eulogy and remembrance of John Lennon cast here as a fallen comrade. A lot of love in this one. It really is placed perfectly as finale as really nothing could comfortably follow it. But coming as it does right after "Tempest," it feels kind of buried.

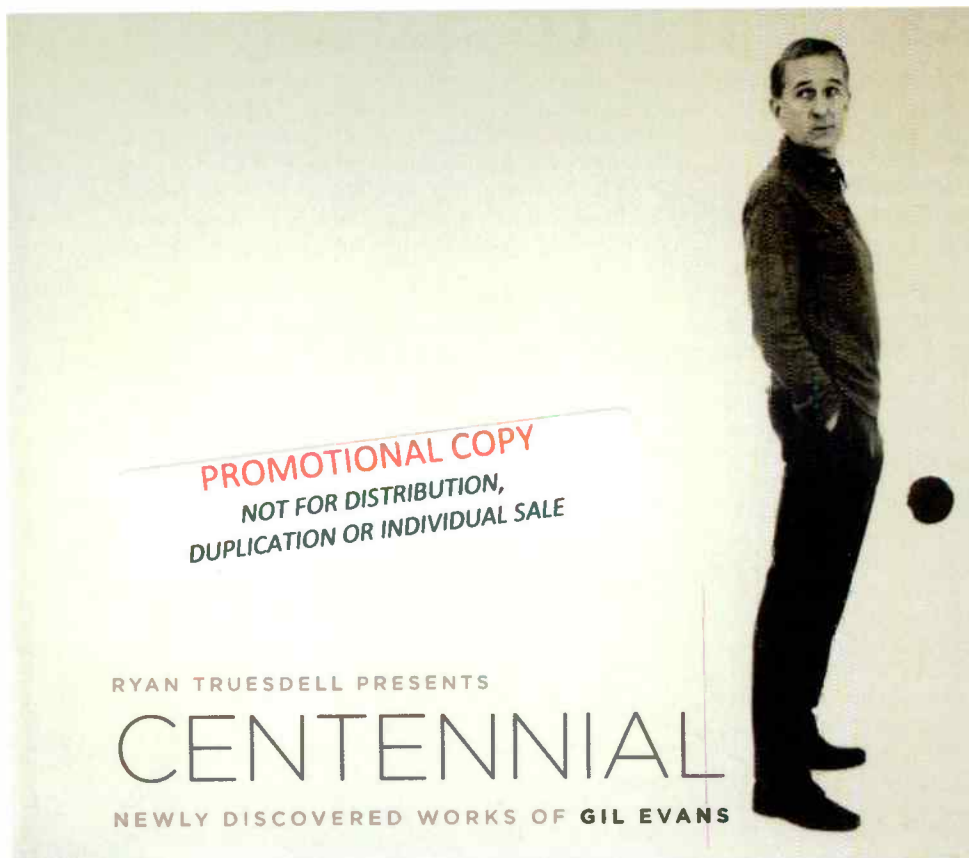
Bottom line: There's a lot to like in Bob Dylan's *Tempest*. Many of the songs show Old Bob's creative fire still burns brightly. But there are some tunes I would not mind permanently avoiding. The disc is way stronger than its mostly forgettable predecessor *Together through Life* (itself mostly co-writes with Hunter), but nowhere near as strong as *Time Out of Mind* or "ove and Theft."

The same day *Tempest* appeared Mark Knopfler, Dylan's touring mate for fall 2012, released his *Privateering*, but not in the U.S. as Warner Brothers declined to release it due to its being a double album. Pity, as it is terrific! I got it via Amazon. Gorgeously played and technically brilliant, it is Knopfler at his finest. Its 20 songs come in a pleasing variety of musical styles ranging from rock and blues to Celtic with some delicious side trips. I will call him on his "Got to Have Something," a naked rewrite of "Rollin' and Tumblin'." But since, as noted earlier, Dylan did the exact same trick, so I guess I have to grant some leeway.

Truthfully, I recommend *Privateering* (Mercury [UK] 6025 370 43217) over *Tempest*. I suspect it will wear way better over time. I have always been a huge Knopfler fan since Dire Straits' debut, and he keeps getting better all the time. Having both as new releases at the same time is almost an embarrassment of riches.

Nearly 50 years on from his vital work in the Blues Project, Danny Kalb has released a great double CD of 25 songs. Some tunes come from classic bluesmen, such as Muddy Waters or John Lee Hooker, with others from Bob Dylan, Johnny Cash and Hank Williams. Better, there are a handful Danny himself wrote. Check out *Moving In Blue* from Sojourn Records. You can buy it at Amazon or at CDBaby.





Seth Greenstein

Jazz

Ryan Truesdale Presents
Centennial - Newly Discovered Works of Gil Evans
www.gilevansproject.com

GIL EVANS, the elegant and visionary arranger, composer, leader, and musician, would have turned 100 this year. To commemorate this anniversary, Ryan Truesdale assembled an all-star ensemble of today's musicians to perform 10 never-before performed arrangements from Evans's archives, dating from the 1940s to the late 1960s. The result, *Centennial*, is more than a labor of love. Part sleuth, Truesdale scoured the Evans family archives for complete versions of lost compositions and alternative arrangements. Part impresario, Truesdale funded the project through ArtistShare donations from

equally devoted Evans fans. All told, *Centennial* is a fitting tribute to the spirit, the genius, and the meticulous work of one of the greatest musical minds of the 20th century.

Centennial reminds us why Evans, decades after his passing, remains one of music's freshest and most thoughtful voices. All jazz players talk about the colors in music but, by far, Evans was the most synesthetic. Listening to Evans reveals how he used timbre as coloration, musicians as paint to be mixed on his palette and each note as a brushstroke. We hear in the dynamics of his compositions spacious epic landscapes. Even the

most familiar melodies become, in Evans's conception, blank canvases the orchestra infuses with the deep, subtle, and nuanced hues of our emotions. *Centennial* remains true to Evans's painterly qualities. Each arrangement over the decades covered by this collection reveals new possibilities in even the most familiar compositions. The richness of the harmonies and the care in Evans's choices of instrumentation still surprise and enlighten.

The set opens ambitiously with a 14-plus minute original Evans composition, "Punjab," that Evans had recorded in the studio in 1964 with a star-laden orchestra for *The*

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Individualism of Gil Evans; but, dissatisfied with the result, refused to release. In his liner notes, Truesdale recounts how he sought out the score for "Punjab," and attempted to fill out the missing sections of the score after listening to Evans's original studio tapes. By adding Indian rhythms using tabla drums, Truesdale finds the right complement to the mysticism of the melody, played in unison, then in harmony, passed back and forth in

Centennial features many small gems as well. On "Beg Your Pardon," an Evans arrangement for the Claude Thornhill Orchestra and the earliest arrangement in the set, singer Wendy Gilles sweetly and authentically evokes the sound of 1946 where uniforms, suits, and party dresses met to dance the night away. The *noir* ballad "Smoking My Sad Cigarette," had been intended for a 1957 disc with singer Lucy Reed, and is sung here evocatively

confused those on the dance floor.

The last track, the Burton Lane – Yip Harburg classic "Look to the Rainbow," has had many lives and meaningful readings, from Ella Logan's original lilting Broadway performance in "Finian's Rainbow," to Dinah Washington's uplifting anthem of strength and hope at a time of great social upheaval, and the rendition on *Centennial* deserves its place among the best. Evans first realized "Rainbow" in

All told, *Centennial* is a fitting tribute to the spirit, the genius, and the meticulous work of a great musical mind.

an ebb and flow among the brass, reeds, piano, and percussion. Characteristic of Evans's later work, the composition does not merely leave room for improvisation, it feels improvised in its entirety; or perhaps like the music, present around us, that musicians describe, rather than discover, as a recounting of a journey taken together.

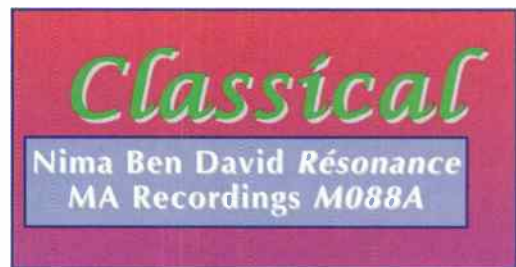
Two other extended compositions on *Centennial* previously were released in different incarnations. Kurt Weill's "The Barbara Song" retains the familiar tension of the original – the mellow dissonance of the brass against the shrill piccolo — but has a slower pulse and more open space. In the latest and longest composition in the set, 1971's "Waltz/Variation on the Misery/So Long," Evans combined three compositions that appeared in other forms in the 1960's. Performed by a 25-piece orchestra, and featuring excellent solo work by trombonist Marshall Gilkes, vibraphonist Joe Locke, and saxophonists Steve Wilson and Donny McCaslin, the three sections still retain their identities as three compositions. "Waltz" opens, light on its feet, then pauses, giving way to a lugubrious "Misery," and returns briefly before the long goodbye of "So Long." While Truesdale describes this arrangement as Evans's "magnum opus," the combination of these three distinct pieces sounds forced. Despite the smoothness of the transitions, the three works retain independent identities and never truly meld as a singular statement.

by Kate McGarry with an octet orchestration only Evans could have conceived, with deep hollows of bassoon and trombone pierced by the shrill piccolo and tenor violin. Another Evans original found by Truesdale, the 1950 delightful confection "Dancing on a Great Big Rainbow," never was recorded – despite having been in the arrangement books of the three major bandleaders Tommy Dorsey, Claude Thornhill, and Les Brown.

A measure of Evans's originality and artistic development can be heard by comparing *Centennial's* treatment of "The Maids of Cadiz" with the familiar version from Evans's first collaboration with Miles Davis on "Miles Ahead." This earlier version, arranged for the Thornhill orchestra, relies on the contrast between the formality of the Spanish themed introduction, choruses and interlude, and the sections that swing ever more forcefully. And unlike the ethereal Evans-Davis version, meant to showcase a single solo trumpet, the *Centennial* version emphasizes the ensemble, passing the lead from alto saxophone, to piano, and trumpet. Evans's arrangement of the standard "How About You" is anything but standard. Beginning with an extended legato pairing of flutes and French horn, the orchestra explodes into a joyous Lindy. Yet, the arrangement never sacrifices its integrity for entertainment. To the contrary, the intricacies of the arrangement still delight the listener at least as much as it must have

1965 as a bossa nova lullaby for an unadorned quintet (flute, guitar, piano, bass, and drums) and the winsome voice of Astrud Gilberto. Here, a full 14-piece orchestra backs vocalist Luciana Souza on a far richer and deeply satisfying performance. Bassist Jay Anderson solos during a quintessentially Gil Evans interlude between the verses, where the sonorous bass contrasts with flutes and woodwinds playing in their upper registers resolving from dissonance to harmony, and returns again at the end responding to Souza's dreamy scat.

During his lifetime, Evans never attained the popularity of the artists he arranged for. Yet, from his earliest work he had won their appreciation, and the acclaim of jazz critics and cognoscenti, as a unique and eminent artist. *Centennial* in many ways embodies all of Evans's best attributes. Truesdale's effort is aesthetically authentic, and represents the progression of Evans's vision over four decades of musical styles using ensembles of different size and talents. Because he was able to fund the project from others who also wished to properly honor Evans's genius, Truesdale ironically was able to realize Evans's arrangements in a way that Evans could not always achieve – with full orchestration and uncompromising recording quality. Like most tribute recordings, *Centennial* has its uneven moments. But its best moments, and its revelations about Evans's artistry, make *Centennial* worth returning to again and again.



WE *NERVOSA* TYPES ARE partial to slightly quirky but captivating music that's extremely well played and of course to knockout sound. If we can get both on a Late-Night Private Soulful Listening Disc, so much the better. You'll find it all here.

Nima Ben David plays a quirky instrument, the viola da gamba (or "viol"). It's the father of our cello, and was in widespread use in Europe through the end of the 1600s. Nowadays we hear it mostly as part of the period instrument revival. The viol is neither as nimble under the fingers nor as full-bodied in sound as the later cello. But it oozes overtones and is capable of a powerful intimacy. If you saw the movie *All the Mornings of the World* (aka *Tous Les Matins du Monde*), about the lives of Sainte Colombe and Marin Marais — two of the greatest-ever viol players — you understand me.

Fortunately for audiophile types, *Résonance* comes to us from MA Recordings, well known for some of the best-sounding discs available anywhere. MA mastermind and engineer Todd Garfinkel has done it again with this production, offering unusual music in stellar sonics.

Ms. Ben David takes us on a musical tour of what the viola da gamba can do, going back to a Bach solo cello piece transferred to her preferred instrument (she was originally a cello student in Tel Aviv, then moved to Europe to take up the earlier instrument, on which she's now considered a reigning master) right up to the present day.

According to my notes, I was quickly captivated by the opening tones, which instantly conveyed the resonant and emotive power of the viola da gamba in Ms. Ben David's hands. Two preludes by Carl Friedrich Abel (1723-1787) are attractive, even startling works and perfect introductions to the instrument.

Abel was probably the last composer to take the viol very seriously, toward the end of its 16th-17th century heyday. His preludes are expressive works, definitely suited to the late-night meditative listening which I referenced earlier.

Ms. Ben David also boldly adapts a solo cello work by J.S. Bach, the *Sarabande* from the *Suite Number Six in D Major*, BWV 1012, to the viola da gamba. My preferred versions of this on record are, of course, by cellists — the Swede Anner Bylsma on a period cello, and Nathaniel Rosen on a modern one — but Ms. Ben David is not far behind with this rendition on her preferred viol.

The meditative melancholy of the viola da gamba suits this *Sarabande* perfectly, and I think that if you listen, you'll be won over. Bach's otherworldly faith comes across beautifully on the instrument, and yes, the viol can do the required double stopping.

There are also some later works for the instrument including a *Prélude* by Sainte Colombe, plus two English works 16th and 17th centuries. They will all entertain you at the very least, I think.

The disc also includes some contemporary works, among them two specifically written for Ms. Ben David, Frenchman Philippe Hersant's 2003 *Shadow of a Doubt*, and Greek composer Christos Christodoulou's 2007 *26 April Village Fantasy*. These run the range from delightful to the eerie-ghostly to the modern-nervous, and suggest that the instrument offers more to composers and they have perhaps realized — at least when played by Ms. Ben David.

If you ever venture into the late-night Private Listening Sanctuary I mentioned in the opening paragraph, and I know many of us make that journey, you might want to take this CD with you. I do.

Sonus Faber Venere 1.5 Loudspeaker

Hugh Mandeson



I'VE READ ABOUT Sonus Faber for a very long time. I know that some of their designs are completely without compromise and literally handcrafted to extreme levels with unique design flair and care. I was pleased therefore to get the opportunity to review their new Model 1.5, a two-way bookshelf speaker from the Venere line. The stands are optional, in that it doesn't come as a part of the basic package, but it gets the speaker to its correct height and is well made. I had high expectations for this affordable speaker that Sonus promises "...has a unique look, ... youthful and aggressive character and sound that is vivid, agile, dynamic, and powerful." Furthermore Faber's "...legendary design touch is to be found everywhere; from the enclosures sensual lines, down to the aluminum and tempered glass foundation base."

The 1.5 is approximately 15.6 x 8.2 x 11.9 inches and thus is far from a rectangular box; instead, it has a shape inspired by the Lyre with smoothly curved sides and a flat backbone. The top is canted upwards front to back, and the very rigid front plate also leans slightly back to align voice coils of both speakers. This type of design helps keep the wave fronts of both drivers coherent. Both drivers are inset to the baffle, and the dome tweeter in a quasi horn. The specifications of the Venere 1.5 are given as 50 Hz to 25 kHz, 85 dB SPL for 1 watt input (2.83 volts), and nominal impedance is 6 ohms. The drivers are a 1.1-inch, silk-dome tweeter and a 6-inch Curv cone mid/woofer. List price is \$1,198 a pair plus \$398 for the 27-inch tall matching stands. They are 13.3 lbs each.

Despite the conventional wisdom that a speaker enclosure needs to be ultra rigid and non-resonant, Sonus speaker boxes are very lively and tuned to enhance the overall sound. The firm says they don't rely on measurements (and provide none) but use critical listening and computer modeling in developing their designs. The drivers are custom made by the "finest international manufacturers." While this model now appears to be their entry level, as far as cost goes, they borrow from Sonus' great experience building cost-no-object models and I was very eager to hear them.

Inside the shipping boxes, I found everything embedded in a very strong and dense foam, which was custom molded to each piece. The speakers and stands themselves were each clad with their own soft Tyvek

bags, the finishes were beautiful. The set-up assembly is quite solid, and good stability is achieved using the close tolerance hardware supplied. Everything tightens up nicely with the supplied hex key.

ful clarity and detail was entrancing. Pat's angular sliding lines bopped and shimmered and had me twitching. The acoustic bass was marvelously delicate and firm with great body and fullness. The drums alternately

The new Sonus Faber Veneres have breathtaking clarity and offer a beguiling sense of vocal presence.

The included spikes for the bottom tilt the speaker face back a bit and were threaded for some range of adjustment if needed. Protective disks are also included. The rear binding posts are very high quality with knurled ends for finger tightening and several wiring diagrams are included for single, bi-wiring, and bi-amping. I only used them single wired for this review.

For set up, Faber recommends 5 to 8 feet between the speakers and advises that they be kept at least 2 to 2½ feet away from any corners. They also say both that the rear profile of the speaker is optimized for interfacing with the rear wall reflections but that their design makes environmental interaction less problematic and therefore they are easier to set up.

I found that these speakers bass response was far more sensitive to where I placed them relative to the rear wall than is usual with other systems. This allowed me to tune the bass response. The front ports, which are slots in the front baffle, worked well, with zero noise of their own. The system gives a very even and honest bass if just a little generous between 40 to 80 Hz. They ended up 63 inches from the rear wall, 8 feet apart, and 9 feet from my listening position with some toe in.

Out of the box, I took a quick listen and I was struck by their very low distortion. It took only about two days for the bass response to smooth a bit and a few days longer for the extra level of clarity and sense of height to develop. **However, after three weeks**, they absolutely sang. They are a tad dark, which to my ears more closely resembles what is heard live, but had no compromise on top extension.

They seemed to my ears to go lower than 50 Hz or at least the roll off is gentler than usual for this type of speaker. This gives them a low-end power that belies their size. I am very sensitive to drivers' dispersion characteristics and tend to like omni and other non-flat baffles. The Venere cabinets are wonderful in this regard with no beaming or spot-lit annoyances; they sound great off axis with a good-sized sweet spot.

I enjoyed listening to the 1.5s very much and was running them thru their paces with my usual test tracks followed by an assortment of music with female vocals like Suzanne Vega, KD Lang, Mary Black, and Joni Mitchell. I was never less than impressed with the sound of their voices, delicate, breathy, and quite present. Then I switched to several acoustic ensembles, jazz, folk, and rock. The reproduction was beautiful and sensitive with instruments in perfect focus. I was drawn into the music and listened rapt in attention. These Fabers speak in the voice of the musicians with a high level of expression and energy.

Pat Metheny's new quartet with sax player Chris Potter, bassist Ben Williams, and drummer Antonio Sanchez utterly floated my boat. The sax with wonder-

burst and waned, Sanchez is a unique and gifted player. The warmth of these speakers is without any sort of resonance or overhang, while bass was impressive and offered a nice weight to all but the lowest notes. I really like this new system from Sonus Faber.

I played some live Led Zeppelin (BBC Sessions) to see how loud these speakers would get before sounding compressed. To me, 85 dB SPL is loud and that level was easily achieved. But on peaks above 100 dB, I did feel the bass was no longer as dynamic and unstrained sounding, yet there was no distortion or port noise at all. These might not be the best choice for bass fiends who want it really loud and thumping, but for those who love acoustic music, classical, jazz, electric jazz, and classic rock, the Fabers did justice to everything I played. Electric guitars reared their heads in smoldering glory; angry or impudent as played. Acoustic guitar had an amazing level of communication; each pluck, fingering, and tone of the instrument lay bare, only a shade less bright and piercing than live.

NOTES

Sonus Faber Venere Model 1.5 Loudspeaker, \$1198.00; stands, \$398. U.S. distributor, Sumiko, 2431 Fifth St., Berkeley, CA 94710; phone 510/843-4500, fax 510/843-7120; e-mail mail@sumikoaudio.net.

Associated Equipment

Krell KAV-300iL integrated amplifier, Monolithic PS-1 phono stage with PS-1 power supply, Revox B791 turntable, Dynavector 17D m.c. cartridge, Audioquest Sorbogel mat, custom record weight, Stealth Ultimate phono cables, VPI 16.5 record cleaner, North Star Designs M192 DAC, Audio Alchemy Digital Drive System transport/player, Pioneer Elite D45A universal player w/IEC adapter, Echo Audio Layla 3G audio interface, Human Solutions Quad-core PC DAW, Stealth Sextet BNC digital cable, Stealth M-21 Signature, Stealth Sakra, Stealth Indra audio cables, Stealth M7000, M7 Signature, Cloud 9, Cloud 99 a.c. cables, Black Diamond Racing and Polycrystal cones, Shakti Stone, Chang Lightspeed CLS 6400 power conditioner, and PS Audio Power Port wall outlet.

In particular their clarity is breathtaking and what little they were missing is slight and subtle compared to the very best systems I've heard. Solo piano in particular was heavenly through these speakers. I felt they are a bit soft at about 6,500 Hz, which may contribute to their non fatiguing character. Some cymbals were less metallic sounding than live but it didn't bother me a bit. The cymbals on the newly remastered Abbey Road CD, *Maxwell's Silver Hammer*, were almost shockingly palpable. The remaster really brings out the drums, synths, and strings. I really enjoyed it and cranked it up loud. The level of intelligibility of dialog would make these great Home Theater speakers I think and a complete package of them would be dynamite with a worthy subwoofer.

Now that I had put in enough listening hours to have a handle on these in particular speakers, it was time to play some of my own recordings of a local chamber orchestra made in an old stone church. This time the orchestra was joined by a very talented choral group from nearby Westmont College as well as finally making use of the very fine pipe organ there. A really nicely restored Flemish-style harpsichord featured in the second half. I was not at all disappointed, the size and width and depth were nearly as large as with my big floor-standing reference speakers. While the sense of space was curtailed a bit on the Veneres and the rumble of traffic outside was not there, the sound picture I had was really terrific, I could easily "see" every musician and singer in place and even the height seemed to be right on. It took me right back to that night, just a bit less immersive than I've heard but no less gorgeous. These speakers made a very coherent and seamless image with an excellent sense of presence to each voice and instrument. They were particularly beguiling with

voices, the driver integration is superb and the level of fine detail generous and unhyped.

I thought the Veneres might have the most wonderful reproduction of sibilance I may have yet heard. They didn't quite nail the sense of "there-ness" and timbral texture of speakers orders of magnitude more expensive, but for their size and class, they hit well above their weight. While they lack very deep bass, what they did reproduce was nothing to be ashamed of. Your neighbors and housemates might be grateful for that.

They had a very effortless and relaxed sound with more than adequate spaciousness. Images hovered solidly and extended beyond the edges of the speakers. Each voice and instrument inhabited its own acoustic within the overall sound portrait which was just behind the plane of the speakers. Voices, female voices especially were silky smooth, firmly anchored without the slightest smearing or bloat. The fine details of any recording played were beautifully rendered in all their subtlety and finesse. Decays, reverb trails, and the walls of the recording venue were easily heard and appreciated with just the least bit of depth curtailed by the lack of really deep bass. The bass they did have was wonderfully warm, round, and organic.

Dynamically, they were nimble with a naturalness, speed, and effortlessness that make them nearly invisible. The micro-dynamics were exceptional and on a macro level very fine for speakers this size. They have a startling precision without the least bit of hardness.

I have to say "Bravo Sonus Faber!" This new line is going to give the competition a run for the money. The rest of the Venere line can only be better IMHO. Try and hear this system somewhere. State of the art is trickling down!

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NAD C 375BEE DAC Integrated Amp

Mike Driscoll



I HAVE ALWAYS had a great deal of respect for NAD audio components, for one thing, I never recall hearing a bad sounding piece of NAD gear at any audio show, in an owner's rig, or in any dealer showroom. Also, NAD has always been a "value for money" type of company, offering good and sometimes great sound at a reasonable price. When editor Gene asked if I would like to listen to an amp from this company, I jumped at the chance. I was in for a surprise when I heard the name of the PR guy for NAD, Peter Hoagland, as I had worked with him at an audio store in Northampton, MA, about 35 years ago. Peter agreed to send me a C 375BEE DAC (which from now on in this review, I will mostly refer to as "the NAD amp," and it arrived within a few days of my reconnection with old friend Peter.

NAD was founded in 1972 by Dr. Martin Borish; NAD stands for New Acoustic Dimension. One of their first products that made a big splash was the NAD 3020 integrated amp which appeared in the late 1970s. That unit received rave reviews from several audio mags of the time, and became a big seller for the company. NAD's philosophy has always been to offer good value for the money, and to build its products with only those features they consider truly necessary, and coupling the value with pleasing aesthetics.

I myself owned an NAD cassette deck in the early 1990s, and when I got out of cassettes, I gave the unit to a friend, who is still using it. It has never given him any trouble. In the late 1970s, NAD began using Asian manufacturers, long before that became common practice. The company was purchased in 1981 by Audionord, a Danish company, and again in 1999 by the Lenbrook group of Pickering, Ontario, Canada.

The first thing I noted when this amp arrived was the sheer heft of this thing. My previous experience with British integrations led me to expect a lightweight little amp. The NAD weighs in at about 33 pounds, and as any audiophile knows, weight in an amp or receiver usually promises quality of performance and long life.

The rated output power for this amp is 150 watts per channel into 4 or 8 ohms, from 20 Hz to 29 kHz at 0.009% THD. The amp also is available with an optional phono stage, with which our sample was not equipped. I had instead a DAC using what NAD calls their Modular Design Construction (MDC), but more about this later. Due to the lack of a phono stage, I used the stage in my Primaluna Prologue 3 preamp, through the tape outs.

I auditioned the NAD using a variety of associated equipment. The speakers used were Monitor Audio

Bronze Sevens and PSB Alphas. My turntable was a VPI HW-19 Jr, with a Sumiko Blue Point Special cartridge. In addition of the phono stage in my Primaluna preamp, I also used the moving-coil stage in my classic B and K Sonata Pro 10 preamp. Digital sources were either a Pioneer universal player or a Denon DVD 2900 universal player. I also used a Sirius satellite receiver. Interconnects were by Kimber, and speaker cables were from Discovery. I also made comparison against my Primaluna Prologue five amp and a Jolida JD 202 integrated unit.

The first recording I listened to through the NAD was my LP of *The Cowboy Junkies Trinity Sessions*. The spa-

Dead songs, had all the emotion come through, and was as moving as I can remember hearing it.

The J Street Jumpers, a Mapleshade swing recording, all had the pace and rhythm that my reference tube gear provides. *The Best of the Band* was again about as good as I remember it being through my tube gear. All The Band's classic songs, "Ophelia," "Down on Cripple Creek," and "The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down" among them, really took me back to that classic musical era. In my judgment, that is what high-end audio equipment is all about, right?

Speaking of taking me back, Amy Gallatin and Roger Williams' *Something 'Bout You*, took me back to seeing

This firm has long been known for good value for money and this integrated amp with DAC upholds the tradition.

acious acoustics of the church where the recording was made came along quite wonderfully using the NAD, and the ambience coming through was as lifelike as possible in my judgment. The famous air-conditioner duct noise on this recording was rattling away, seemingly suspended in space to the right-rear of the sound-stage. Tonal balance was spot on, as good as I have heard from this recording. If you have yet to hear it played back on a really good system, do so quickly for it can sound truly awesome.

I then moved on to an LP of The Grateful Dead's *American Beauty*. This wonderfully recorded studio album was reproduced with all the beautiful sound it was meant to have. Again, the tonal balance was just right, the bass, played with aplomb by Phil Lesh, was deep and tight, the high end was just right, cymbals had none of the tizziness one sometimes notes with inexpensive solid-state gear. "Ripple," one of my favorite

these two perform live, on stage, at many bluegrass shows I've been to. Again, that's what it's all about. The title song, "Something 'Bout You," with its lyrics "I've whiskey-ed up my coffee cup, trying not to call you up" and "I've got this life of mine, it's nice and quiet and I like it fine" convey the meaning of this song perfectly, and it all came through with the subtle emotions intact.

An old CD that I have which I've always liked, *The Desert Rose Band*, has a very annoying tipped up tonal balance, and the tone controls on the NAD were a God send in taming the high-end response on this disc. This CD, featuring Chris Hillman, always one of my favorite musicians, is virtually unlistenable on my Primaluna or Jolida gear, due to the lack of any way to tame the top end. The tone controls on the NAD did the trick quite perfectly.

Another CD with tonal problems is *Gram Parsons and The Flying Burrito Brothers Live at the Avalon Ballroom 1969*. This disc was recorded by Grateful Dead recording engineer Owsley Stanley, known to deadheads as "Bear." This recording has heavy mid-bass and the NAD's tone controls alleviated this problem nicely.

One other nice thing this 375BEE has is that built-in DAC module I mentioned. Thus if you don't want to spring for an extra outboard DAC, use this one. It sounded smooth and clean in my fairly abbreviated listening tests. You can insert digital signal from a CD, DVD or BD player, a digital cable box, or a digital tuner via a standard optical input. Alternatively, you can stream a 24-bit/96-kHz PCM digital signal from your computer into the NAD's asynchronous USB input. There is a slide switch on the back panel, between inputs, to select the optical input.

When I initially received the NAD, I broke it in using Sirius/XM satellite radio's Grateful Dead Channel, played almost continuously for two weeks. The reproduction was superb. Most of the Dead recordings were done by Owsley (Bear) Stanley, who was also infamous for giving the world a recipe for LSD. Almost always, he did a wonderful job. All the sense of venue present in these recordings came through great, even though the unit was still breaking in. Tonal balance did not seem to

N O T E S

NAD C 375BEE DAC Integrated Amplifier, \$1600.00. NAD Electronics Intl., 633 Granite Ct., Pickering, Ontario L1W 3K1 Canada. Phone 905/831-6555, Fax 905/837-6357, website www.nadelectronics.com.

Associated Equipment

Primaluna Prologue 3 preamp and Prologue5 amp, VPI HW19 jr turntable, Sumiko Blue Point Special Cartridge, Denon DVD 2900 universal disc player, Sirius/XM satellite radio receiver, Jolida SJ292 integrated amp, Monitor Audio BR7 loudspeakers, PSB Alpha loudspeakers, Kimber interconnects, Discovery speaker cables, and assorted cones and footers.



change too much during this period either. The remote control, also something that is absent from my tube gear, functioned perfectly, and was a great help for a couch potato like me.

I also fed the output from my television into the amp, as well as using an old Sony SQ decoder, the rear outputs of which were fed into the Jolida integrated, which was then connected to my PSB Alphas as rear speakers. Watching Red Sox games like this gave a real "you are there" soundfield, and added greatly to the enjoyment of the games. I suppose this would also work well with Yankee games, but as a Sox fan, I would not recommend it.

DVDs played through the NAD had all the deep bass, when present, and when the rear

channels were played through the Jolida/PSB combo, also did a great job, despite the lack of a sub or center speaker. Music DVDs, like Roy Orbison's "Black and White Night," were absolutely riveting when played in this manner.

As a long time fan of tube equipment, I usually approach reviews of solid state-gear with more than a little trepidation. Will I like the sand as well as the glass, or will it sound flat and lifeless to me?

In the case of this sweet little unit, I needn't have had such worries. I found the NAD C 375BEE DAC to be a true piece of high-end audio gear at a reasonable cost. I would recommend this amplifier to anyone looking for an amplifier priced at this level, and who doesn't want to mess with tubes. Very highly recommended.

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Nola Contender Loudspeaker

Chuck Bruce



THE NOLA CONTENDER is one of the latest creations from veteran designer Carl Marchisotto and it is one which carries forward his tradition of fine craftsmanship and attention to detail. One might recall Mr. Marchisotto from his days at Alón / Acarian Systems. He is now head of Accent Speaker Technology, LTD and Nola products of NY-USA. The Contender is a three-way, floor-standing model which expands on the remarkable performance of the two-way, stand-mount Boxer design Marchisotto launched a few years ago. What is extraordinary to me is that the Contender offers such outstanding performance at a down-to-earth price point of only \$3,600.00 per pair. I first heard the Contender a couple of years ago at one of the many audio shows I attend, and I knew immediately that Mr. Marchisotto was onto something. This mid-size speaker system was only 44 inches tall with a footprint just 8 inches wide by 12 wide. Thus the Contender does not dominate a room, an appealing feature especially to those who live in restricted spaces or who must achieve ultra high Décor Scores for sensitive spouses or significant others.

Despite its modest volume, the scale of the Contender's audio presentation is large and envelop-

ing, more expansive than one might expect. Physically the robust MDF construction speakers is quite attractive and is offered in two finishes, piano black and cherry. The review samples were of glossy Steinway-quality finish with enough depth and polish to comb your locks.

Design Basics

At first glance, the Nola Contender speaker system may appear to be a 2.5-way design, yet in fact it is a full three-way. Frequency response is stated at 35 Hz – 28 kHz, output or sensitivity is specified as 90 dB SPL for 2.83 Volts input at one meter, and the nominal imped-

experiment. I also found the best ear height to be on the vertical plane with the tweeter, 41.25 inches off the floor. And very importantly with any loudspeaker, the distance to the listener should be measured carefully so that each speaker is equidistant from the listener. I had my best listening experience using this triangle. Off-axis listening with this speaker was fully acceptable, no “head in a clamp” required.

The bass port fires directly to the floor which enhances the bass and this can be augmented by some room placements. The Contender is capable of output lower in frequency than its 35 Hz specification; we did

Nola's Contender is a moderately priced speaker that offers deeper-than-expected bass and excellent treble.

ance is 8 ohms. The system features a one-inch silk dome tweeter, a 6.5-inch polymer-cone, rear-ported midrange driver, and an identical 6.5-inch driver located near the base of the cabinet (facing forward) with downward firing port directly below this driver serving and reinforcing the bass. Both two-inch diameter ports are flared to minimize audible air “chuffing.” The bass driver is located nine inches from the floor if one includes the two-inch metal spikes Nola provides. The speaker must be used in this manner, standing off the floor to accommodate the port (so don't forget to mount these spikes immediately after unpacking). The midrange and bass driver centerlines are separated by 25 inches. The relatively wide separation of these two drivers' separately tuned ports are said to enhance bass without affecting speed. To these ears, the goal appears to have been accomplished in good fashion, and I should say further that the acoustic integration of all the drivers is extremely good. There is a natural smoothness from top to bottom of the frequency range and tight, dynamic bass. Two separate crossovers are incorporated, one serving the mid and highs and the second the low frequencies. The crossover boards are physically separated to minimize any electromagnetic interaction. High-quality, polypropylene capacitors and Nordost wiring are specified. The midrange driver is centered 8.5 inches from the top of the 8-inch wide cabinet. The 8-inch front baffle should minimize secondary diffractions, especially from the tweeter. My 20 Hz to 20 kHz pink noise test also revealed a remarkably linear character across the spectrum in a real listening room. I did not try to make highly detailed measurements in an anechoic chamber or with TEF or Melissa gear (nothing wrong with this of course), but I did check the basic response parameters to identify potential issues I ought listen for in the later listening sessions. As always, my primary goal was to check whether the music, instruments and singers all sound as natural as possible considering source quality? Did the presentation engage me when there was a good variety of music? Are these speakers fatiguing over time? Can I accurately hear at least some of the character of the recording venue?

For set-up, Nola recommends facing the cabinets straight forward toward the listener. I generally followed this technique, but I have to comment that I do love to

some informal testing with an AudioControl unit where we had reasonably flat output as low as 31.5 Hz. Paying attention to the acoustic behavior of a listening room is an important factor that must be addressed whenever possible. My listening space has only a moderate amount of acoustic treatment, and it might be said that I am lucky in this regard. Setting-up a listening room is easily more difficult than mere placement of loudspeakers, furniture, equipment racks, etc. Room treatments, rearrangements and other “tricks” of acoustic design and analysis are typically required to achieve the best sound. This often requires a long term effort, and while one may have the most expensive gear on the planet, but if the room isn't right, the sound won't be right.

The Listening

First off, the Contender offered several attributes including a deeper-than-expected low-frequency extension in my listening room. As noted earlier, the speaker easily reached to 31.5 Hz in my room before it started to roll off. I was quite pleased about this as it allowed enjoyment of many favorite recordings, those with deep bass. Even though I have a pair of very nice Emotiva Ultra 12” powered subwoofers, I eschewed their use, feeling little need for their augmentation for most all of my music sources. The Contender's are capable of producing full-bodied sound throughout their range with ample, non-strident treble extension and fast transient response. Their 90-dB SPL sensitivity allows use of mid-to-low powered amplifiers or a quality receiver.

I do use good source gear including a full stack of EAR equipment, but I also had some fun with a very fine but not hyper-expensive German-made solid-state AVM C-9 CD receiver which I alternated with the latest Raysonic SP200 100-wpc integrated tube unit. The Nola Contenders performed with ease when driven by any of these units.

With a variety of CD, LP and computer music sources, I experienced in my listening room performance similar I to what I enjoyed at the several audio shows where the Contenders were showcased. Since the sonics of show rooms are unpredictable and often difficult, if a speaker such as the Contender can survive this sort of challenge with composure and consistency, then it must be pretty good. To my ears and experience,

the Contenders survived these tests with performance to spare.

The Contenders have not been a one-trick pony for me. I have heard them many times and I patiently waited to receive review examples. Actually, both the editor and I are honored and pleased that we did. As I feel that one must listen awhile to any audio gear to get a complete impression, snap decisions don't get it done for me.

Cutting to the chase and testing the mettle of the Contenders, one of my fave "butts to the wall" recordings is Hugh Masekela's Hope, an African Folk/Jazz CD featuring "Stimela," the South African miners' train song plus some other dynamic cuts on Triloka 82020 (LPs are also available). This superb recording contains some of the most stunning examples of jazzy voice and layered instrumentals ever captured, especially in this live performance. The Contenders present all of the famed attributes of this recording, including lightning fast bass, without strain or pain. If this recording doesn't make you perk up your ears regardless of personal taste, then call your local coroner as you may be stone dead! Have someone reliable check your pulse.

Moving on to a quite sublime and engaging recording, we come to Prof. Keith Johnson's Reference

Recordings LP of Rachmaninoff music featuring "Symphonic Dances" and "Vocalise," RM-1504. This brand new LP issue confirmed the capabilities of the Contenders as versatile, full-spectrum loudspeakers which play true classic recordings with ease. Another fave in the classical genre that is well treated by the Contenders is the Living Stereo CD/SACD reissue, RCA 82876-67903-2, of Stokowski's Rhapsodies featuring selections by Liszt, Enesco, Smetana, and Wagner. This early '60s RCA classic is second to none in elegance of musical presentation and is effectively conveyed by the Contenders. Perhaps the best item on this LP is Smetana's "Moldau" which was given extraordinary emotional impact by the Contenders.

A Spanish-themed classic from 1967-1969 is the stunning Albeniz, Fruhbeck De Burgos Suite Espanola, with the New Philharmonia Orch. In this case, the JVC/XRCD/FIM label reissue, Fim XR24 069 that contains some of the most expansive and involving music of this genre you'll likely ever hear and is near perfectly recorded too boot. This ain't no sleeper, boys and girls, it's a true a "sit-up and listen" engagement. This is a challenging recording for any loudspeaker system, especially the "Austurias (Leyenda)" track, yet the Contenders handled this challenge with remarkable composure, maybe running up to the edge in both extremes, but not breaking over.

Let me change pace to Miles Davis and his legendary performance at The Black Hawk Club in San Francisco in the early '60s where Miles was jammin' with his pals Hank Mobley, Wynton Kelly, Paul Chambers, and Jimmy Cobb. The Contenders provide us with solid transport to that time and place. I especially like the rendition of "So What," jaunty and sexy, Miles at his best. Check it out on the IMPEX (Columbia) LP reissue label C2S 820.

Pat Barber's later generation Café Blue, a cool jazzy CD on Mobile Fidelity UDSACD 2002, exhibits some of the finest lateral staging, lightning fast drum licks, and near 3-D instrumental layering such that it will test the ability of any speaker to deal with space. The Contenders responded very effectively and belie their modest size and in-this-universe price-point. This is especially well conveyed by the "Yellow Car III" cut, an ultimate test of dynamics, with true multi-dimensional presentation.

In any case, I found that the Contenders were up to the task with most any recording when played at a reasonable level. Unless you must have the utmost in earth-slamming bass, these speakers with their solid 35-Hz bass and good treble extension will very likely surprise you.

The Contender's didn't get in the way of the music nor did they exhibit unwanted aberrations distracting the listening experience. I enjoyed listening to them for hours while playing a variety of recordings from CD and LP and I even used some computer music files (mostly WAV files of Red Book resolution or better).

The Contender is an appropriate name for a three-way, floor-standing loudspeaker with their modest \$3,600.00 price-point, as it competes extremely well with other speakers in this range and performance. It is well worth an audition and consideration. In my opinion, they offer excellent value in what has become a world of over-priced audiophile products. Quite refreshing, Mr. Marchisotto.

NOTES

Nola Contender Loudspeaker, \$3,600.00 per pair. Accent Speaker Technology, Ltd., 1511 Lincoln Ave., Holbrook, N.Y. 11741. Phone, 631/738-2540; Fax, 631/738-2542; website, www.nolaspeakers.com. Design: Three-way, reflex-loaded, floor-standing system. Drive-units: 1-inch silk-dome tweeter, two 6.5-inch polymer-cone woofers. Nominal Sensitivity: 90 dB SPL for 2.83 volts at one meter. Nominal Impedance: 8 ohms. Frequency Response: 35 Hz to 28 kHz. Dimensions: 44 inches high x 8 inches wide x 12 inches deep (including 2-inch floor spikes). Weight: 50 pounds ea. (22.7 kg). Finishes: Glossy piano black or cherry.

Associated Equipment

EAR 912 line/phono preamplifier; EAR Acute-III tube/hybrid CD player D/A; EAR 890 power amplifier; Sony NS999ES universal CD/SACD player; OPPO 83SE universal CD/SACD player; AVM C-9 CD Receiver; Raysonic SP200 integrated tube amplifier; MacIntosh MR-77 FM tuner; PI HW-19 Mk-4 Turntable with Benz Micro Ruby 3-H cartridge; Soundstring Gen-II, Kimber Select, PK10 Palladian, Black Cat Morpheus interconnects, and WireWorld Silver Starlight USB cables, interconnects, speaker cables and power cords; Acer 4810TZ laptop using JRiver Music Management with output of WAV files to EAR 24/192 D/A via USB; TIFF dual-channel power conditioner; Room Tune panels, and Auralex corner bass trap.

Bob Carver Black Magic VTA20 Amplifier

Bascom H. King



Being aware that Bob Carver had a new company and was making some interesting tube power amps, I was pleasantly surprised when *TAV* editor Gene Pitts asked me if I would like to review one. Always being interested in tube gear, I said yes to the proposed newest one in the line, the VTA20A.

The VTA20S is a 20-watt per channel, tube power amp utilizing two pairs of EL84M output tubes and two 12AX7 input and phase inverter tubes. It can be changed into a mono 40-watt amp with a switch on the back panel. This mono mode works by simply paralleling the outputs of the two channels and making the left-

channel input and output the connections for this mode of operation. Output impedance is said to be about 1.5 ohm in the normal stereo mode, presumably halved in the mono mode, a more or less typical value for many tube amplifiers.

One of the design features of this amplifier and the larger mono amplifiers in the Carver line is a circuit attribute called a "d.c. restorer". What it does is to clamp the output tube grids' full-power signal swing in

of this until I can be convinced it has an actual audible effect on the sound.

I did have several concerns about this little amp's ability to interface with my Genesis Advanced Technologies 6.1 speakers. The first was its relatively low output power and, more importantly, its rated output impedance of some 1.5 ohm. The power issue is really one of how loud I might want to play certain program material. The 6.1 speakers are reasonably efficient

One can forget the hi-fi with this amp and just listen to the music. Wow!

the negative direction to some negative voltage near twice the negative idling bias voltage. This prevents the tube's bias from shifting negative due to the grid's positive direction swing bumping into grid current near zero volts at full power and cutting off the tube momentarily until the system recovers. This description applies to a tube power amp with what is called "fixed bias". In the case of the VTA20S, the output stage is cathode biased and the grid clamp diodes go to ground. One by-product of the relatively high output impedance is an interesting effect where the amp is said to "listen to the room" by reflection of the sound in the room back to the speaker and, due to some microphonic effect of the speaker, cause some corrective action in the feedback loop of the amplifier. I must remain somewhat skeptical

at near 90 dB SPL and most program material I play easily takes much more than 20 watts per channel. However, an adverse output impedance situation can significantly affect the frequency response of a speaker. In the case of the 6.1, the lower midrange and bass energy will rise a number of dB over the midrange level because the impedance of this design rises with lowering frequency due to the unloading of the mid-bass driver crossover below about 500 Hz, and because the servo bass system takes no power from the main driving amplifier and thus the speaker input impedance in the bass region is quite high. With all this said, my system is balanced with good overall subjective frequency response when the driving power amplifiers have low output impedance. What I can do is to lower the bass level and bass crossover frequency on the bass amplifiers somewhat and this will result in a reasonable bass balance with a slightly warmer mid bass – not always a bad thing.

After adjusting the bass level and crossover frequency of the speakers per the above, and playing a few things to help break the amp in over a couple of days, I found that the frequency balance of the lower midrange and the bass level worked out to be reasonably OK but not as good as with my best lower output impedance amplifiers. I used my W4S DAC-2 with the Bryston BDP-1 and PS Audio PWD as sources and found the sound of the little amp to be more than surprisingly good. I then hooked up the loaned ModWright OPPO 95 player from a good friend with its digital output into my W4S DAC 2 and played Patricia Barber's *Café Blue* album. Wow! This little amp really played that album most convincingly! The amp is going through a break-in process and was sounding better and better to me. I got the ModWright player with its tube output stage going and played a range of things with this player, which is the best that I have as a signal source, and was amazed at how good this little amp sounded with some of my reference material.

Further, my reservation about power was considerably allayed as it actually kicked ass pretty good on some of the things that I like to play loud. For instance, the cut "Tom Tom & Tom" on the great sounding *THST* album played quite loudly and convincingly with the space and decay of the drums sounding very similar to my reference power amp. One of my reference cuts is the piece "Duende" from the *Black Light Syndrome* album. This has blazing guitar, drums, and bass in a fast-paced piece of Rock and Roll! The little

N O T E S

Bob Carver Black Magic VTA20S Amplifier, \$2,100.00. Bob Carver, LLC, 204 Industry Parkway, Suite F, Nicholasville, KY 40356; phone 859/258-9794; www.bobcarver.com; e-mail info@bobcarver.com

Associated Equipment

Genesis 6.1 speakers, DSPeaker anti-mode 8033 room EQ units for the Genesis active servo woofers, Constellation Audio prototype 200 watt per channel power amp, Music Reference RM10 35W/Ch tube power amp, Aesthetic Calypso pre-amp using Tung Sol 12AX7 and 6H23Pi-EB tubes, Wyred4Sound DAC-2 with special tube output stage, Bryston BDP-1 File Player, ModWright OPPO 95 player, Berkely Alpha DAC, Berkely Alpha USB, PS Audio PWT, Apple iTunes, Apple Mac Pro computer with Audirvana and Pure Music player programs USB cable connected to the Alpha USB, Hp dv6604cl laptop with Jriver Media Center Player program, USB cable connected to the Alpha USB.

VTA20S really rocked out with this cut and played it amazingly loud and clean. One thing to remember in my enthusiasm as to how loud the amp can play is that my speaker system is not taking any power out of the amp below about 200 Hz and this helps a lot. With less efficient normal speakers, it most likely won't play as loud.

One of my favorite groups is the duo Gillian Welch and David Rawlings. Cuts from their new *The Harrow and the Harvest* sounded beautifully defined and present. I next played a wonderful SACD of Rubinstein playing Beethoven sonatas, RCA 82876-71619-2 and the "Moonlight" sonata just sounded spellbinding. It is like having Rubinstein play for you in your house! They say that the signal source is the most important part of a system and I'll tell you, with the ModWright OPPO feeding my Aesthetix Calypso preamp, a wide range of music played through the little VTA20S was incredibly enjoyable.

To be a bit more analytical, the sound of the Black Magic amp wasn't as precise, present, dynamic, and spatial as my reference CA prototype amp but it wasn't "tubey" in the overly euphonic sense but simply nicely relaxed and musical. One can forget the hi-fi, so to speak, and enjoy the music with this amp. I was most impressed with it. This would be a great little amp for a desktop system, a dorm, or for an otherwise small listening space – and for my somewhat larger listening space too!

In the lab, I looked into the amp and found its construction to be of good caliber and it should be reliable for a long time. Further, I found out, not surprisingly with no bias adjustment pots, that it indeed had cathode rather than fixed bias. This has all four output tubes

passing their cathode current through a common resistor, said resistor sized to produce about 13-14 volts of drop and therefore setting the bias for the output stages. The resulting power dissipation in the output tubes was of the order of 6-7 watts each, a conservative value indicative of long output tube life. One technical problem with such an arrangement is that if the four tubes are not matched very well, the actual currents in each tube may be somewhat unequal with the effect that the d.c. currents in the primary of the output transformers can be unbalanced, causing more low frequency distortion than if the plate currents were balanced. I was curious about how well matched the supplied output tubes were in their idling plate current, so I checked this by measuring the voltage drops in the output transformer primary windings and dividing the observed voltage drops by the measured winding resistances. I observed a spread of, from the power transformer end of the string of the four output tubes, 12.2, 16.8, 17.3, and 15.3 mA respectively. One in particular is low, the other three within reasonable tolerance. I tried a matched pair of tubes from Ram Labs and the low frequency distortion amounts in the two channels were much closer together. Of note, I did all my listening with the supplied output tubes and in the order originally inserted and measured. Subsequently, as I write this, just for grins, I swapped the 15.3 tube with the 16.8 tube which would be a slightly better match for what is the right channel of the amp.

In conclusion, I would have to say that the Black Magic VTA20S did exhibit some black magic in that it produced some highly listenable and realistic sound in my system. Makes me want to experience some of Black Magic's big brothers! Highly recommended.



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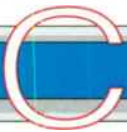
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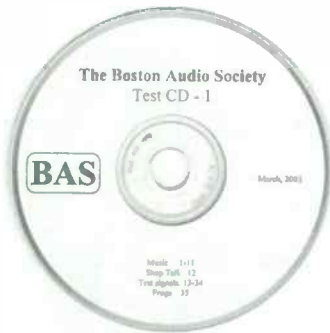
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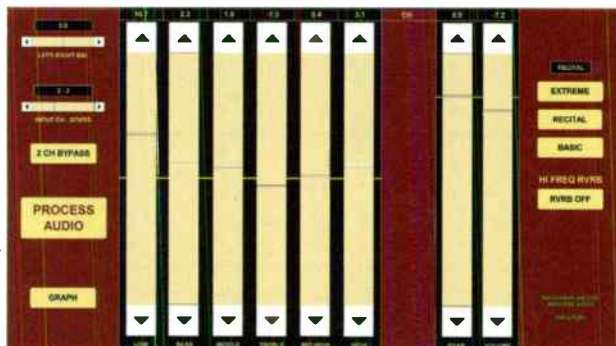
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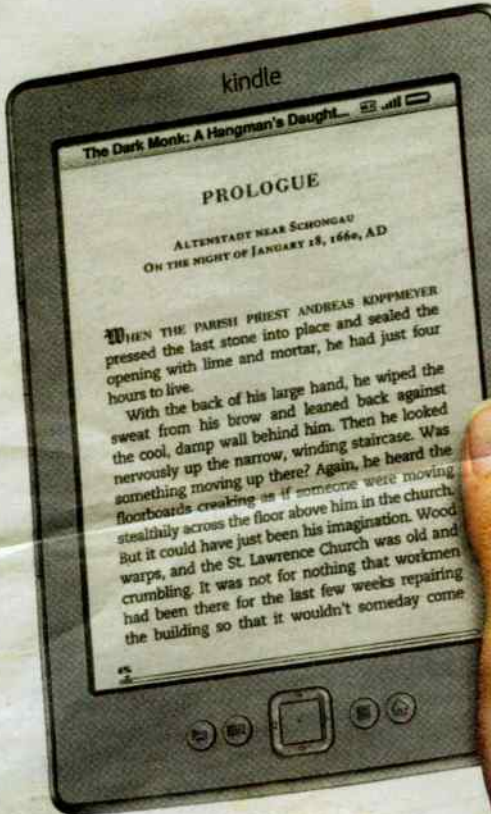
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