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The audiophile voice™

Volume 3, Issue 1

"...by audiophiles for audiophiles."

**Tom
Petty:**
He's The One

**The Other
Internet**

**In Search of
Analog Paradise**



"SOME OF THE SWEETEST VALVE AMPS IN THE WORLD COME FROM VAC..."



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"This stuff is too nice to ignore."

Ken Kessler, HiFi News & Record Review, September 1995

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To achieve this level of performance, technology and value in a single precision chassis, we design and build these amplifiers in our own factory just outside Seattle, Washington. Hear the technology that has the experts talking at your authorized Carver dealer.

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Carver Research Lightstar Reference Amplifier

Recommended Component, *Stereophile*, April 1996
(Vol. 19, No. 4)

"Innovative, powerful (350 Wpc) power amplifier that impressed RD [Robert Deutsch] with its dynamics and sense of power in reserve, while sounding impressively neutral."

Carver TFM-35x THX Amplifier

Stereophile Guide to Home Theater, Fall 1996
(Vol. 2, No. 3), Robert Deutsch

"It's very modestly priced but doesn't sound like it... There are two groups of audiophiles to whom I particularly recommend the TFM-35x: those who are drawn to the tonal qualities of tube amplifiers but don't want the responsibility of their care and feeding, and those who are attracted to the sound of the Carver Lightstar Reference but deterred by the price... In the right system, it can give the big boys a good run for their money."

Carver AV-806x Multi-channel Amplifier

Recommended Component, *Stereophile*, April 1996
(Vol. 19, No. 4)

"I was expecting competent performance; what I got instead was magic," enthused TJN [Thomas J. Norton] about the six-channel Carver... 'My favorite current multichannel amp.'"

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the audiophile voice

v o l u m e 3 • i s s u e 1

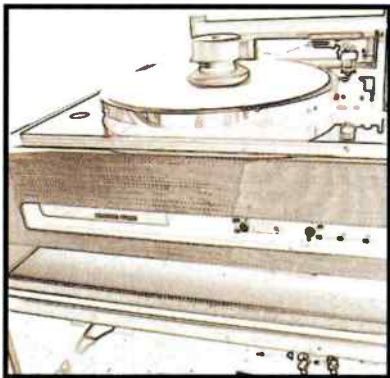


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The Other Internet

Robert Long

Life outside the World Wide Web need not be spent in the dark of *.com hype. Some of the freshest information of interest to audiophiles is located in the little-hyped Usenet newsgroups.



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In Search of Analog Paradise

John Hellow

One man's search for turntable nirvana leads him to many timeless insights, as well as a hefty financial investment and perhaps the ultimate in turntable isolation. He who has ears to listen, let him hear.

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Introducing The *Tower*™ Series By Henry Kloss.

Cambridge SoundWorks' new *Tower* series speakers combine musical accuracy, very natural tonal balance, precise stereo imaging and an incredibly dynamic presence – all without reinventing the laws of physics.



“The soundstage of the Towers was stable, deep, and richly three-dimensional...unfettered, solid bass to below 30Hz...an uncommon value.” *Audio*, Jan. 1997

Our new *Tower* series of speakers was designed by Audio Hall of Fame member Henry Kloss (founder of AR, KLH & Advent). They have the wide range, precise stereo imaging and natural tonal balance of our acclaimed *Ensemble*® series – and add improvements in efficiency, dynamic range and “presence.”

The result is somewhat unusual: speakers combining the dynamic presence of high-efficiency studio monitors, and the precise musical accuracy and pinpoint imaging of low-efficiency “reference” speakers.

Tower III by Henry Kloss™

Tower III is a two-way design using a wide-dispersion tweeter and a single 8” woofer. It combines high sensitivity and outstanding dynamic range with the natural, wide-range sound (including terrific bass) of a generously-proportioned cabinet. It has been carefully “voiced” by Henry Kloss for superb tonal balance and precise stereo imaging. These benefits come at a much lower cost than superficially similar models through a combination of Henry Kloss’ design expertise, plus Cambridge SoundWorks’ highly efficient direct-to-the-consumer sales policy. *Tower III* is the most affordable high-performance floor-standing speaker we know of.

Like other models in the series, *Tower III* is magnetically shielded and features removable black grilles, fully-finished cabinets (front and rear) and gold-plated binding posts. Finished in black ash vinyl. **Factory-direct price: \$599 pr.**

Tower II by Henry Kloss™

Tower II is a three-way system substantially larger than *Tower III*. It has two 8” woofers, a 5 1/4”

midrange, and a 1” soft-dome tweeter.

The large cone area of *Tower II*’s drivers contributes to an effortless sound quality, giving music a strong feeling of “presence.” That presence, along with *Tower II*’s smooth, musical octave-to-octave tonal balance and precise stereo imaging, produce what we think is the finest speaker system ever offered under \$1,000.

Tower II is finished in vinyl that simulates black ash or Vermont walnut. Bi-wire/bi-amp capable.

Factory-direct price: \$999 pr.

“Tower II can generate the gut-wrenching bass and do justice to a first-rate music system. To top it off, the price is right!”

Stereo Review

Tower by Henry Kloss™

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Tower features two forward-facing 8” woofers; a forward-facing 5 1/4” midrange driver; a 1” soft-dome tweeter; and separate rearward-facing midrange and tweeter units identical to those used in front.

Because it has even more cone area, *Tower*’s feeling of “presence” is, if anything, stronger than that of *Tower II*. That presence, when combined with the three-dimensional sound of *Tower*’s bipolar design, results in sound that is nothing short of incredible. Available in lacquered walnut or black ash veneers, *Tower* is one of the finest speakers ever offered. Bi-wire/bi-amp capable.

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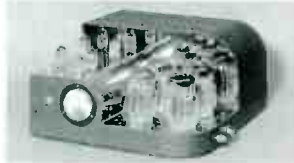
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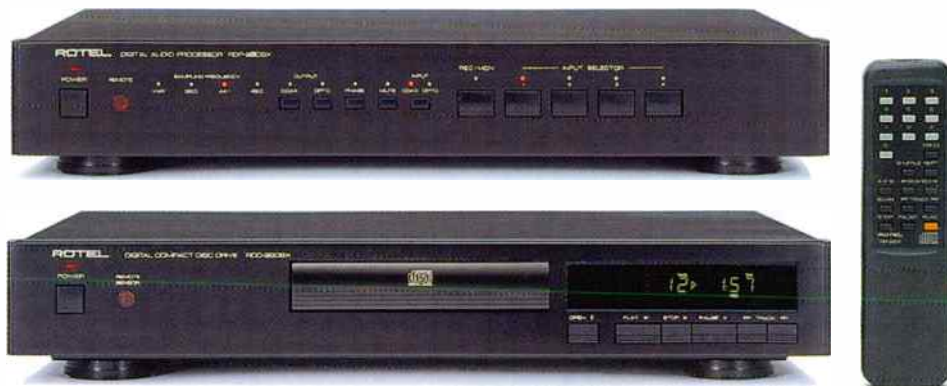
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Rotel Report

3



The RDP-980 Digital Processor (top) and the RDD-980 remote-controlled CD Transport provide state-of-the-art digital performance without a state-of-the-art price. Suggested Retail Prices: RDP-980 (\$599), RDD-980 (\$699)

A LOT MORE

A LOT LESS

The digital dilemma answered at last.

Digital separates really do provide superlative sound. The only problem is that most of them begin by separating you from the contents of your wallet. That's hardly an enticing prospect for those of us who constantly balance our quest for musical excellence with minor annoyances like rent and the IRS.

Fortunately, Rotel has the answer. Our new RDD-980 Compact Disc Transport and RDP-980 Digital Processor combine exceptional sound, unique convenience, and affordability. How affordable? Let's just say that you'll have enough money left over for some wonderful concert tickets...or that CD buying binge you've been putting off!

Synergy.

The RDD-980 CD Transport and RDP-980 Digital Processor boast circuit sophistication and sound quality far beyond their modest prices. They're a perfect match. But, they'll also work spectacularly on their own in your music or audio/video system.

Perhaps best of all, they're from Rotel, where dependable excellence is a tradition. See and hear them both at your local Rotel dealer. And be prepared to believe.

RDP-980 Digital Processor

The RDP-980 reveals musical nuances with a faithfulness formerly reserved for only the most expensive processors.

That's not the end of the RDP-980's capabilities. It switches up to 5 digital sources using coaxial or optical links. It handles sampling frequencies of 32kHz, 44.1kHz, and 48kHz for compatibility with any digital source. And, it features full remote input selection, phase inversion, and output muting.

The RDP-980's high isolation power supply includes two shielded transformers, one for the digital stages and one for the analog circuitry, and 17 individual local voltage regulator/filter capacitor arrays. The glass epoxy circuit board isolates signal traces and ground planes on separate sides for minimal interference.

Jitter? The RDP-980's specially selected optical input modules and high speed, wide bandwidth coaxial amplifiers minimize it. Additional circuit stages precisely synchronize all digital inputs and outputs to the RDP-980's master clock to effectively eliminate it.

Delta/Sigma modulation with 64x oversampling and fifth order noise shaping follows a high resolution 8x digital filter. A voltage-reference switched-capacitor D/A then converts the high density data stream to a constant voltage analog signal.

The analog stage features high precision metal film resistors throughout. Close tolerance polypropylene foil and epoxy-dipped ceramic capacitors complement the FET-based operational amplifiers.

The result? A spacious, detailed, and totally non-fatiguing presentation of all your digital sources.

RDD-980 CD Transport

Rotel's RDD-980 CD Transport begins with Philips' highly regarded CDM-9 laser mechanism, long respected by critical audiophiles for precise tracking and immunity from external vibrations.

We didn't stop there. We suspended the mechanism in the center of the RDD-980's substantial chassis for even better damping of resonances that could cloud delicate musical information. We thoroughly isolated the motors, tracking servos, digital circuitry, and the information display with a multi-segment, dual transformer power supply. We minimized minute internal supply variations with precise voltage regulators, oversized heat sinks, and high grade capacitors. We included both coaxial and optical digital outputs, full remote control capabilities, and housed it all in well-shielded heavy gauge all-metal chassis.



Rotel of America

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NEW PRODUCTS



The Spectral DMA-150 High Resolution Amplifier offers both high speed (400nS rise and fall times) and high current (60A) with its Focused Array circuitry. \$5,995.
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Data: 404/344-7111.



The M&K Bookshelf-75 Speaker lets users adjust the sound for possible use with a subwoofer. \$450 per pair.
Data: 310/204-2854.



AudioQuest Feet, made from Sorbothane, offer outstanding damping for tape decks, turntables, etc.
Data: 714/498-2770.

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B&K is developing a family of consumer audio/video products based on the Motorola® 56000 Series 24-bit DSP processors. Chosen as an Alpha development site by Motorola for the 56000 Series, B&K contributes to the Motorola effort to design, develop, and test their newest state-of-the-art digital signal processors. B&K is leading the way with the first Dolby Digital® (AC3) preamp tuner/processor powered by the Motorola 56009 DSP processor, the AVP1030.

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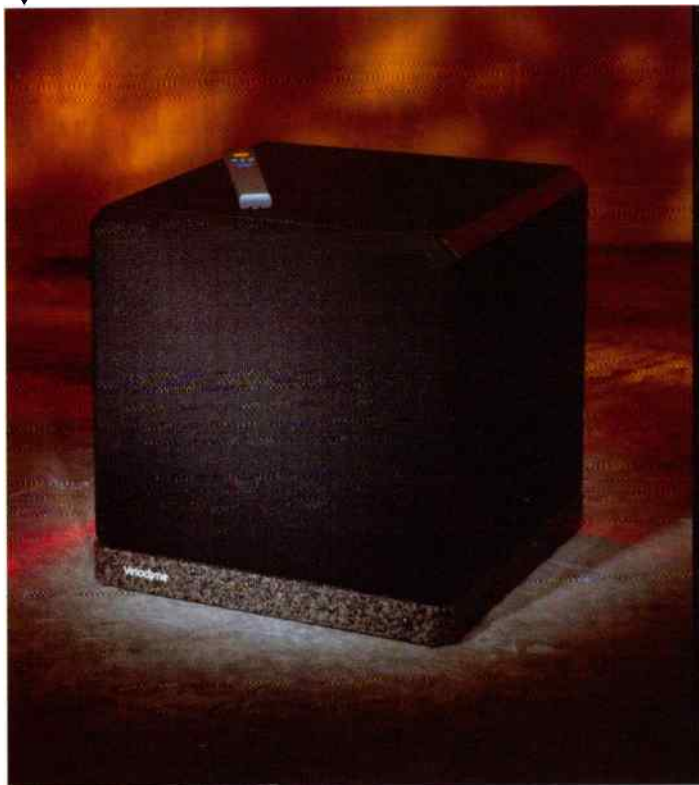


NEW PRODUCTS

The Velodyne F-1800R Subwoofer is the firm's new flagship model and features exclusive distortion-reduction technology, unique operating flexibility, and massive power handling. \$1,999. Data: 408/436-7270.



▲ **The Sony STR-DE605 Receiver** provides an affordable entry-level option with virtually all the most-wanted home theater features: Digital Cinema Sound, dual rear amps, 12 acoustic environments, etc. Second systems, specifically for the video buff, have never been so easy. \$349.00. Data: 800/222-7669.



▼ **The Tributaries Tribute SA 1.3 S-Video Compensator** is a true S-video amplifier which corrects and clarifies S-video signals in all types of systems and amplifies them for clear, accurate distribution over distances previously thought impractical. \$650.00.



Data: 800/521-1596.



Into the next millennium...Series 2000

Boulder takes an enormous step forward with the all new Series 2000. Previously, remote controlled preamplifiers suffered interference from the microprocessor into the audio path.

A fresh approach to preventing this annoyance is Boulder's elegant three piece chassis design.



The 2010 Isolated Balanced Preamplifier uses optical coupling between the microprocessor base and the two audio cases, one each for left and right.

To complete the isolation, a triple power supply has separate transformers and regulators for left channel, right channel and digital.

Building on the legendary discrete 990 gain stage, Boulder proudly presents the new 993 with improved slew rate, cascaded input stage, and potted case. The 2010 Preamplifier generously uses eighteen 993 stages.

Volume control in 0.1, 0.5 or 1.0 dB steps is accomplished over a 100 dB range without distortion or hiss by a proprietary solid-state circuit.

The new standard in preamplifier clarity and accuracy has arrived.

Boulder finally delivers what has long been needed in Digital to Analog Converters, *respect for the analog.*

By using Boulder's new chassis design and building the audio path with ten 993s, the 2020 Advance D/A Converter has more thought given to the analog than ever before.

Digital balanced drive to the five converters assures the lowest distortion and noise possible today.

A unique digital time advance feature allows speaker relocation by advancing time in only one channel.

The Series 2000 Modular Remote Control operates both products, expanding as your system grows.



Boulder Series 2000 is an audio perfectionist's dream come true.

2010 Isolated Preamplifier \$33,000.
2020 Advance Converter \$32,000.

Boulder

Ralph Glasgal, Ambiophonics Institute,
www.ambiophonics.org

To many audiophiles and even most high-end equipment designers, psychoacoustics is regarded as the dismal science, and so it is seldom allowed to intrude into the design processes for such paradigms as surround sound, multi-channel recording systems, Ambisonics, digital recording standards, etc. High-end magazine equipment reviewers seldom comment on how what they are listening to stacks up against psychoacoustic precepts, and Internet PC screens glaze over when the subject comes up in audio chat groups. Perhaps this phobia is as universal as it is because the prefix “psycho” has a negative connotation, thanks to Alfred Hitchcock and Sigmund Freud.

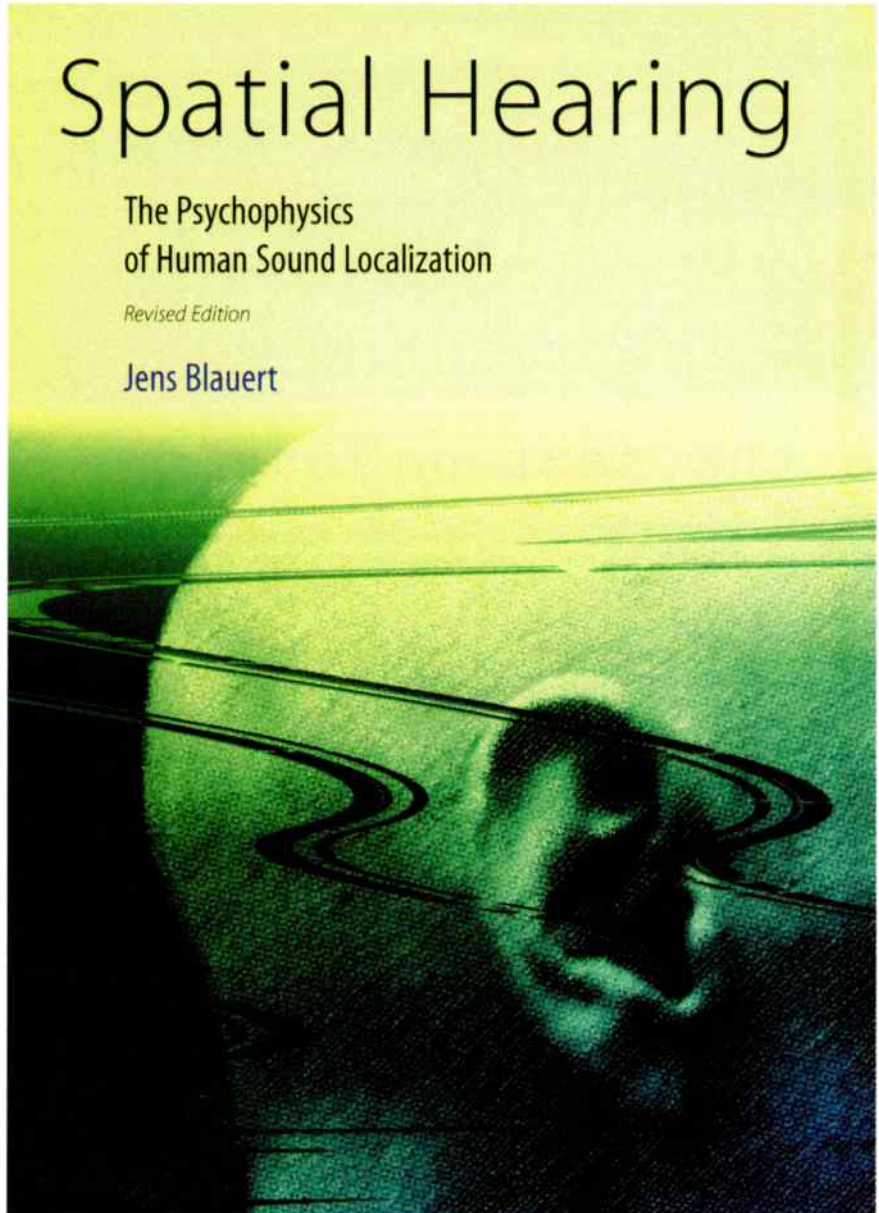
But the electronic inventions of Blumlein, Dolby, Art Klayman at SRS, Bose, Robert Carver, David Griesinger at Lexicon, Polk, and Thiele at Schoeps, and the hall-design techniques of Ando and Beranek were all based on an in-depth appreciation of the psychoacoustic properties of the human ear. Those audiophiles who have the patience to master the basics of the human spatial hearing mechanism will be better able to separate

Spatial Hearing

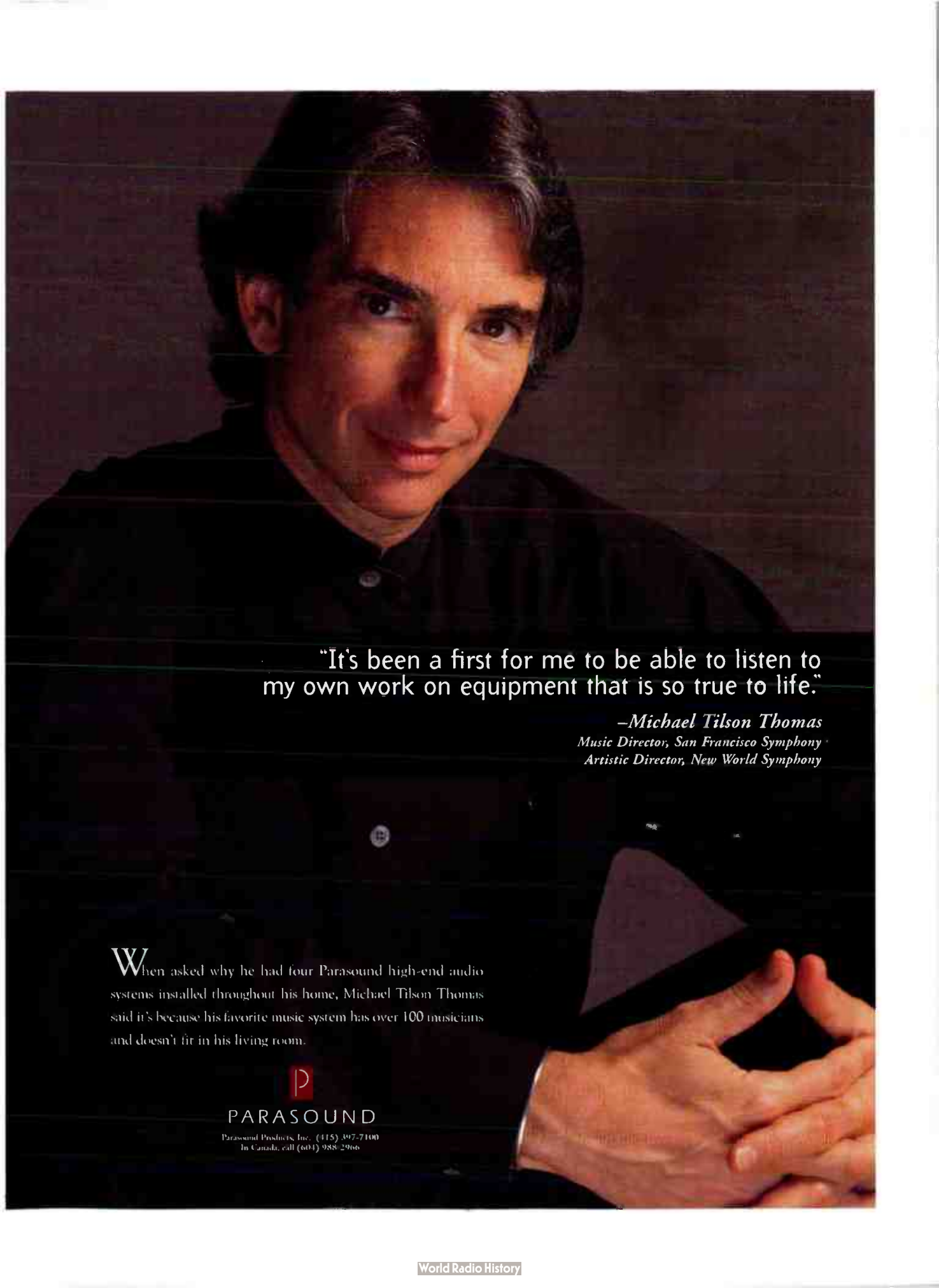
The Psychophysics
 of Human Sound Localization

Revised Edition

Jens Blauert



“Spatial Hearing, The Psychophysics Of Human Sound Localization,” by Jens Blauert
 The MIT Press, Cambridge Mass.,
www-mitpress.mit.edu
 480 pages, 215 illustrations, price: \$35.00.

A close-up portrait of Michael Tilson Thomas, a man with dark hair, wearing a dark button-down shirt. He is looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. His hands are clasped in front of him.

"It's been a first for me to be able to listen to my own work on equipment that is so true to life."

—Michael Tilson Thomas
Music Director, San Francisco Symphony
Artistic Director, New World Symphony

When asked why he had four Parasound high-end audio systems installed throughout his home, Michael Tilson Thomas said it's because his favorite music system has over 100 musicians and doesn't fit in his living room.



PARASOUND

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the wheat from the hype when it comes to judging new tweaks, selecting playback equipment, and testing or adjusting a stereo, surround or virtual-reality system.


The Freud of the psychoacoustic fraternity is Jens Blauert, who is a German-born Professor of Acoustics at Ruhr University. Blauert has published over 70 papers describing his own original research on how the human auditory system localizes and focuses on both stationary and moving sound

sources, within both open and enclosed spaces. There is hardly an AES paper on sound perception that does not refer to one of Blauert's papers.

But it is in his role as the King James of the psychoacoustic bible that Blauert is best known. By calling his book *Spatial Hearing*, Blauert avoids overt involvement with psychology, and indeed the overwhelming bulk of the text deals with the physical mechanisms and limitations of sound localization rather than with processes that might

occur within the brain after a sound reaches the inner ear. The first edition of *Spatial Hearing*, in German, appeared in 1972. [Editor's Note: While Editor of *Audio Magazine*, I was very pleased to run one of the few reviews of the book in the hi-fi press, after it was called to my attention by the guy who eventually reviewed it, Robert Berkovitz. Gene Pitts] *Spatial Hearing* is not a narrative type of book; it is more a compendium of references and technical abstracts organized by topic. The book was updated first in 1982 when it was translated into English, and now has been updated again with references as late as 1996 being cited. With each edition, the coverage of his subject has been expanded.

Blauert, who was born in 1946, is an honorary American since he received an Electrical Engineering degree from MIT in 1975. It is therefore surprising that since the coverage of European research is so exhaustive that there are relatively fewer references to American papers in the field, particularly the seminal paper of James Moir of CBS from 1952 dealing with azimuth localization. The first four chapters remain unchanged from the previous edition. After an introduction, the second chapter deals exclusively with the subject of spatial hearing where only one sound source is involved—first where the sound is identical at both ears, and



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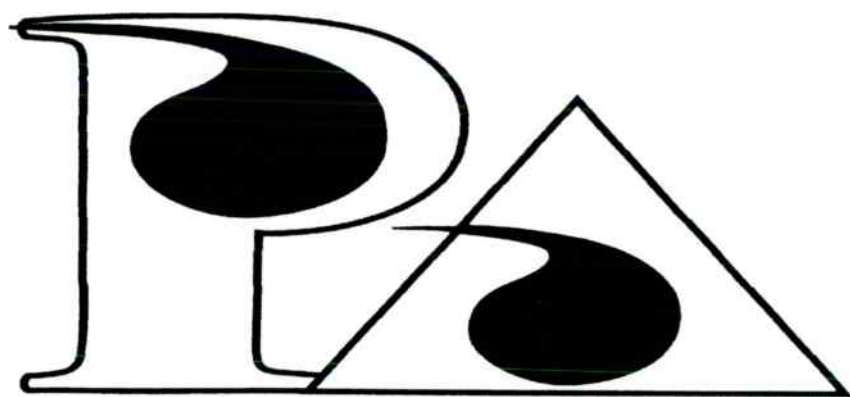
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then when the sound is different at both ears. Chapter 3 is concerned with how the ears cope with first two and then multiple sound sources in enclosed spaces. Chapter 4 is concerned with research after 1972 into the functions of the outer ear, monaural and interaural (binaural) localization mechanisms, and the cocktail-party effect.

But it is the new Chapter 5 that will probably be of the greatest interest to audiophiles. Here Blauert explores the brave new world of binaural room simulation and auditory virtual reality. In this chapter, Blauert defines a new discipline that he calls "Binaural Technology." Imagine a home computer, with audiophile caliber software, that can generate any acoustic space, compensate for your own personal pinna shape, position virtual sound sources, precisely compensate for loudspeaker positioning errors, etc. Blauert describes the end of an experiment in binaural concert hall simulation as fol-



lows: "The results of auditory tests, in which the real and simulated binaural signals were compared, led to the following conclusions. Binaural room simulation is able to evoke auditory perceptions that are regarded as being authentic even by critical listeners," and again, "Applications based on the physics of the external ear have established themselves as an important basis for a novel enabling technology, binaural technology. Spatially static acoustic scenarios can be represented with sufficient authenticity, even very complex ones, such as the acoustics of a concert hall."

At some 494 pages for the present edition, Blauert might consider using some tome control in the next edition. No one should expect to sit down and read this book from cover to cover, not even the Editor of this magazine. [Editor's Note: Ralph, I didn't even do that with the previous edition of this fine book. Gene Pitts] Perhaps as much as one third of the text is of little interest to audiophiles, such as the sensing of moving sound sources. However, the verities of psychoacoustics are the rock upon which audiophile-quality sound reproduction must be built. If one ignores psychoacoustic truth, the results will be disappointing. *Spatial Hearing* should be required reading for all equipment designers, reviewers, multi-channel recording advocates, Ambisonicists, and AES officers.

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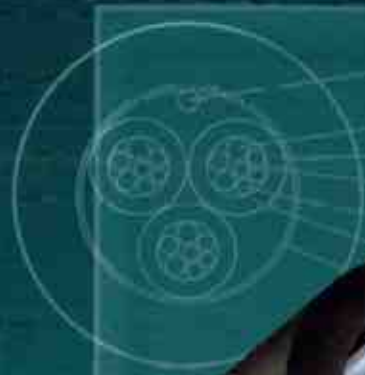
 A photograph of two AudioPrism audio components. The larger one is a Mantis amplifier with a light-colored, textured faceplate and four knobs. The smaller one is a Debut preamplifier with a similar faceplate and several vacuum tubes visible on top.

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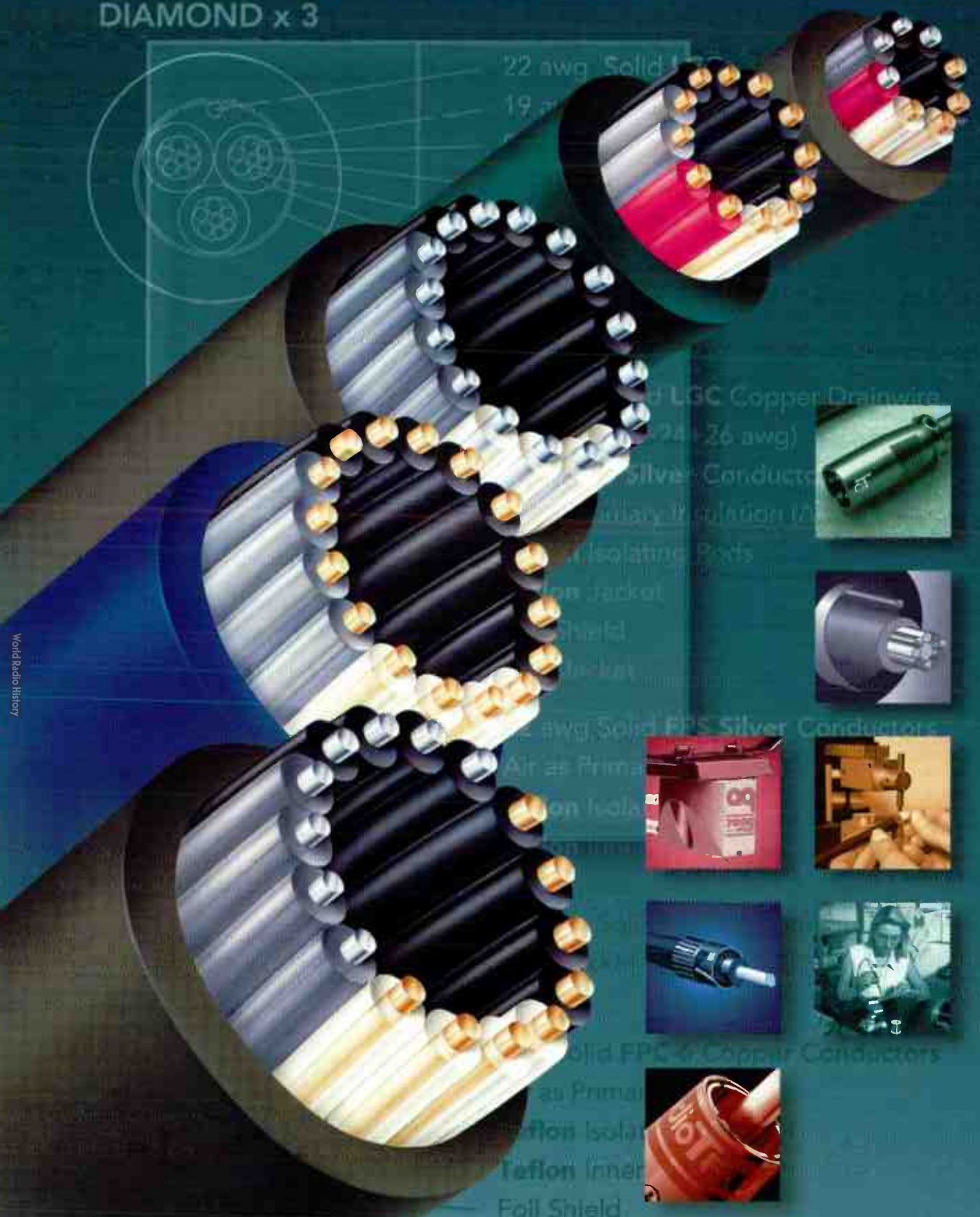
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NETroversy?

Dear Editor:

Enclosed is a check for a subscription to **The Audiophile Voice** through 1997. Thank you for sending the complimentary issue to me for evaluation; your confidence in your publication is well-founded. I wish you luck in your new endeavor and I am looking forward to reading your publication. I would like to add my opinion that speakers are the most variable component of a high-end system and therefore reviewing speakers should take precedence over other components. There is a controversy on the Internet (rec.audio.opinion) where an experienced listener could not reliably distinguish between a Yamaha AX-700 (<\$1,000) and a pair of Pass Aleph 1.2s (>\$10,000). I doubt that the same thing would happen when comparing speakers in those price ranges.

Roger Brown
Wayzata, MN

The Editor responds:

*I would agree that it is somewhat more difficult to distinguish between two amps than it is to tell two speakers apart, but I also think that the controversy you cite tells you more about the "experience" of that listener than it does about the products reviewed. A very similar "discussion" also appeared in Ed Dell's **Audio Amateur** and you ought to read the editorial in our last issue as well. I have always been amazed by how many "differences" go away when the listener can't see what's actually playing music or when we level match, that is when we adjust for the two units'*

different sensitivity. It has been my experience, in doing non-blind listening tests for about 25 years, that a great part of the "difference" goes away when we get rid of about four or five of these things.

Editorial Punch-Out

Dear Editor:

I enjoyed the trading of ideas and punches between you and Mark Block in the Editorial section of the last issue, and I agree that these items are pretty tricky. I also think that the questions are good ones to discuss and would like to hear other readers' opinions. I don't think that Editor Pitts is right about why, perhaps, high-end hi-fi is not doing well financially. I think it's more that other things like computers are getting dollars out of the wallets. Also, the good pieces last longer.

Sometimes I think I can hear all these things, and sometimes it's not so easy. Perhaps you took too easy a shot at the green marker for CDs, as I don't see any discussion of blind or any other kind of testing that you guys did. I don't have a good science background, so I don't like to read the measurement type of magazine. Those measurements may be good for engineers, but I have to agree that we don't listen to test tones.

I once went to a hi-fi show and a famous speaker engineer was in another speaker-maker's room, where a hot new model was being demo-ed. He asked for "FM White Noise" to be played, the stuff off-channel from an FM tuner, and he put his ear right up to the speaker and after a while said, "This speaker sounds great!" I think that's the only

time I've ever seen a test tone used for listening.

George Harrison
Whitestone, NY

Blue Over Baez

Dear Editor:

Were you reviewing Joan Baez the person or her Mo-Fi CD?

After reading the review of *Diamonds & Rust* (MFSL UDCD 646) in your last issue (Vol. II, No. 5), I was unhappy to find more information on what Ms. Baez was doing at the time of the recording than anything to do with the quality of the remaster. Being as I'm at an age where I can state that I bought the LP when it came out and know all I need to know about the performer, I would have much preferred to read about a direct comparison of the 24-K gold CD made by Mobile Fidelity with their GAIN system to the aluminum CD, rather than getting the great job of letting everyone know about Ms. Baez, her beliefs, social life, and whatever! I can appreciate such work but not in a review of a CD remastering where the MSRP is \$29.99.

For the record, I have compared the original aluminum CD (A&M) to the Mo-Fi, and it's a night and day difference. While *Diamonds & Rust* is not one of my favorites, the Mo-Fi rework makes it worth owning.

The point I'm trying to make is that while it's nice to read all the stuff about social history in the '60s, such info can be found in other publications where there won't be much of anything about the recording. So, let's not lose focus. It's a review of a recorded piece and in this case a re-issue. The review

should ask hard questions. Is the Mo-Fi better than the original? Does it deliver for its \$30.00 cost? Only when these questions are answered, will I have a valid review that I may use to make an educated purchase!

Enough, thanks for the story, but where's the review?

Vince Whirlwind
Final Note
Lewiston, ME

Future Tense

Dear Editor:

I read with interest your editorial in the last issue. Your reputation in the industry is well-known, so I was pleased to learn of your acquisition of the magazine. Although, historically, TAV's publication schedule has been somewhat irregular, it is a great periodical, reflecting the insight and care of the reviewers. As an audio enthusiast for many years, I have watched with disappointment as certain publications have changed formats, only to dilute the essences of their writings and abandon the precepts upon which they were founded. One in particular comes to mind; once a publication for the audio purist, its reviews were comprehensive, incisive, and professional. It now shares merely a name with its predecessor. I am confident that the level of quality exhibited by the reviews in TAV will continue under your direction. I do hope, however, that you will not change the size of the publication. Like many readers, I find the digest size far preferable to a larger, "floppy" magazine which cannot stand unsupported on a shelf. Please consider leaving the size of TAV as is.

Joseph Cartland
Dallas, PA

The Editor responds:

Thanks for your letter, but I have always thought it was better for the writers to be "well-known" than for the editors to be "recognized" as from a most-wanted poster in the Post Office.

While I have concentrated on getting the magazine out on a regular schedule (which will go to bi-monthly in 1997), the larger format allows both our art director and advertisers to practice much better graphics. Also, the newsstand effort would not have been possible if we had remained in the digest size, because some newsstands refuse to carry digest-size publications. I think

that the "stand up" business relates more to the thickness of the publication and its cover stiffness than to the magazine's page size. Thickness, of course, is directly related to the number of advertisers who support the publication. One might buy magazine slipcases from the Jesse Jones Company of Philadelphia; you can find them in the phonebook.



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Lies And Whimpers

David Nemzer

DAMN!!!

It happened again!

Somebody moved my right interconnect!

I've been trying to get my partner to understand that I don't want my wires moved, touched or altered from where I placed them on the floor. Her response is to assume I just landed on a trip from Mars and off she goes.

The cleaning lady is another story altogether. On the plus side is the fact that in the time it takes me to decide what cleaner to use in the VPI this time, she has cleaned the entire house up to surgical theater level. It looks great. It's how she does it that scares me. For the tenth time I've asked her to not clean near the stereo, near the wires, near the cables, and near the speakers. She looks at me like I should board the ship back to Mars, and replies, "schmootz no good, must clean!!!" The last time she said she would leave it alone, she cleaned the turntable. It must have been the cyclonic movement of the cleaning rag that gave the positive charge to the dust cover. Have you ever seen your tonearm rise to attention as you lift your dust cover? And the wire from the ET tonearm—it undulated like a cobra for three minutes before it lost its charge. I had to unplug the table for at least five minutes because I was convinced the stylus would weld itself to the next record it touched. My last cleaning nightmare is that she will vacuum my Maggie tweeters right off the speaker frame.

Now that the great renovations to the house are done, the listening room, now referred to as "The Audio Salon," is starting to shape up. It has gone from a convoluted L-shaped room, with legs 18 by 10 feet wide, to a really nice 18 by 35 feet

with 9.3-foot ceilings. Thank you, no applause. The furniture wars seem to be over, and I might have won the battle. Well, maybe it's a truce. At first, the delay in the room lasted an eternity, so I've been slowly adding to the room objects that contain the echo and disperse the sound better. This is not so easy if you remove furniture as one of your choices. Against the strong advice of many audiophile friends, I only used a 9x12 area rug in front of the speakers. No wall to wall, no drapes, no curtains. The marble fireplace and 18-sq. ft. mantle mirror still define the room, and I won't shroud it when I listen for fear that I'll knock off a cherub or two from the fragile plaster casting. It has been a slow process of change; so slow, in fact, that most of my listening experiences in the past four or five months have been on the run.

It's been quite a journey and one that has me really wondering about the correctness of it all. I have gone to the homes of audio friends and audio reviewers, and not always are they one in the same. I have made some general conclusions about what I've heard and what they hear. So hear goes. All the reviewers I spent time with were able, with a good degree of accuracy, to correctly identify changes in their systems when they introduced a new component into the chain. Rarely did they get it wrong, and sometimes we would disagree about the extent of the change, but change was always apparent. Careful attention was always paid to the reference system, and they always took their responsibilities seriously—as any equipment reviewer must. Never was more than one change introduced at a time, and we always went back and forth between the two components to try to be accurate and consis-

tent with our observations of what the result was. Sounds right, doesn't it?

Well, it wasn't. With the exception of but one reviewer, everyone's idea of accuracy, of correctness, seemed to be different. I'd like to say "wrong" but I'm probably no different to them than they are to me. The range of "correctness" was great, and sometimes it seemed that the "non-reviewers" were more correct without trying and with less effort. Troubling to be sure. Most listeners would benefit from two major changes to their listening habits. First, TURN DOWN THE VOLUME!!! I can't believe you guys, it's sooo loud. Stop trying to dB people to death. Half of your room problems are volume related so renovate, relocate, or reduce. Or better yet, bite the masculinity bullet and buy smaller speakers! Everyone is so hung up on the size of their speakers; that's what's killing high end, and don't get me started on Miller's vinyl fantasy, PLEASE!!! There are speakers out there that inch for inch are killers; which, despite their size, fill a room to more than rock levels. We have to stop considering them visually and just listen. I'm never going to be able to buy these huge systems that are everyone's "show" references. And neither are you, so you'd better serve yourself and your ears by giving some more time to smaller is better.

You might be asking yourself why I rarely name or push particular products. Well, first I don't consider myself an audio equipment reviewer, nor do I take as "seriously to be considered" small changes in a system that require mere eleven thousand dollar changes of electronics. I'm a believer in tweaks that are cost effective and not really supportive of effective tweaks that are cost prohibitive or cost insane. You want to buy audio, I'll try cork dots; you want stones, I'll try a brick—and while I'm at it, try a banana—A RIPE BANANA—it will almost do the same thing. You want to spend thousands on cables, be my guest; I tend to go for equipment probably does almost the same for a quarter the price.

As usually is the case with my ramblings, I've gone completely off again so back to my listening room, now referred to as "The Audio Basilica." In my continuing attempt to lower the room resonances, I've decided to try room treatments. There are a number of companies out there: Room Tunes, Echo Busters, ASC, and others. I've heard all three listed in numerous applications and feel that all work well, given the correct application and judicious use. This is important since I am of the opinion that if you're using a forest of treat-

ments to treat your room, you would have been better served by not owning those BIG speakers your ego made you purchase. Big speakers work in big rooms. Get real. Get small—or at least smaller. I've started my journey with Echo Busters because considering price, looks, service, telephone attitude, they are in the middle. Any one of the others might be better or worse. I have not tried them all in my house; most of us never do. It would be fair to say that esthetics play a larger part in my choice than only sonic benefits do, and that the custom size charges using stock fabrics are more than fair. I'm willing to compromise my sound in the cause of relationship harmony. But...

Damn.

Who moved that CABLE!?! It's on a different floor board!?

And worse! The Buster delivery is due any minute, and she hasn't gone shopping. Big trouble. You don't think I'm going to try this while she's home. Well, as audio fate would have it, within a 15-minute window, she is out and Busters are here. I'm taking it slowly to have minimum exposure for maximum sonic benefit. It's clear to me that custom sizing and photographs of your room, along with good measurements of all planes, help best to approximate what you can get away with. I do see that while I will take longer to reach total audio satisfaction, I will also not have to list half of what I should *not* have purchased in Audio Mart. It's a good thing.

Results? It's clear that most of the offensive echo is gone at little harm to either the eye and ear. I'm going to slow down now because it's easy to overdamp, and since I still use those black, round things, I have more to lose than those digiheads will ever hear. (I will concede that the Aluminuts are gaining better sound reproduction but good business or not, Tom, the vinyl disc still is the goal by which all will still be measured and compared.)

Damn.

Where did she put the remotes this time?!?

I'm very exacting with regards my editorial deadlines; I never miss them by more than a



week. The last time I fooled around, everyone wrote about the GE Super III, even though I'd been telling my friends to buy it for years. I should mention, perhaps only an issue late, that I strongly believe that the Radio Shack Extended Range Portable Radio, listed as #12-603 in the '97 catalog, is virtually the same radio. [But David, don't TAV's experienced writers know that deadlines for a quarterly rag come every three months? —Gene]

When it comes to musical selections it seems I never to have to worry 'cause no one has the obscure taste range I have—at least not completely. Russ Novak continues to surprise me and often comes up with a few I should have gotten on my own. The last pairing he gave me one shared reviewer session was a Cole session on a hot summer night. Most audiophiles have heard of Holly, but what about Freddie and Diana? A really perfect pair to listen to in any season. Diana Krall's *All For You* (Impulse IMPD-182) is a collection of some of the more famous—and a few of the obscure—pieces of music that Nat King Cole made famous with his early trio recordings from the 1940s. Diana Krall, born 20 years after some of these songs were first done by Cole, captures the real essence of Nat's piano as well as the lyrical flow of his vocal delivery. You'd never think that most of these songs were written 40 to 50

years ago, so fresh is Diana's delivery. Her piano is strong where needed and restrained when it is secondary to the vocals. Her voice is pure toned, but she hardens it where the song calls for that extra, seductive edge. As is my style, it's a recording (YES, A CD!!!) that can be shared with the other person in the house. Probably not your kids because these songs are restrained, refined, and recorded for adults but probably would be recognized by your parents almost immediately.

Add a good 30 years to Diana's 30, and you'll find yourself being fooled by a voice so familiar that you'll get the chills. If you grew up with Nat Cole or heard what your folks listened to, you'll be surprised when listening to Freddy Cole's *A Circle Of Love* (Fantasy FCD-9674-2). I first heard Freddy live in a club about 12 years ago, when I heard that Nat had a brother who also sang. In his own right, and not singing his brother's songs, Freddy is a joy to listen to, with a warm, relaxed style that is effortless. It's a great temptation to ask him to sing songs his brother made famous, but not fair to Freddy, since he could easily stand alone if there never had been a Nat King Cole.

However, on this night, someone did ask and his renditions of a few of his brother's songs was a *deja vu* that would scare you right out of your seat! Buy this CD, take a gentle ride.

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The 1997 Winter Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas ended yesterday, and drew over 80,000 attendees. My own informal method of counting heads is to see how hard it is to get around the different facilities, in particular the Las Vegas Convention Center (LVCC), and also in between the LVCC and the outlying hotels. In Vegas, I rent a car, as cheaply as I can, because I don't like carrying increasingly large loads of press kits and such around all day. I also don't like standing in line for the slow trips on the jitneybuses that CEMA quite reasonably lays on for the conventioners, and the cab lines are too long and the fares somewhat too heavy.

The real reason for the car is that I use it in a vain attempt to keep my editorial conscience clean by trying to attend all the press conferences I've been invited to. That, however, is not possible, because it would break one of the basic Laws of Physics, the one about not being in two places at once. Even if an editor ignores or declines the requests from companies whose principals don't understand that their products lie in fields outside *everyone's* interest, there have always been direct conflicts, where you have to be at opposite ends of town at the same time.

Because of my new responsibilities, the car also had to tote a dozen 30-pound boxes of magazines. I might be better off going around by cab, but I think the very best way is to have a car, with a driver on call, and use a cell-phone to say, "Hey, wake up; I'll be at the LVCC pick-up point in five minutes." But that sort of thing runs against my cheapskate nature.

It was hard to get around this year, not only because of heavy foot traffic in the aisles of the Show proper, but also because of car traffic on the roads around the various facilities. Parking was very difficult, and too often there was some sort of hassle with the attendant.

The Alexis Park Hotel was the main site for the high-end companies, rather than the Sahara Hotel, which is undergoing some expansion. The Sahara, which held the high-end last year, is about a 15-minute walk from the LVCC, while the Alexis Park is a 15-minute drive *if* there's no traffic. Parking itself can take upwards of 15 minutes, and then it can take yet another 15 minutes to walk to the press conference. (And no, I'm not going to tell you where my secret close-up parking spots are.)

I like the physical layout and atmosphere of the Alexis Park, where most of the firms display in rooms located "out back" in one or another of the two-story buildings discreetly draped around swimming pools. I still had a feeling of having to keep my elbows close to my sides, and the luggage cart I was using to move magazines around nicked not a few ankles. Further apologies to all those who didn't hear them the first time.

And while I'm at it, VERY LARGE apologies to all those firms not visited or where I didn't spend enough time. There just wasn't time to do everything, go everywhere, and listen to every worthwhile demonstration. It is another demonstration of that Physical Law cited above. I can only suggest at this point that you give me a phone call or write me a letter or send me the press kit.

I'd be remiss if I didn't mention "The First Annual High-End Show, produced by the International High-end Society," which was located in the Debbie Reynold's Hollywood Hotel a few hundred yards up Convention Center Drive from the LVCC. Put together by Ken Mavrick of Mavrick Audio Systems, this "alternative show" drew several dozen exhibitors. One wag called them "the Budget Breakaways."

What did I like best at the Show? I liked the atmosphere; most people seemed to feel good. I believe our report will be in the next issue, but that depends on our writers writing rapidly.



TAV's take on what's to 'Net besides the Web

Robert Long

Everywhere

you turn these days there are references to the World Wide Web. That's what most people mean when they talk of "the Internet." Admittedly, it's the newest and most glittery component of the sprawling tangle that is the Internet, but it's by no means the only component. Lurking in its shadow is another major resource: The Usenet.

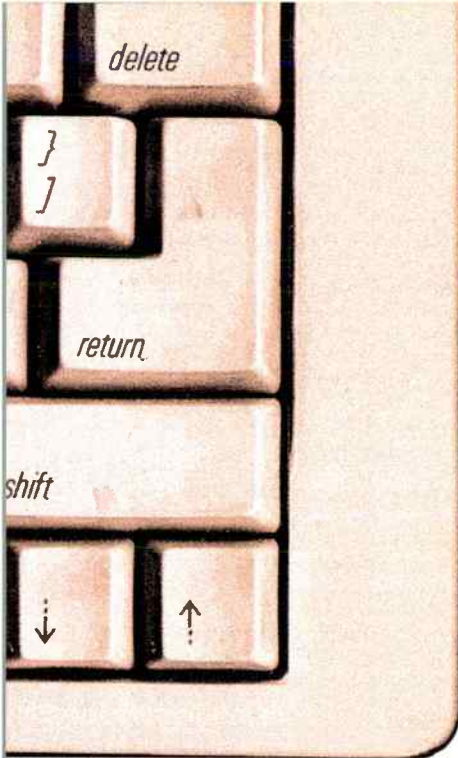
If you were into BBSing (haunting so-called computer Bulletin Board Systems) in the days when the Internet was the private fief of scholars and federal agencies, you probably know all about the Usenet. It's a collection of hundreds—nay, thousands—of "newsgroups" devoted to specific topics. Some are regional, steeped in local references and expressed in the local language. Others are worldwide in scope and conducted in English with only occasional posts in other languages. Subject matter ranges as far as the human imagination will reach. Really! If you've never sifted through the newsgroups list, I guarantee you'll be shocked at what all you can find there.

Most of the newsgroups that concern us here have names that begin with "rec."-something—meaning, I suppose, that these subjects are "recreational." For some of us, they are more than that, but that's beside the point. The audio newsgroups I look in on, for example, are called

[rec.audio.high-end](#), [rec.audio.marketplace](#), and so on. The music groups I read regularly are [rec.music.classical](#), [rec.music.classical.recordings](#), and [rec.music.opera](#). But there are some 80 of them, from [rec.music.a-cappella](#) to [rec.music.video](#). The most recent addition is [rec.music.makers.saxophone](#). In addition, there are over 200 more groups in [alt.music...](#) and a dozen or more in [alt.rock-n-roll...](#) that I haven't attempted to explore.

Newsgroups can be a wonderful source of information—and, if you're not careful, misinformation—or of just plain chat with people enjoying similar interests. The software used to send and receive messages in these newsgroups can be as simple or as complex as you want and, if you choose simple, may be free. I'll get to some recommendations by and by, but the point is that you can find out what's new at Germany's *Funkausstellung* or Japan's Audio Fair or the Consumer Electronics Show faster in an audio newsgroup than in any other way—unless you have a reporter friend with an unlimited long-distance budget. And if you have a problem with your Weird-O 727 postamplifier, you may find a fellow owner in the group who can set you on the road to a solution without the denial ("It ain't our fault, man!") of a local dealer, if there is one, or a company customer-service person.

But first the bad news, so you know what to avoid. Newsgroups can be cluttered, unruly, contentious, and even somewhat criminal. Most of the



groups I currently participate in are unmoderated: That is, there's nobody in charge to boot out those who are out of line. Human nature being what it is, some posters—particularly the cowards who hide behind spurious identities like "frank.instein@graveyard.net"—can get fairly nasty when they disagree with you. When you encounter them, just ignore

them. Then there are

the newcomers bearing offers too good to be true. Assume you'll lose your money or your merchandise unless the other party has established credibility via deals that make sense and long-term participation with no noticeable complaints from other participants.

If you set your newsreader to ignore all posts with "\$\$\$" in the subject line, you'll be spared most of the get-rich-quick schemes that are no more than illegal pyramid plans in disguise. Topic, schmopic—they're likely to show up in any newsgroup. So are statements of quasi-political faith and posts that really belong in another related but less populous group—say, a question in the **pro** group that really belongs in **high-end**, except that the questioner believes he'll get more answers and better ones from the pros. Often these will be cross-posts: That is, posts directed simultaneously to more than one newsgroup. The Emily Posts of the Internet (whose dicta are known collectively as "netiquette") frown on the practice, but it's very common nonetheless.

Note that I've stopped bothering with the full prefixes to the newsgroups; I'm sure you understand how they work. Among the audio groups, **high-end** is the one that may interest you the most. It includes discussions of both individual components and general technical topics: HDCD, CDs vs. LPs, tubes vs. solid state—that sort of thing. The group is not particularly populous, which you may take as a blessing, because you can check out the current posts quickly. On the other hand, discussions tend to be heftier and more varied in the newsgroups that get higher traffic rates.

From some acid commentary elsewhere, I gather **high-end** is moderated. Posters whose want of taste or restraint or ethics has caused their posts to be rejected tend to get a mite nasty. My own feeling is that the newsgroup is probably better off without them. Some people demonstrably feel otherwise; if you think of the usenet as one vast labyrinth of in-fighting, then I suppose you may be disappointed by the relative civility of moderated newsgroups.

The **marketplace** group is supposed to contain all buy and sell offers. You'll find offerings of all sorts of audio gear, new and used—even needles for antique Victrolas, in a recent posting. Some posts offer services, such as cutting CD-Rs from your DATs. You'll also find some posts from folks who are seeking particular items. By the way, "FS" at the beginning of a subject line means "For Sale"; "WTB" means "Want to Buy." Some FS items, however, do show up in other groups as well.

You may also find complaints about would-be vendors or purchasers in such a newsgroup. You should take such posts with as many grains of salt as you reserve for the too-good-to-be-true offerings. In another area there recently was a posting from someone who evidently planned to trade copies of commercial software—which is illegal, of course—with another poster. The writer claimed to have sent off the agreed program and have gotten nothing in return. His response to this breach of honor among pirates was to call his correspondent a thief in public. If you see a com-

Newsgroups can be a wonderful source of information—and, if you're not careful, misinformation.

plaint, be wary of both the plaintiff and the defendant—who seldom puts up much of a defense, because it can simply make matters worse, as one feud of several months' acrimonious duration in another marketplace newsgroup demonstrates.

Three of the remaining audio groups—**misc**,

opinion, and **tech**—have pretty fuzzy boundaries, and you're likely to find discussions of such topics as interconnect cables or biamping or power requirements or DAT vs. Minidisc or AC-3 setups going on simultaneously in more than one. Obviously, some of these topics are audio perennials—FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions), in Internet jargon. Others sample the latest pie in the sky.

And the level of "audiophiliness" varies over a wide range. Some posters are just upgrading from rack systems (or even, on occasion, to rack systems), while others may be deeply engrossed in, say, the audible differences between Krell and Audio Research electronics. But **whatever the sophistication level of the poster, you're likely to see more complaints than plaudits about the audio press**—including *The Audiophile Voice*. That's human nature: Folks with a beef have more reason to speak up than those who are satisfied.

Again, the comments on the audio press can range from civilized to vitriolic. Readers of the so-called underground audio press may square off against each other or against the magazines that enjoy relatively conventional distribution. High-end buffs may dump on a broad-spectrum publication like *Stereo Review*. And so on. *Stereo Review* actually has had the most cogent defense recently from a poster who pointed to the service it has done for readers who wouldn't think of buying a magazine with a high-end focus.

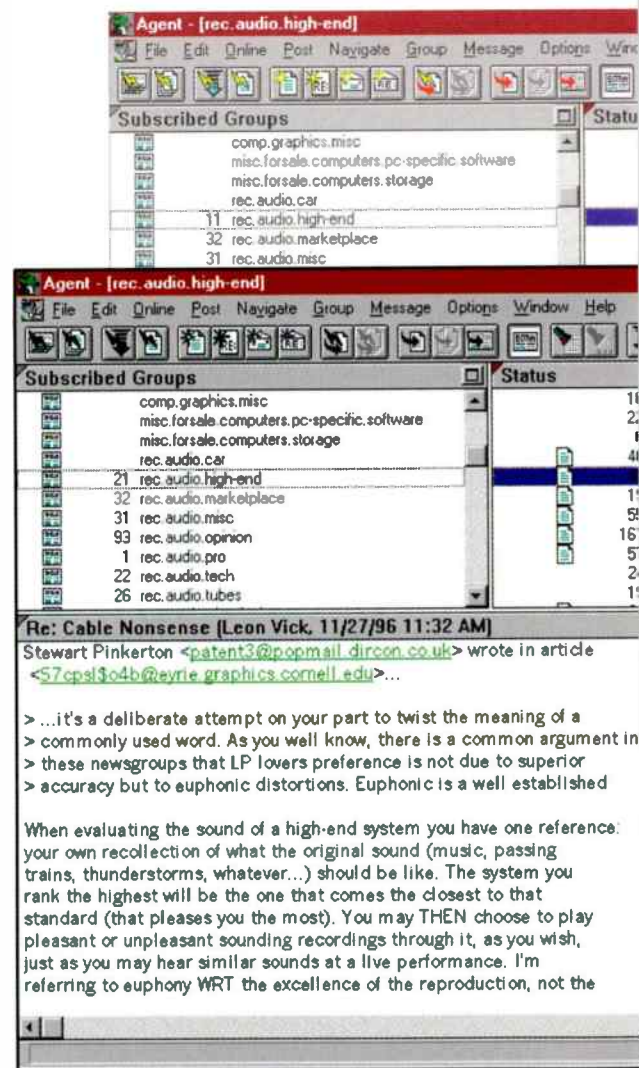
The **pro** group is quite clearly defined and suffers relatively little cross-pollination from the others, partly because it is very active, with its own concerns. If you're a home-body audiophile, you may wonder about some of the terminology; but a lot of its posts may still be of interest. Discussions of microphone technique or multichannel recording formats will seem more arcane than some of the more generic discussions—say, of preventing hum pickup or "burning" (recording) music CDs on a computer's CD-R drive.

In music, I can only speak for the classical areas, since that's my specialty. There isn't a lot of difference between what shows up in **classical** and what you'll find in **classical recordings**. Discussions of the work of young, new performers or recently deceased ones, recommendations of recordings and discussions of the available works of relatively arcane composers, and occasional excursions into music history or that of the recording industry are generally the most enlightening and enjoyable. Some offers of used CDs or LPs for sale may turn up a prize you can't find at retail.

The least enjoyable are the periodic diatribes against classical music as music that "has had its day"—an attitude I find as difficult to explain as the participation of anyone holding it in a classical newsgroup.

Some of the posts deal more with musical trivia than anything else, but even these can precipitate an insightful post from time to time. Questions like "What do you think is the saddest piece of music?" leave me wondering why I bother, frankly. But once we've got past "Valse Triste," some of the responses may astonish you and get you thinking along lines you had never before entertained. And there are some exceptionally knowledgeable participants in the group.

The **opera** group is somewhat more specialized, with most of its posts concerned with singers, performances, recordings, or opera texts.



The Usenet thrives on hierarchy. Any news reader worth its bytes will show you (1), a list of the subscribed groups (shown above); (2), a list of the messages contained in a given newsgroup. Shown is a message posted to rec.audio.high-end, as presented by the

Many are duplicates of posts in **classical.recordings**. Among those that are not you'll often find reviews of current performances or master classes from San Francisco, New York, London, or indeed almost anywhere. And lots of operatic gossip, of course.

There also are groups on **classical.contemporary**, **classical.guitar**, and **classical.performing**. Once again, topics in the less populous groups tend to be duplicated in **.classical** or **.classical.recordings** if they have any general-interest value. The value of the narrow groups is that if their subjects interest you, you can participate without having to wade through the clutter of general-interest postings in the broader ones.

If you decide to go after these goodies, I'd strongly recommend a good news-reading program. *Netscape Navigator* and Microsoft's *Internet*

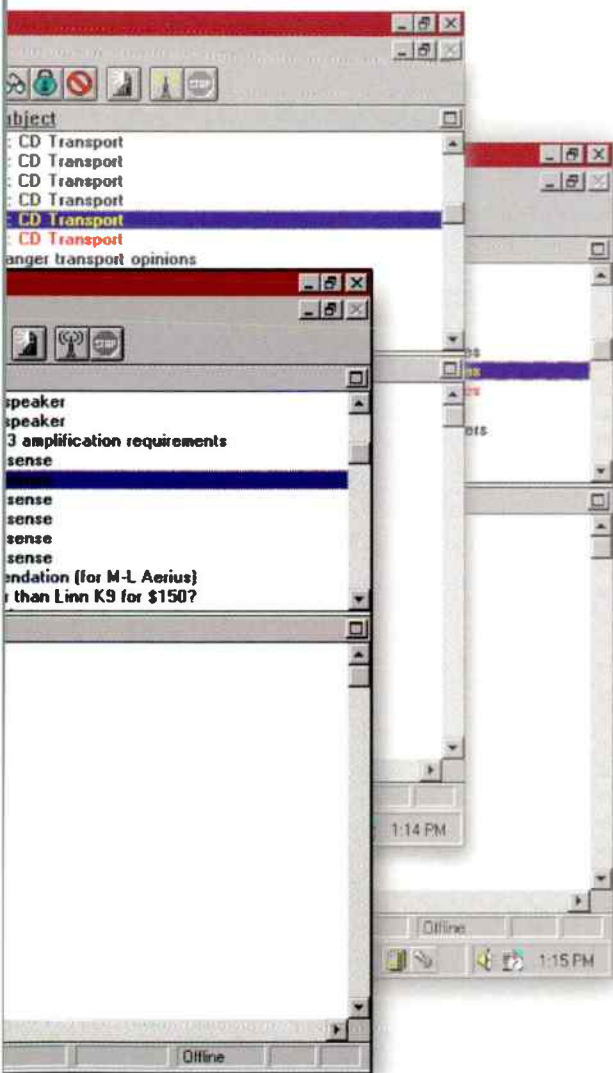
Explorer include features for the purpose these days, but I think you'll find the free-standing alternatives more flexible and useful. I use *Agent* (a.k.a. *Agent .99*, because it is technically still a beta until *Agent 1.0* is issued), which is both a news reader and a mail reader. A demo version called *Free Agent* (because it's free) has a limited features set but will give you an idea how it works. You can get either version at the Forté (its manufacturer) web site: <http://www.forteinc.com>. Other popular programs include *Gravity* (<http://www.microplanet.com>), which was a recent *PC Editor's Choice*, and *Spry News* (<http://www.sprynet.com>)—one element of *Internet in a Box*, which is distributed by CompuServe.

All of this software is available for the PC, though some requires Windows or Windows 95 and other programs offer alternative 32- and 16-bit versions. Some (*Netscape Navigator*, for example) also are available for the Mac, and doubtless there are other Mac options of which I'm unaware because I use PCs exclusively. But even if you do, too, you should ask around and consider the power and features of the various programs before deciding. There not only are many options, but they're constantly changing.

The full-price versions of programs such as *Agent* include all sorts of aides to sorting, hiding, automatic downloading, and so on. They use macros of a sort to pass over any message with a certain string in a certain place—like "\$\$\$" in the "Subject" or the name of a rude loud-mouth in the "From" line. Just how they work varies from program to program, of course; it helps to have tried the free versions and learned the basics of the company approach before committing to the more elaborate model.

If you find the messages of Henry Fogel or Richard L. Kaye (both participants in **.classical.recordings** from time to time) to be especially interesting, you can set the reader to download their posts automatically. But otherwise, you can minimize on-line charges by downloading only the message headers, going off-line to choose which messages you want to read, and then going on-line again to download those posts only. And you can save messages to "folders" of your own creation, decode and examine message attachments, and on and on.

I generally look at 25 to 50 newsgroups daily, but I only download a few dozen messages per day at most. If you're not careful, all this can become quite addictive. **So don't say you weren't warned.**



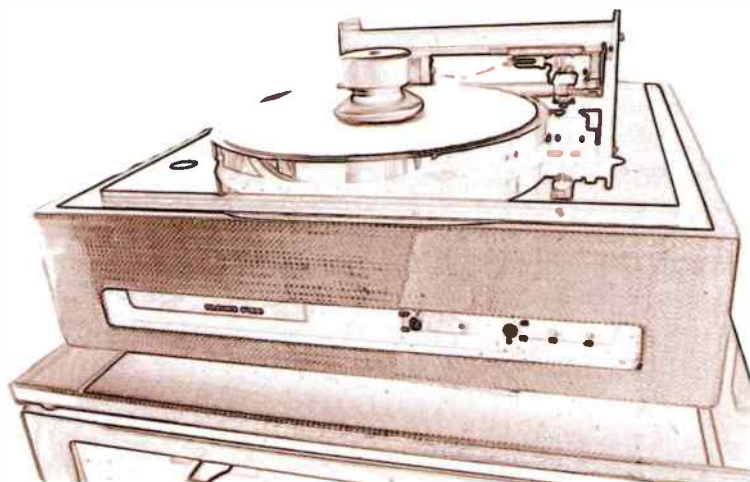
), a list of newsgroups you "subscribe" to (upper left panel on the right); and (3), the contents of a given message (bottom panel). *Agent*, for Windows PCs (see text).

In Search of Analog Paradise

Tinkering With The Goldmund Studio Turntable

John Hellow

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If you have the yen to tinker, read on, but be forewarned, the time, effort and financial commitment to this turntable upgrade are very significant—but then so are the rewards. (I define “tinkering” to be more than “tweaking”. Tweaks are superficial and easily removable changes to a component. With tinkering, you can seldom return home. Plan your tinkering carefully.)

Michel Reverchon, the Director of Goldmund, S.A. of Switzerland, probably will condemn this project as the antithesis of Goldmund’s mechanical grounding concept. Nonetheless, increasing the Goldmund Studio’s plinth mass, stiffness and mechanical damping, and isolating that plinth assembly with pneumatics, yields a substantial improvement in the table’s ability to deal with dynamics and low frequencies, as well as improve low level detail and the soundstage. Once again, the time, effort and financial commitment to this project are significant. Also, this article is not primarily about rebuilding Goldmund Studio turntables. Instead, it’s about how

to choose the best materials for analog signal sources (and maybe digital transports), how to use these materials, and how to isolate the analog source from its environment in ways that make

sense within the Laws of Physics [John, it’s nice to see a lawyer paying attention to the law.—Gene]. The Goldmund is only the vehicle we’re using here to demonstrate these propositions.

The Quest Begins

1976— I acquired my first good turntable, the Luxman PD-121 and began tweaking its suspension. The PD-121 was an extremely attractive direct-drive turntable which used the same motor assembly as Technic’s SP-10, provided an interesting “digital” readout for speed accuracy, an inadequate arm mount structure and not much in the way of a suspension. Replacing its feet with racquet balls, that could be inflated or deflated to

level the table, also isolated the table from acoustic feedback. However, in comparison to a friend’s Linn, it was relatively unsatisfying.

1977— Mitchell Cotter provided some relief for those of us with unsuspected, or inadequately suspended, turntables with the

release of the Cotter B-2 isolation base. The B-2 was a 50-lb. affair which consisted of a blue elastomer material sandwiched with sheets of steel, surrounded by a picture frame, sitting on four

*The journey to perfection in
the turntable, my son,
begins with but a single step.*

springs encased in foam rubber. The foam rubber was designed to damp the resonance of the springs. It was impossible to level unless you continued to use the table's existing feet. However, the Luxman with the Cotter base more closely approached the quality of my friend's Linn, with better bottom end extension. Filling the bottom of the platter and the base with mortite also eliminated resonances through the mid-band.

1978–81— Law school and a Masters program in St. Louis, Missouri separated me from my audio system in St. Clair Shores, Michigan. Fortunately, St. Louis had a thriving high end community and the stores were willing to humor a poor law student that just wanted to listen to music. In particular, Audiophile Systems, the distributor of Linn in the U.S., had a store in the suburbs, and sold copies of *The Absolute Sound*, *Stereophile*, and *The Audio Critic*. When I couldn't listen, I could at least read about these items of my dreams.

In the summers during this period, I used every opportunity to work with my system back in Michigan. I replaced the Audiocraft arm and Grado Signature 1B cartridge with a Fidelity Research FR-64S arm, and my first moving coil cartridge, a JVC MC1. While I was still dissatisfied with the Luxman, I had other priorities within the system and an extremely limited budget.

A Glimpse of Paradise

1981— In Issue 21 and 22 of *The Absolute Sound*, HP reported on the availability of a turntable from Paris, France, "The Goldmund Studio," produced by a company called "Architecture and Physique Appliquee." (In point of fact, the table had been available since at least 1978.) The turntable was a rather elegant affair, sitting in a plain, unfinished wood base, the plinth manufactured from black methacrylate, polished to a high gloss, with a concave methacrylate platter. The turntable was hideously expensive at \$1,800, certainly not within the budget of someone just having graduated from school and experiencing Los Angeles cost of living considerations for the first time.

1983— I now had a roommate, had moved to a larger apartment, and HP just couldn't stop writing about the Goldmund Studio turntable. Its finish

was now black gloss lacquer over a particle board base, with matching methacrylate plinth and platter. Christopher Hansen, Ltd., the mecca of high end audio in Los Angeles, had become a Goldmund dealer and was displaying the Studio turntable with Goldmund's T3B linear tracking arm. Listening to this system through a Koetsu Onyx Sapphire moving coil cartridge, in comparison to turntables and arms available from Linn, Oracle and SOTA, made me want this assembly all the more. However, the price of the turntable was now \$2,300, and the arm had risen to \$2,500. I bought my first Koetsu, instead.

1985— I married a wonderful Irish lass from New York during 1985. We moved from our small garage-top apartment in Manhattan Beach to a house, not more than a cottage, on a peninsula at the southernmost point of Santa Monica Bay. The living room was smaller than in our apartment, so I was obliged to sell my IMF Pro-Monitor Mark IV speakers, the size of small refrigerators. They were replaced with ProAc

Extended Bass Studios. These new speakers were expensive, lacked the low end of the IMFs, but provided imaging and transparency beyond anything I could have imagined. The Goldmund Studio would have to wait.

Succumbing to Temptation

1988— The California real estate market was booming; people were showing up at the doorstep wanting to buy our house—and the price of high end audio was moving in the same direction. I had sold my Marantz 7C, which I now lament, and acquired a Klyne SK-5, due to the quality of its moving coil stage. I had also discovered Audiomart, a publication of used audio advertisements. The cost of a Goldmund Studio in 1988 was \$3,390. It had been revised considerably since its initial incarnation. The base was now also manufactured from methacrylate. The suspension was directly attached to the base, rather than to a flimsy lexan plate that sat loosely in the bottom of the base. However, the German Pabst motor had been replaced with a Japanese unit, and the way that the platter mated with the spindle, so as to isolate the platter from the motor, was less effectively implemented. The power supply

*Unusual
materials
should not be
rejected by
followers of the
true path.*

was now a wall wart. Rumors began to surface that the new Studio was not as good as the old.

I located what was supposed to be a mint early Goldmund Studio in Audiomart for only \$1,500. It arrived at my house in the original Goldmund box, accompanied by another box containing a 20 lb. 24 volt power supply that had been recommended to Goldmund owners by David Wilson. Unfortunately, for me, the former owner had mislabeled the positive and negative leads from the power supply, and as soon as I hooked it up to the Goldmund, I fried the Pabst motor. The table went over to Chris Hansen for repairs, which cost me \$250 for the motor, \$100 for labor, and \$275 for Goldmund's new Super Elim power supply. With a Fidelity Research FR-64S arm on the table, I was in seventh heaven. (Goldmund's then-new T3F arm was \$4450 in 1988. Something more to dream about.) I rediscovered my record collection. Bass was deep and tight, details emerged from a deep black background, midrange purity was greatly enhanced, and having attended a live

performance by Amanda McBroom that year in Beverly Hills, I was able to appreciate how accurately the Goldmund Studio reproduced female voice. (However, the suspension springs did resonate. By placing the springs in zip lock bags or loosely interleaving the copper threads from copper cleaning pads into the coils, the resonance could be reduced. Putting shrink tubing around the coils had a negative effect on the sound.)

1991—I had the fortune of being the first person to respond to an advertisement in Audiomart by a member of the Greek Embassy in Washington, D.C., selling a Goldmund T3F arm for \$1,000 (about \$5000 retail and soon to be discontinued). Pierre Duval, the head technician and designer of the T3F arm with Bill Pugh's International Audio Technology in Virginia, the distributor and servicing agent for Goldmund in the U.S., had inspected the arm, replaced a defective ROM (said to cause the automated arm to act mischievously during play), and a stepper motor. The new arm was a significant improvement over the Fidelity Research,



The "Goldmund Studio-Carbon/Pneumatique" Special.

particularly in terms of high frequency resolution, ambience retrieval and distortion.

Tinkering With Paradise

1994— Some interesting things happened in 1994 and 1995 that added considerable spice to my audio life. First, I began experimenting with different shelf materials for the extremely rigid equipment stands that are manufactured by Mike Frederickson. Carbon-clad composites seemed to yield the best results over Corian, MDF, granite, marble and fiberglass wall board.

Second, in the latter part of 1994, I began to write vinyl reviews for this magazine. I attended

the 1995 Winter CES as a member of the staff of The Audiophile Voice, and had the pleasure of meeting Shannon Dickson, then one of the magazine's writers (and now with another publication). Shannon and I share a common interest in component suspensions and resonance reduction. Shannon had been working with pneumatic feet from Newport Corporation of Irvine, California.

These feet are used in bases manufactured by Newport Corporation to isolate laboratory equipment, including laser interferometers and scanning electron microscopes, from their environment. Shannon had been using the Newport Corporation's

complete base assembly for this purpose. I suggested to Shannon the raw pneumatic feet would work well when used in combination with carbon composite shelves to isolate CD transports and turntables.

At the same time, I hounded Newport Corporation to sell me the raw pneumatic feet to use with an extra massive shelf that had been custom-built for my CD transport. By the spring of 1995, I had a two-inch thick, 45-lb., carbon-clad shelf sitting on three of Newport Corporation's active pneumatic isolation feet, connected through a manifold and a pressure regulator to an air tank, providing the suspension for my CD transport. The Newport feet are polycarbonate ovals, eight inches long, three and one-half inches wide and one and three-quarters of an inch tall when the pneumatic foot is not extended, two inches tall when the foot is extended (overextended) to its stop. The one and one-half inch circular foot sits at one end of the oval. On the active version of the foot, a leveling sensor sits at the other end of the oval. The sensor is a cantilever that contacts the flat bottom of whatever is sitting on the foot, and opens or closes a valve to adjust the air pressure to keep the foot at a preset level. On the passive version of the foot, you inflate the foot to a desired height, which it will maintain until the air leaks out of the foot. I was amazed at the improvement that the pneumatic suspension provided to a CD transport. In fact, one of the original feet had a small leak, and you could tell when the foot fell back to its stop, providing no isolation, because the sound stage would simply collapse at that point.

Detours on the path to turntable nirvana are undoubtedly difficult, my son, but they regularly occur.



I began to believe that a similar treatment for the Goldmund Studio turntable would yield even more substantial improvements.

It's A Fine Red Apple

Shown in this article are pictures of what I call the "Goldmund Studio-Carbon/Pneumatique" (pun intended). The plinth is unchanged from the original. It has simply been removed from the old base, along with the front panel controls and the rear panel d.c. input (both of which come out easily after removing several screws). The original suspension, three acrylic towers that house the three springs, bolted to a lexan chassis, lifts out of the old base after the plinth is removed. Neither the old suspension or base are used in the revised table.

The new base is larger in all directions than the original. From the outside, it is $20\frac{5}{8}$ inches square and 5 inches tall. On the inside, it is $19\frac{5}{8}$ inches square and $4\frac{1}{8}$ inches deep. The exterior walls are $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch thick composites clad with carbon fiber and sprayed with clear automotive enamel. The bottom plate is $\frac{7}{8}$ -inch thick and $19\frac{5}{8}$ inches square. It uses a composite core material and is clad on both sides with carbon fiber and acrylic sheet. The exterior walls are attached to the outside edges of the shelf, and to each other, with aerospace-grade adhesive. Use three of whatever feet are in vogue for the underside.

Here are some "how-to" recommendations. The front of the base has a narrow rectangular cut-out to accommodate the control panel. This cut-out is $16\frac{1}{2}$ inches long and $1\frac{3}{8}$ inches high. It is centered horizontally and the bottom of the hole is one inch from the bottom of the front panel. If you place the control panel at the back of the hole inside the base, mark the 5 small holes to drill for its screws. Please be careful not to drill through to the exterior of the base, and only use $\frac{7}{16}$ -inch, self-tapping, stainless-steel screws. I suggest stainless-steel because any composite material you use for this project is extremely hard and other kinds of small screws break as they are inserted. I speak from experience on this.

The rear panel of the base will need two holes. The first hole, as you face the outside of the rear panel, will be cut starting 2 inches from the right edge and towards the center and starting so that

the bottom of the hole is 1 inch up from the bottom of the base. It needs to be $2\frac{5}{8}$ inches wide and $1\frac{3}{8}$ inches tall. This hole will be used to house the small d.c. input panel. This panel attaches in the same fashion as the front panel. You will need to start four small screw holes on the inside of the rear panel, no deeper than $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch so that you don't go through to the outside.

The second hole on the rear panel is centered horizontally, and cut with the bottom of the hole 1 inch above the bottom of the panel. The hole should be 4 inches long and 1 inch tall. This hole will allow you to pass the air manifold and hoses connected to the feet to the rear outside of the table. The manifold has three needle valves that can finely adjust airflow to each of the three pneumatic feet. The pressure regulator is connected between the manifold and the air tank. Based on the weight of the plinth assembly described below, the pressure regulator is set at 21 psi. That pressure has to be varied depending on the weight of the payload, so that the feet are sufficiently lively as a suspension.

The subplinth assembly is a work in progress. An additional subplinth or subplinths have to be added below the Goldmund Studio's plinth, to stiffen it, increase the weight necessary to properly compress Newport's pneumatic feet, and add mechanical damping. Newport's feet require at least 25 lbs. of weight per foot to properly compress. Once properly compressed, the Newport feet provide considerable isolation beginning at 1 Hz, equally in both the vertical and horizontal planes. No suspension that I am aware of provides more isolation in both planes than are provided by these feet.

I am currently using 2 subplinths. The subplinth mated to the Goldmund plinth is $17\frac{3}{4}$ inches square (same dimension as the Goldmund), but it is $\frac{3}{4}$ inch thick, instead of the $\frac{9}{16}$ inch thickness of the Goldmund. It has been sanded very flat so that it mates without forming air pockets. It has a $4\frac{1}{2}$ inches round hole, the center of which is $7\frac{7}{8}$ inches from the left side and $6\frac{5}{16}$ inches from the front. The Pabst motor hangs below the original plinth, so a hole in the subplinth is necessary for clearance. This subplinth is not sufficiently massive for the Newport feet, so I had to insert a second subplinth between it and the feet. The second subplinth also is $17\frac{3}{4}$ inches square, but is a lead-impregnated one-inch thick version that has extra

*The benefits of
full pneumatic
isolation
cannot be
underestimated.*

layers of carbon-fiber weave for additional stiffness, and that weighs 40 pounds. It is mated to the first subplinth with a self-adhesive, nondeformable elastomer that's called Microsorb. The motor wires run between the two subplinths, in a channel in the elastomer, to the control panel.

I am contemplating replacing the second subplinth with a ½ inch steel plate, that uses a ballast of 12-inch square, 2-inch thick bronze impregnated teflon. This combination would add 15 pounds to the existing assembly, and additional layers of dissimilar materials for resonance control. It would also bring the top of the plinth below the upper lip of the base, and make it even less susceptible to airborne resonance. Finally, it would reduce the height of the plinth assembly increasing the stability of the Newport feet. The Newport feet become unstable when the height of the object sitting on them exceeds one half the distance between the nearest two feet. Thus, if the feet are laid out in a 17¾ inch equilateral triangle (measured through the center of each foot), the height of the object on the feet should not exceed 8⅞ inches. The platform will have a tendency to oscillate if this rule is violated.

The parts list, in addition to the base and subplinth(s), should include the following:

Newport Corporation **Pneumatic Feet** (Active version) (714-863-3144). Approximately \$600 for the set of four (you'll only be using three for the Goldmund but they don't package a set of three), and figure an additional \$100 for the regulator and manifold. You will need to order the active version of the pneumatic feet, which do an exceptionally good job of maintaining level for the turntable. These active leveling feet do a much better job of maintaining a level plinth than Goldmund's spring-based suspension. Because they are active, the plinth stays level even as the tangential arm moves across the record. A spring-based suspension won't do that.

Air Tank. I bought mine at Home Depot for \$29.95. It is inflatable to 120 psi. Until I recently purchased an inexpensive compressor, I filled the tank at my local gas station about once a month. Tanks, unlike electric pumps, can be kept in the listening room, as they make no noise.

Tone Arm Termination Box, if you use a Goldmund T3 based arm. Goldmund did not do a particularly good job with the way that they termi-

nated any version of this arm into its female RCA connectors. They are built into the side of the arm towers, and with any form of live suspension, dramatically reduce the number of arm cable options. Any arm cable on a table with a lively suspension needs to be sufficiently flexible so as not to impede the movement of the suspension. Additionally, Goldmund provided both Fischer and RCA connectors on the arm. The arm wires terminate into the Fischer connectors and then jumper wires are taken over to the RCAs. By going to an RCA termination box (I find the Cardas box in black milled aluminum to be quit elegant) directly from the arm, you can both free the suspension by attaching the box to the new base, and eliminate one solder joint.

Carbon fiber laminates are not the only good material for purposes of constructing a new base for the Goldmund. For example, Corian, Fountainhead and Delrin may be less

expensive alternatives. However, certain properties of carbon fiber are not available in non-fibrous materials. Carbon fiber weave is made up of thousands of strands of very fine carbon fiber per square inch, woven in a crisscross pattern. Carbon fiber is applied to a base material by soaking in an epoxy resin and then applying it to the surface of the base material. Carbon fiber threads have a much higher tensile strength than steel for a given size. Epoxy resin limits carbon fiber's ability to move against the base material, but it does not completely immobilize it. Consequently, when carbon fiber sees a vibration, the individual threads will rub against each other producing heat. Carbon fiber is very good at turning kinetic energy into heat, and eliminating parasitic resonances.

I also am not sure that the base of the Goldmund Studio is as critical as what is used to suspend the plinth assembly, or the subplinth materials. If the Newport feet are operating as intended, and are isolating the plinth in a perfect way from their environment, the base material should not be that important, except that it should provide a smooth, flat surface to support the Newport feet.

The Newport feet, however, are a critical component to this system. Most other efforts at pneumatics do not provide the same level of damping and isolation in the horizontal plane as they do in the vertical plane. I firmly believe that for turntables, isolation in the horizontal plane is what is

*The subplinth,
as all things in
life, must be
considered as a
work in progress.*

MATERIALS SOURCES

According to their websites, the following firms offer sheet and other forms of carbon fiber cloth: Alliance Composite, 4005 Clany Ave., Suite F, Halton City, TX 76117; phone 817/656-1013, FAX 817/656-2918, and Raka Marine, 2755 South U.S. HWY 1, Boynton Beach, FL 33435; phone/FAX 561/364-8086. You should also check with your local 3M Company distributor.

The Cardas phono termination box, extensional damping, and isolation materials, such as Microsorb, EAR Isodamp, and Navcom, are available from Michael Percy, P.O. Box 526, Inverness, CA 94937; phone 415/669-7181, and Parts Connection, 2790 Brighton Rd., Oakville, Ont., Canada L6H 5T4; phone 909/352-5425.

Surface finishing products, such as 3M emory paper in 1000 and 1600 grit, are available from auto supply centers such as Pep Boys, Trak Auto, etc.

Titanium-coated drill bits and stainless-steel bolts and screws, both of which are essential when working on composite materials, are available from Sears, Home Depot, and similar hardware outlets.

most important. If you visualize a stylus/groove interface, virtually all of the information the stylus reads is horizontal information, that is, the stylus moves back and forth to read the information in the record's grooves. Consequently, minimizing extraneous horizontal movement of the stylus is critical. Other companies may produce pneumatic components that isolate equally well in the horizontal as well as vertical planes; I am simply not aware of any at this time. While the new Air Mass from Bright Star may be a very good product for the money, it will not provide the same level of isolation from vibration as the Newport feet.

The Goldmund Studio turntable is a direct-drive unit. So, consequently, the last remaining areas of resonance that will not ameliorated by the Newport feet, concern (1) vibrations which the motor transmits into the platter, and (2) the resonance caused by the mechanical reading of the groove walls by the stylus. Carbon fiber in the subplinth assembly helps eliminate some of these last vestiges of resonance because of the way it

converts kinetic energy to heat. However, as I noted above, the subplinth assembly is a work in progress. As I find other materials that work well in the subplinth, I will provide updates to this article, editor permitting (he has indulged me quite a bit on this article already). [Editor's Note: Don't push it, Hellow.]

One note of caution, I have not yet been able to refit the Studio's acrylic cover to the new, enlarged base. It will sit loosely of the new base, but must be lifted off, rather than raised on its hinges and strut, to use the turntable. I have some ideas here but haven't yet had time to implement them.

Adam, Can I Have a Bite of That Apple?

This retrofit should not be limited to Goldmund Studio turntables. In

fact, the Immedia table now has an optional pneumatic platform that is manufactured by Newport Corporation, but not from aerospace composites. Similarly, the new Arias turntable from VPI is a perfect candidate for the Newport feet plus a composite shelf that will fit its 16 x 22-inch dimensions. Newport feet with a carbon-fiber top plate of sufficient mass can be used to isolate other components, such as your CD transport, which I have done as noted above. Such a platform also can also be used with other turntables, although I would experiment with immobilizing the turntable's existing suspension before placing it on

a pneumatic platform. Finally, while I have not tried this, I suspect that tube amps and preamps would benefit from pneumatic platforms, due to the microphonic nature of tubes.

Good luck with the use of pneumatics. I believe that they do

bring a level of isolation to the audio market that has been sorely lacking in efforts to date. In the context of analog turntables, the changes will literally make your jaw drop.

I firmly believe that for a turntable, horizontal isolation is the single most important item.

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EPR 9510 *Fabio Bidini in recital*

Clementi:

Sonata op. 40 no.2 in B minor

Bach-Busoni:

Chaconne in D minor

Schubert: of Drei Klavierstücke DV 946, No.2 in E-flat Major

Beethoven: Sonata op. 57 in F minor "Appassionata"

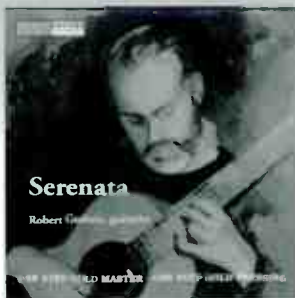
"...the best excuse to buy the disc, is the grand Sonata in B minor of Muzio Clementi...this ambitious sonata stands up well in Bidini's thoroughly devoted, magnificently virtuosic reading. He treats it in much the same way he does Beethoven's "Appassionata" on this same disc, with warmth and brilliance."

Wayne Lee Gay

Fort Worth Star Telegram

available Feb 97

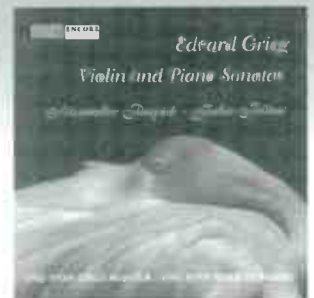
available Mar 97



EPR 9509
Serenata



EPR 9611/12
Brahms Piano Quartets



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R

ECORDINGS

Jon Tiven

If people like Julian Lennon, Carny Wilson, and Ziggy Marley can lay claim to being true rock 'n' roll or just music progeny, Tom Petty is the illegitimate son of rock 'n' roll. Petty has survived several record companies and musical revolutions by taking his "Bob Dylan crossed with Rolling Stones meets The Byrds" approach and tempering it slightly with contemporary rhythms. He is now a grand old man of rock 'n' roll like his heroes—something he must get a chuckle

"Change The Locks," which is really a great choice, and a Beck song called "Asshole" (Can I use that word in my reviews here, Gene?) (Only if you're not referring to me, Jon!) which is O.K. but sort of a one-joke kind of thing. Good for you, Tom, giving the kids work.

So, what's the deal on Tom Petty? He's basically a very talented guy, in a band full of very tal-

ROCK

Tom Petty & The Heartbreakers
Warner Brothers

She's The One
46285-2

over. I mean, it's one thing to be Gainesville, Florida's best Stones cover band and something else again to be backing up Bob Dylan with Ronnie Wood in your band. Or having Ringo playing drums on your latest record.

Although I wasn't a fan of Petty's last album, this one—which is a soundtrack for a movie called "She's The One" that I probably will never see—is actually the best record since Learning To Fly. The songs are above par, and there will probably be some hits here, for instance "Walls Circus" and "Hope You Never." Sonically, it resembles the kind of approach he was taking around the time he was playing with the Traveling Wilburys, which means a nice crisp snare and lots of acoustic guitars. It tends to be "under-instrumented," which some might call "underproduced," but let's just say the songs are strong enough to lend themselves to spare arrangements. The guests are kept to a minimum—Carl Wilson and Lindsey Buckingham sing some backing vocals, and Ringo plays drums on one song. Curt Bisquera plays drums on most of the album (well), and Steve Ferrone plays them on two cuts here as he did the last tour and album (I guess that's a rotating chair now that Stan Lynch is out). There are two covers, a Lucinda Williams song called

TOM PETTY AND THE HEARTBREAKERS

SONGS AND MUSIC FROM THE MOTION PICTURE

SHE'S THE ONE



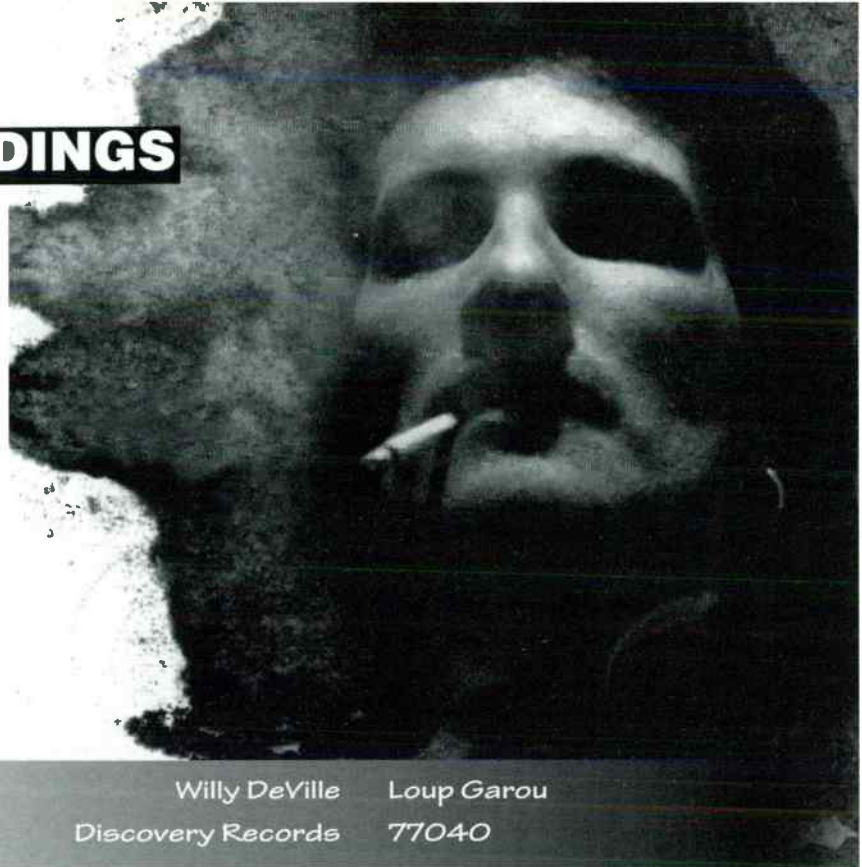
ented guys, all of whom have distinguished themselves as producers, arrangers, songwriters, whatever. So what's—the problem? It would be nice if he just made a non-consensus album, something without the kind of commercial considerations to maybe give him a little nudge in the credibility department. I don't know whether that's in him. I don't know whether he knows either. But it might be fun to get a "new" Tom Petty record that doesn't sound like any of the others.

R

ECORDINGS

Mark Block

Yet another great album from Willy DeVille, if anybody's listening. (You should be.) Thankfully, he has a new record company, so perhaps his career will get back on track; I'd like



ROCK

Willy DeVille Loup Garou
Discovery Records 77040

to see his popularity in Europe matched here in the States. *Loup Garou*, a very eclectic collection of very catchy tunes, should help.

The opening cut, "No Such Pain As Love," sounds like a John Mellencamp hit; Smokey Robinson could have written "When You're Away From Me"; "Angels Don't Lie" might easily be mistaken for something from a Mark Knopfler soundtrack (they collaborated, remember, on the Princess Bride theme song). Bruce Springsteen could have done almost any of the numbers here. And make no mistake: If Bruce had taken these songs and turned them directly into his latest release, we'd be proclaiming it a triumphant return to the commercial mainstream, and one of his best albums. (Although in fairness to His Brucceness, Springsteen would certainly have written more interesting lyrics—but that's why they call it rock 'n' roll music, not poetry with a beat.)

There are echoes of Dr. John, Phil Spector, Little Feat, the Byrds, Southside Johnny, and others. You could almost turn *Loup Garou* into a trivia game of "Name the Influences." It's all familiar—some would say too familiar—but Willy throws it into a big Creole pot and cooks up a feast for the ears. There's one cover—the Chambers Brothers' "Time Has Come Today"—and one duet with a guest vocalist on "You'll

Never Know." At first, I thought the singer was Ronnie Spector, but about halfway through I wasn't so sure. Checking the liner notes, I was surprised to see the credit: Brenda Lee! A blast from the past, and she sounds wonderful.

It's almost impossible to overstate just how immediately likable these songs are. At 43, Willy DeVille is one of the few baby boom rockers who doesn't seem to be slowing down creatively. At this rate, he may wind up in the rock Pantheon with idol, Doc Pomus (a songwriting partner on DeVille's *Coup de Grace* in 1981).

Sound quality isn't up to the exceptional standards set by *Willy DeVille Live* or *Big Easy Fantasy* (a pastiche of cuts from the *NYC* and *Paris Live* gigs with a few studio cuts from *Victory Mixture* thrown in; both are imports only). I'd give the engineering a solid B+: Good tonal balance, but some compression with a consequent lack of transparency, and an off-center image on some cuts. Don't worry about it; just enjoy the music, because this is one of the best of the year.

Produced by John Philip Shenale and Willy DeVille, the CD was engineered by John Carter, John Beverly Jones and Ray Kennedy, and mixed by Al Schmitt. Information is available from Discovery Records; phone 800/377-9620 or e-mail/web <http://www.discoveryrec.com>.

R ECORDINGS

Michael Tearson

The unfortunate Ego Trip name notwithstanding, *Blue Guru* is a whole lot of fun, as it celebrates the swampy rhythm & blues sound that flourished on Atlantic and Stax/Volt Records in the '60s. The dedication of the album to the great Don Covay (writer of such classics as "See Saw," "Chain of Fools," and "Sookie, Sookie") is a strong hint of what's gong on here.

What it isn't is some kind of slavish exercise in style. What it is, is a baker's dozen of brand-new souful songs played straight and true. The band works with the sizzle and economy



ROCK

Jon Tiven
Fontainebleau

Jon Tiven's Ego Trip
7007021004-2

of vintage MGs minus Book T's organ and feels similar to Robert Cray's best stuff. Jon is especially effective and tasty on the Steve Cropper-styled guitar rhythm and lead fills. Alan Merrill's fine-grained sandpaper vocals are a fine instrument for this project.

The Tivens, Sally and Jon, who both play guitars and bass, have gathered an impressive array of co-writers for their songs: Covay, Don Nix, Dan Penn, Spooner Oldham, Sir Mack Rice, and Donnie Fritts, all of whom have glittering

Memphis soul credentials. Added pluses are Procol Harum lyricist Keith Reid and the late Arthur Alexander who we are blessed to hear singing duet lead on his co-write "Let's Think About It."

Blue Guru immediately feels as comfortable as an old friend as soon as you start playing it.. The disc glides by so effortlessly that it seems much shorter than its 50-minute length and leaves me hungry for lots more good grits. Anyone wanna go on down home?

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Earle Stevens

The curse of living in interesting times certainly seems to apply to Bela Bartok, a true 20th Century composer of Hungarian birth and disposition, whose genius spanned an era



The LSO is obviously the more technically skilled of the two orchestras coupled on this reissue, but I believe Dorati got a more musically satisfying performance out of

Classical

Bela Bartok The Miraculous Mandarin (complete), Sonata for 2 Pianos and Percussion and Divertimento
 Antal Dorati BBC Symphony Orchestra & Chorus; London Symphony Orchestra
 Mercury 434 362-2

of political and artistic ferment (1881–1945). *The Miraculous Mandarin*, a one-act pantomime, the third and final work Bartok composed for the stage (1918–9), is a classic example of the bizarre made beautiful. The scenario, by Menyhert Lengyel, documents a depressing variation of the timeless badger game mixed with Eastern mysticism, white slavery and murder, all this set to dance. Show time! Fortunately, this is a CD, not a LaserDisc. The music is a fantastic blend of nervous excitement and contemporary tonality.

Antal Dorati (1906–88), a fellow Hungarian with an extensive background in ballet, is a grand choice, indeed, for this music. He brings a sense of abandon to the work without losing touch with the discipline dance requires. Musicianship is first rate and the recording is vintage Mercury "Living Presence."

The companion pieces on this disc are also classic Bartok, but the choice of the *Divertimento*, written in 1939, is most apt. This stunning composition, at the other end of the Bela Bartok continuum, represents a modernist exploration of the concerto grosso, playing off a string quartet against the main body of strings. He clearly demonstrates the compatibility of 18th Century forms and 20th Century sensibilities.

the BBC. I found it an interesting experiment, first programming my player to play the *Divertimento*, followed by the *Mandarin* and *Sonata*, a sort of mini music appreciation course spanning two centuries with the dates all wrong. It's an exercise similar to reviewing Picasso's works and seeing the flow from representational art to cubism.

The final work, the *Sonata for 2 Pianos and Percussion*, represents what a casual listener expects from Bartok. Written in his full maturity during 1937, three years prior to Bartok's self-imposed exile in America, it is, in my belief, one of the high water marks of modern music. The *Sonata* is at once demanding and accessible, a composition clearly both modern and classical.

An audiophile bonus of the *Sonata* is that it is a test of system resolution created by the composer's use of various drum sticks striking different specified places on the drumheads. Listen carefully for the subtle variations of percussive sounds and the resulting interplay between transient attack and decay. Lesser CD equipment need not apply.

The sound? Class analog lovingly transferred to digital in 1995, originally recorded in 1960 and 1964, some might say the best 16 bit has to offer. If you cannot get the originals, get this. Highly recommended!

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Arthur Paxton

Classical

Brahms Violin-Piano Sonata No.1 "Rain"
 Amy Beach Violin-Piano Sonata
 Arturo Delmoni Yuri Funahashi
 John Marks Records

Arturo Delmoni's burnished tone and singing line make this an attractive issue of a Brahms masterpiece and a substantial, but less well known work by Amy Beach.

Delmoni and pianist Yuri Funahashi project a strong identification with both pieces and with each other (important for music so conversational). Even the warm acoustic of New York's Church of the Holy Trinity enhances the sonic and emotional bond between the musicians. The balance between musicians, a concern to Brahms who feared that the piano might overpower the violin, is perfectly caught by veteran engineer David Hamilton in this 1990 recording.

Brahms' three violin sonatas are gems. At first blush, intimate and a bit self-effacing, they yield new dimensions with each hearing. Brahms, the classicist, concerned with formal unity and ingenuity, resides here along with Brahms the romantic, evoking a panoramic emotional landscape. Compositional content and emotional resonance become one. With Brahms, brains and emotional brawn are so developed and intertwined that music such as this seems always to tell a story. Brahms' lyrical side certainly inspires Delmoni, but drama and intensity are also convincingly projected. Tempos are quite slow, but never drag, because the phrasing is so nuanced and directional. Portamento works very naturally in this environment. I have heard more muscle-bound Brahms, but compositional gristle and bone offer hidden support for all the surface poetry.

A stuttering (thrice-repeated) D begins the outer movements, and figures importantly in the middle movement. The first is in 6/4, permitting a typical Brahmsian play of two against three, leading in this personal framework to music of great rhythmic subtlety. It is also harmonically fluent, beginning the development section on a Neapolitan tonality

(A-flat in the key of G) setting up a deliciously bittersweet dissonance between the violin and piano. Near the end of the development, Brahms fakes out the listener with a teasing false return of the first theme (in the wrong key) before the actual recapitulation. The second movement's main theme, with notes tied over the beat, is hymn-like, but metrically elusive. By contrast, the heart of the movement, a passage of considerable fierceness, is stoked by the pianist pounding out chords in the piece's opening rhythm. The third movement, borrowing from his "Regenlied" sets a gypsy-like melody against obsessive sixteenth notes mimicking the patter of rain. Near the end of this piece, Brahms brings back themes from the two earlier movements.

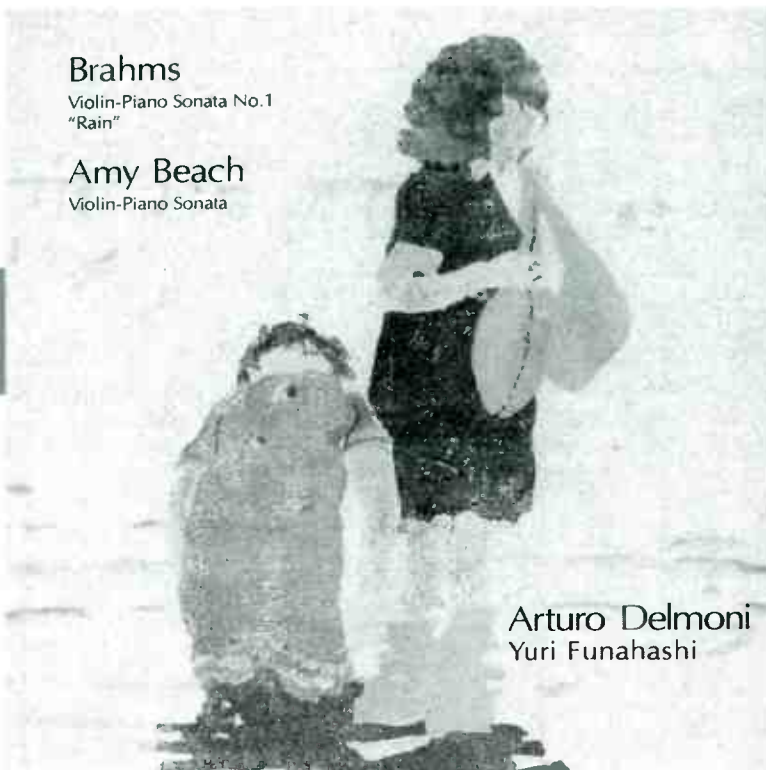
The *Sonata for Violin and Piano* of Amy Beach was written in 1896 when she was 29 years old. Born Amy Marcy Cheney on a New Hampshire farm, by the age of 2 she could pipe a pleasing harmony to anything sung by her mother. Before long, her skills extended to the piano, and though young Amy studied in Boston and later Germany, she was never pressured into the life of a prodigy. Her debut (Chopin's *F-sharp Piano Concerto*) was with the Boston Symphony, which later performed her *Gaelic* symphony, the first symphony by an American woman.

Beach's four movement sonata is drenched in soaring lyricism. The piano part, full and flowing, is in more of a supporting role than with the Brahms. The first movement occasionally recalls music by Charlie Chaplin, who wrote music for some of his greatest films. The second movement suggests Debussy in a perky mood, but the refreshing touch of staccato is soon interrupted by a lugubrious trio section. The "Largo con dolore" is imaginative, and quite satisfying. The final movement has a fugue that tries hard and a climax that

tries even harder. Had this movement, like the Brahms', brought back earlier themes, then one might

Brahms
Violin-Piano Sonata No.1
"Rain"

Amy Beach
Violin-Piano Sonata



Arturo Delmoni
Yuri Funahashi

And speaking of comparisons, this disc appeared simultaneously with a beautifully recorded CD of

the complete Brahms violin sonatas, instantly a very potent, highly desirable collection. But unfortunately, those performances were emotionally wan and tech-

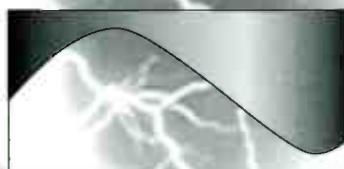
never notice, so similar is all of this material. Themes, even separate movements, are not strongly differentiated, and one begins to crave a craggier rhythmic profile. Beach's sonata offers much good writing, but following Brahms (forgive the unfair comparison), one realizes that his music connects through its subtlety and its boldness.

nically problematic, throwing into stark relief the compelling musicianship (and imaginative coupling) of this recent issue from John Marks Records.

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R E C O R D I N G S

Jack Skowron

These two recordings feature jazz pianists and the music of George Gershwin.

Joe Utterback, while no household name, has been performing for over 30 years. The liner notes

JAZZ Joe Utterbach Pianist
Connoisseur Society CD4206

point out influences such as Bill Evans, Oscar Peterson, Art Tatum, and Errol Garner, and indeed, these have been synthesized into a personal approach. (At this

point, and noting that these are scandal-ridden times, I feel I must disclose that my fearless leader, Gene Pitts, wrote the liner notes, but those bags of cash and the new Mercedes bear no relation to this review.) The feel of stride (as deconstructed by Tatum) is prominent, along with high-velocity runs, Garneresque chord tremolos, and Evans' harmonic language (particularly with ballads). One initially has the feeling that there's less improvisation than



theme and variations filigree (similar to Tatum, there is some degree of truth to this, but it also reflects the overwhelming technical mastery and sheer speed. One might find the playing superficial, and it requires much active listening to appreciate the details). Repeated listening reveals the power of the playing—a three-minute song can be a roller coaster ride of sudden and surprising changes.

The centerpiece of the CD is the "Porgy and Bess Suite." "Summertime" starts at an appropriate slow tempo, with lightning fast commentary between melody statements, while dynamics vary from soft to crescendo and harmonies shift subtly. Utterback breaks into double-time, with finger-breaking flight, then touches down softly. "A Woman Is A Sometime Thing" starts with stuttering stride with mildly dissonant punctuation, then hits at boo-

gie-woogie and barrelhouse styles, Tatumesque wild chases, Garneresque right-hand chording, and more pianist tricks and licks than should be squeezable into five minutes (this may read chop-pily, but the music flows organically on the disc). "O Bess, Where Is My Bess" finds him in his mellow Evans mode, closing the suite beautifully. A spirited rendition of "St. Louis Blues" and three originals round out the CD.

This disc was recorded in Music Hall in Tarrytown, NY, using 96-kHz sampling and Super Bit Mapping (full details are in the CD booklet for those so inclined). The piano is very well recorded,

Marcus Roberts *Portraits In Blue* **JAZZ**
 Sony Classical SK 68488

though slightly "dry" to my ears. There is also less hall ambiance than I expected (multi-miking?), but the sound is good overall,



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allowing the performance through.

Marcus Robert's interpretation of Gershwin is next. On Sony Classical, the disc takes two orchestral pieces, "Rhapsody in Blue" and variations on "I Got Rhythm," along with James P. Johnson's "Yamekraw," and rearranges them, adding spaces for multiple cadenzas and modernizing rhythms and harmonies under familiar themes. Jazzin' the classics is, of course, not new, with artists such as Django Reinhardt, Miles Davis, John Lewis, and many others reconstructing and reinterpreting classical pieces. These three pieces are somewhat unusual in borrowing heavily from jazz. In a recent issue of *Fi*

already be burning me in effigy). Having said that, I do find listening to this CD fun. Roberts has tremendous chops and varies influences (gospel and blues, along with the aforementioned "masters"), and I find his recontextualizing of the two-well-known themes of "Rhapsody..." to be enjoyable and reinvigorating for this old war horse. Rhythms and harmonies are modernized, and the cadenzas, for the most part, take well-worn themes, turn them inside out, and allow you to hear them in new ways. "Yamekraw" is given familiar treatment. This piece, with its yearning blues themes, has had limited exposure, and I do find Robert's version involving, with nice solos, though his demon-

These talented pianists bring new ideas to these Gershwin-oriented CDs.

(November 1996), critic Gene Seymore, in a rave review of Marcus Robert's most-recent CD, dismisses this disc's "wretched excesses" (and most of Robert's work up to now). I would agree that Robert's recent tributes to Jelly Roll Morton, Ellington, Monk, and James P. have been to heavy-handed (the banjo that opens "Rhapsody..." takes a piece that already borders on ersatz jazz and almost pushes it over into parody), though some blame lies with the pieces themselves. Often, composers wishing to merge classical and jazz wind up with classical's ponderousness and simplistic "jazzy" themes, and this is, to some extent, the case here (I know many "Rhapsody..." lovers will

strations of independent right and left hands do get disjointed. In the final piece, the variation on "I Got Rhythm," a treatment of jazz's most overworked standard (though, to be fair, it must have sounded fresh in 1930), the arrangements do sometimes become overwrought, though the piano improv is fine.

Sound is good; "20-bit Technology" and "Super Bit Mapping" provide rich instrumental sound, with decent (though not extraordinary) depth and imaging.

So should you fork over \$16.00 for this? Well, it's not essential (in fact, I'm sure my take on its virtues is very different from its creators, who took it very seriously), but I do find it a fun diversion.

BITE MY TWEETER!
Now that we've got your attention...

Jon Tiven (guitar)
has produced and written songs for Frank Black, Robert Cray, B.B. King, Chrissie Hynde and Alex Chilton and has played with John Belushi, The Jim Carroll Band, Arthur Alexander and Lucinda Williams.

Sally Tiven (bass)
has had her songs recorded by Huey Lewis & The News, The Jeff Healey Band and Son Seals to name but a few.

Alan Merrill (vocals)
wrote "I Love Rock 'N' Roll" for Joan Jett.

Todd Snare (drums)
has played with Me'shelle Ndegeocello, P.M. Dawn and Tori Amos.

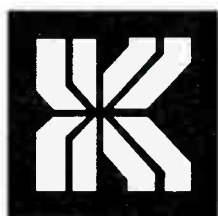
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Jack Skowron

If all he'd done is made it this far, the 89-year-old Benny Carter would deserve accolades (a few jazz artists, such as 94-year-old Benny Waters who still cooks, and the 91-year-old Doc Cheatham, who packs Sweet Basil's in NYC every Sunday with his great Jazz Brunch, have lasted longer still). What's truly amazing, however, is that this multi-talented' (multi-instrumentalist, composer, and arranger) gentleman is as good, and arguably better, than ever.

"The King," active since the pre-Swing Era, has recorded with many of the greats, including Coleman Hawkins, Django Reinhardt, Dizzy Gillespie, and countless others. He's written and arranged for his own big band (more critically acclaimed than financially successful) as well as for others, and he has made many records, mostly on alto sax (his main axe), though also on trumpet, and some on tenor sax, clarinet, trombone, and piano.

Elegy In Blue, a recent release, focuses on tunes composed by or associated with other great jazzmen who have passed on. Being free of the arranging and composing chores (there is only one original, the title tune) has allowed Carter to do his finest playing in years. The Basie alumnus Harry "Sweets" Edison shares front-line duties, and he shines on "Did You Call Her Today?" (for Ben Webster), especially in a trumpet-bass duet. ("Sweets," at age 80, has lost some chops on the physically demanding horn. Initially I found the decreased power and endurance disheartening, but on subsequent listenings, his compensating strategies, sharp timing, and subtle rhythmic shifts became enjoyable on their own terms). Lee Morgan's ballad "Ceora" displays Carter's luscious tone, and his solos are

packed with energy and intelligence. Tributes to Johnny Hodges ("Food Queen Bess"), Duke ("Prelude to a Kiss"), Roy Eldridge ("Little Jazz"), Monk ("Blue Monk"), and Satchmo ("Someday



JAZZ

Benny Carter *Elegy In Blue*

Musicmasters Jazz 01612-65115-2

You'll Be Sorry") all vividly recall and honor these greats. On "Prelude...", his tone is liquid, and he turns the theme material inside out, pulling and

stretching it like taffy. "Someday..." features a "Sweets" vocal and fine obligato from Carter (love the Satch-style end).

The title track is the only Carter original. It's blues-ish (there is a bridge) and "reverent but not somber," according to the composer. It is sad but dignified, evocative without being maudlin. Everyone but the drummer has a say, fine solos all, but it's Carter who steals the show. He is bluesy yet elegant, emotional yet intelligent, with gentlemanly dignity—not crying in his beer but calmly, profoundly reflecting on the passing of these greats he's known.

Sound, while not up to, say, Chesky, is clean, with few digital nasties. There is decent placement of the musicians on the stage, though hardly any depth or ambiance is present. Buy this, however, to hear mature musicians at their best.

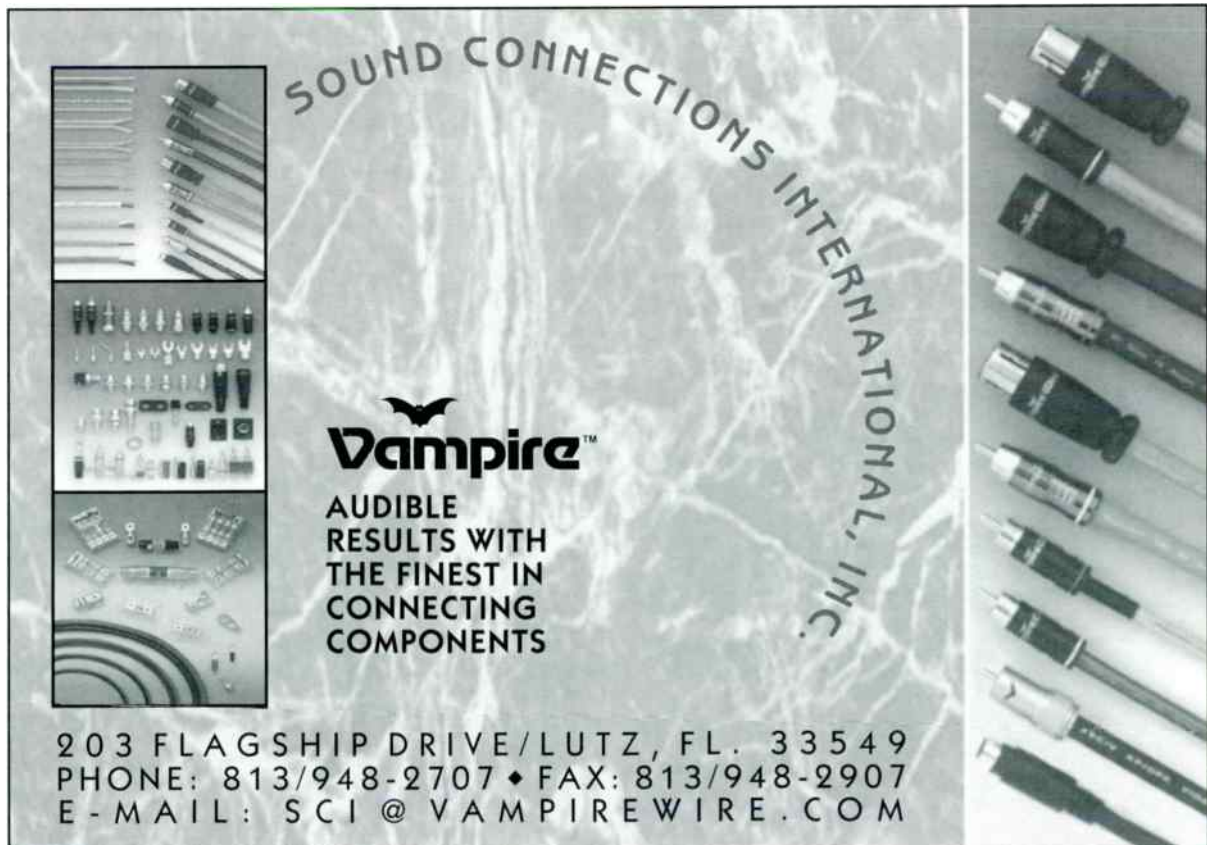
Let me make a few recommendations of associated listening. Any Django Reinhardt/ Stephane Grapelli/Quintet of the Hot Club of France recordings (for the truly obsessed there is *Djangology*. This was originally an eight-LP set on Affinity, then a recently deleted 10-CD set on EMI. At this writing, some sets were still available from True Blue/Mosaic, 35 Melrose Pl., Stamford, CT 06902.)

Stuff Smith is featured on the recently reissued two-CD set *Stuff Smith/Dizzy Gillespie/Oscar*

Peterson (Verve 314521676-2), combining three LPs (all of which are fine, with the S.S./D.G. LP being fabulous). For avant garde fiddling, Billy Bang's *The Fire From Within* (Soul Note 1086 on LP) is recommended. New and Used's *Souvenir* (Knitting Factory Works KFWCD- 125) and Jim Nolet's *With You* are fine CDs, representing NYC's current downtown scene (Mark Feldman plays violin on *Souvenir*).

Firestorm (Victo CD 020) features the incendiary cello-bass duet of Diedre Murry and Fred Hopkins on a great, adventurous disc. For Benny Carter listening, his early sides are spread out (the Time-Life box is good and can be had for next-to-nothing if you can find it; French RCA's Black and White series also issued the big band sides). *Further Definitions* (Impulse A-12) is a great 1961 date with Coleman Hawkins, Phil Woods, et al.

Verve has released a number of 1950s vintage sessions on CD, *Cosmopolite* (Verve 314521673-2) being particularly fine. He is teamed up with Ben Webster on *Benny Carter Jazz Giant* (Contemporary 57555, also reissued on Analog Productions LP AAPJ 013, CD CAPJG 013); haven't heard these. Lastly, his recent big band classic *Central City Sketches* with the American Jazz Orchestra (Musicmasters CIJD 20126Z/27X on LP) has been critically acclaimed.



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R ECORDINGS

Bill Wells

It's been some time since I've lived on the East Coast. However, I still vividly recall one particular New York city radio disc jockey who regularly announced how his late night segment would be filled with music that was "warm and tender."

Well, shortly after loading this particular Mapleshade jazz release into my CD transport, I was once again struck with this fond memory. *Portraits in Ivory and Brass* is truly a "cool" jazz recording that is also warm and tender. In particular, the opening track is so warm and tender that I was virtually transported to a different place and time while listening to it. The combined effect of this trio's superb rendition of Gershwin's "Bess, You Is My Woman," along with Mapleshade's outstanding recording quality, simply made me shut my eyes, sit back and float along with the music.

Basically, this CD features two consummate artists, ones who have graced the New York jazz

scene for quite some time. Throughout most of this record, trumpeter Jack Walrath is accompanied by pianist Larry Willis, however, on several selections, they are joined by bassist Steve Novosel, who provides a solid accompaniment to the playing of the two featured artists.

Both Walrath and Willis are composers, with much to their credit. As a result here, the mix of their musical offerings is varied yet consistent in terms of imagination and delivery. For example, immediately following the opening selection, they move into some rather unusual things musically, artistic expressions of originality that will definitely bring you out of the dreamy calm created by the opening selection.

Once past this second selection, the recording moves into a more mainstream jazz vein, particularly the selection titled "Kirstein." On this cut, all three artists come together and combine their talents for the delivery of a traditional and warmly familiar acoustic package. In fact, it has the kind of seductive quality that makes you want to do repeat listenings. (I did—twice!) Listening to all nine minutes and fifty-one seconds of this selection also reminds me how nice it is to be able to enjoy a musical selection of this length.

In my opinion, far too many contemporary jazz artists are going for a kind of radio play format that greatly shortens their compositions. As a result, it seems that just about the time you are really starting to sink into a nice groove with their music,

it's over. Not so with the Mapleshade recordings. Whether the influence of producer Pierre Sprey has anything to do with it,

Mapleshade

PORTRAITS IN IVORY AND BRASS

Jack Walrath & Larry Willis Portraits in Ivory and Brass
Mapleshade 02032

JAZZ

JACK WALRATH & LARRY WILLIS
WITH STEVE NOVOSEL

quite frankly, I'm not sure. But whatever the cause is, you will definitely appreciate (and enjoy) how the artists allow you the opportunity (and luxury) of fully experiencing their musical talents, such as is demonstrated on this fine recording.

The overall sonic quality of this recording is typical of Mapleshade, and is a joy for the audiophile. The minimalist miking approach used by Sprey avoids that unrealistic super-wide spread of the instrumentalists. After all, this recording primarily features only two, and never more than three artists. Fortunately, Sprey is into a producing style that allows listeners to imagine they are hearing musicians playing on a stage directly in front of them. On this recording, the perspective is more toward the upfront side of the equation. However, it is realistic, especially for anyone who has spent any amount of time in smaller jazz clubs or similar acoustic venues.

The instruments on this CD all sound authentic and quite natural in their pure acoustic context. Whether Walrath is blowing hard into his unaltered trumpet or softly illuminating his soft muted

horn, at no time does the sound offend, yet it is delivered with the proper bite and attack.

The sonic portrayal of Willis' piano is also very convincingly real. Each struck key produces a clear and distinct sound with proper body.

Additionally, there is a very natural cavity resonance and decay as you would expect when listening to a live piano. Another example of this natural tonal balance is the upright acoustic bass; it has a full, round, warm quality while being articulate and clear. It is never too big, too loud or too soft.

One last thing: As I sat listening to the closing number, "Green Eyes," I realized that, for the most part, I had just sat through approximately 60 minutes of pleasurable, straight-ahead, mainstream jazz. As a jazz purist, this was definitely a treat for me. Even the imaginative "Epitaph For Seikolos" was appreciated for its overall content, structure and approach. Once again, Mapleshade has done a superb job of providing an audiophile-level CD with music that is readily accessible and enjoyable. Thanks, Pierre, I needed this!



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R RECORDINGS

Arthur Paxton

“A View From The Side” could well describe the composer/arranger’s perspective, a vantage point quite familiar to Bill

finned-tuned team rather than a collection of

JAZZ

The Bill Holman Band *A View From The Side*

JVC XRCD-0002-2

Holman. Over a forty-five year career he has written charts for singers such as Carmen McCreia and Natalie Cole and for band leaders such as Basie, Ferguson, Herman, Kenton, Mulligan, and Severinsen. The lateral view is the perspective of the creator in the wings, critically checking balances, considering new juxtapositions and generally refining his knowledge of what works and what doesn’t. Holman’s music works, and on this session, he is out front of a band both feisty and tight. These consummate professionals respond to his leadership with definitive performances of ten pieces.

Holman’s characteristic approach is not so much to lay down riffs as to interweave lines, textures, and solos, all the while creating contrasts and disruptions. Polyphony in the great tradition of King Oliver and Jellyroll Morton flowers everywhere. Soloists bring ample personality to their moments in the sun, then speak with one voice in the rousing block-chord choruses. The band works as a

bumptious egos, and the rhythm section is more supple and supportive than hard-hitting. Rock rhythms are avoided as are gauzy attempts at impressionism. Coloristic writing depends not so much on exotic (or electric) instruments as the bold use of traditional jazz instruments in buzzing or whirling textures. Alien rhythms invade the swing; no one can remain complacent.

Grammy winner “But Beautiful,” the third selection, is the one piece mentioned in JVC’s promotional material. Unfortunately, I come to wish saxophonist Pete Christlieb would just chill: his busy playing and lubricious tone work better on “I Didn’t Ask.” Fortunately, Holman’s fluid writing transforms material that could have become hackneyed. The remainder of this disc is on a consistently high level, and I encourage every big band aficionado to consider this CD for the invention and brio of the other pieces.

A favorite is “I Didn’t Ask,”



Holman’s answer to Charles Ives’ “Unanswered Question.” I would have been skeptical about a big band treatment of this visionary composer’s mystical mini-masterpiece, but it inspires a very cool blues. In the introductory choruses, lines overlap with assured independence. Ron Stout’s plaintive trumpet calls are answered by four-bar bubbles of shimmering group improvisation. Stout’s warm-toned improvisation is urgent and smart. All in all, it’s a marvelous mix of down-home and elliptical.

“Make My Day” immediately shows how Holman likes to take a single note and make it buzz and dance, here weaving a wawa texture on one pitch in the brass. Later, trombones with overlapping glissandos and a wobbly rhythm create an off-kilter sense of inebriation.

In a concert performance, “The Peacocks” would not have offered such a surprise, but hearing this disc I thought, “what a fine (and beautifully recorded)

clarinet. What a rich tone to the Chalumeau register." Then the instrument dipped down another octave, and with it came the realization, "that ain't no regular clarinet." This moody minor key piece is a welcome breather, and a superb showcase for the sensual lines of Bob Efford's richly colored bass-clarinet. Holman wisely holds back the band, tempering their impetus with flugelhorns and flutes.

The title track features a spacey beat that recalls Miles' "In a Silent Way." The main tune suggests Coltrane-influenced harmony and some of the sax writing is reminiscent of Oliver Nelson's with a dollop of Gil Evans. With a nod to Kurt Weill, a choppy march joins the fray, and that works too. Andy Martin's trombone and Rich Eames' piano appear against a fast swing beat. The piece is capped by high white-hot trumpets playing long notes (sounding a bit recessive as if they had been electronically attenuated by engineer Allen Sides, even though the booklet proclaims "live to two track").

"Tennessee Waltz" gets harmonized to triads—but not necessarily the ones you expect. The relative simplicity of the first chorus is pleasing and witty, and the almost mechanistic waltz rhythm is balanced by a hip, slithering-over-the-beat rhythm at the end of the phrase. At one point, a crystalline-sounding piano is rudely interrupted by a flatulent ruckus in the trombones, ushering in a joyous binge of blue note incantations. The final number, "Lightening" is a swingin' blues with some gutsy blowing from tenor man Ray Hermann.

The extended resolution process (described over two full pages of text and a third devoted

to a diagram) renders a bright well-defined upper end. Most listeners will be very happy with the sound, but those who prefer an accurate rendering of an actual performance may find the soundstage is not always depicted convincingly. The plastic-free packaging clearly is a departure, and a user-friendly one. The disc resides in a folder of thick

cream-colored paper, part of the book includes eight pages of notes and photos. The attractively bound package has some of the pliant feel of a beloved hard-back and even hints at the great Japanese tradition of exquisite handmade practical objects.

This disc is a must for anybody involved in composing and arranging for jazz band.

The new Ohm Walsh 300 Mk-2s were reviewed by James T. Frane in the audiophile voice. Here's what he said:

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"The 300s displayed excellent dynamics; a case in point was Tchaikovsky's "1812 Overture"... cannon had a sonic impact with no apparent distortion although the amplifier meters were registering past the 400 watt/channel marks.

"The 300s recreated an extremely involving orchestral spread... The placement of the instrumental sections was correct and the balance of frequencies was very good. The 300s did not call attention to themselves as specific sound sources, but evenly distributed the sound across the space between them.

"The sound of 'I'm Confessin'" from *Jazz at the Pawnshop* (Prophone PRCD 7778) was as if I was looking through a wide doorway, defined by the width of the speakers, into the performance space. The ambience and the sense of the room size were marvelous. The vibes seemed just a few feet away. Janis Joplin's soulful voice and her marvelous back-up instruments and singers were only a few yards in front of me.

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R E VIEWS

Bill Wells



JAZZ

Madeline Eastman Mad About Madeline

Fantasy Records/Mad Kat Records MKCD 1003

I must admit, I don't have any of this artist's earlier works. However, when I lived on the East Coast, I used to hear her quite routinely on FM jazz radio. Now, being a resident of the Twin Cities (that's Minneapolis/St. Paul for those of you unfamiliar with this dubious title), I seldom find her voice on the radio or any place else.

So when late one night, not too terribly long ago, I happened to hear a selection from this album on the radio, it was like one of those strange but pleasant reunions. Eastman's voice is not one that immediately grabs you, say in the way that the late Sarah Vaughn's did or other more-spirited, present-day female vocalists might, yet her presentation is very musical and authentically jazz-oriented. You will typically not hear here dabble into lightweight, commercial or pop-oriented material. Based on the what I've heard thus far from Eastman, I would say she simply has too much class for

that type of musical side trip.

I stopped by my favorite record haunt (called The Electric Fetus!) to see if I could scare up a copy of this album. Fortunately, they had several in stock. A quick scan of the CD cover made me even happier for having made the trip: Not only were there a number of standards listed, to my delight, there were several other highly acclaimed artists listed as well. Noting the line-up of saxophonist Phil Woods, pianist Cedar Walton and jazz vocalist Mark Murphy, I was quickly convinced that this album would be an even nicer musical treat than I had originally anticipated.

And when I got the CD home, I wasn't disappointed. It is, in a word, *solid!* As I mentioned, Eastman's voice does not jump out and grab you. It is light and articulate, with her real strengths being superb styling and a no-nonsense manner of presentation. In continued listening to this album, I have

come to appreciate her work much more than I did in my earlier, casual listening. Her work is refreshing and very musical—no severe twists, turns or crazy bumps and grinds. Instead, you will be treated to some very nice be-bopping, comfortable ballads, and occasional vocal scatting. From the opening number to the closing piece, there is a consistent and interesting flow of rhythms, melodies, lyrics, phrasings, and stylings. Throughout, there is a solid interplay among all the artists demonstrating how well they complement one another.

The only thing that even remotely disappointed me was the limited amount of time I got to enjoy Mark Murphy's presence. Initially, after seeing Murphy's name on the cover, I had hoped to somehow get a good amount of his unique vocalizing throughout the album. Wrong! While Murphy's

vocal appearance is definitely complimentary, it is also somewhat limited. Of course, having Mark share too much on this particular venue could have, perhaps, diluted Eastman's efforts as the featured artist. I guess I can live with that.

Actually, on the track immediately following Murphy's appearance, Eastman delivers a very spunky and classy treatment of a tune entitled "Freedom Jazz Dance." This particular number leaves no doubt as to the real owner of this album. Having so enjoyed this selection, I quickly worked past my childish sour-grapes attitude about Murphy's limited appearance on the previous track.

Eastman offers an interesting be-bop approach on the cut titled "Four," featuring an engaging interplay with the renowned saxophonist Phil Woods. For another delicious treat, check

out her arrangement of the old favorite "Wish You Were Here," done in a quietly infectious Bossa Nova style.

Madeline's approach to quiet ballads is equally compelling. In particular, her presentation of such standards as "Turn Out The Lights" and "Don't Explain" really do it for me—but then again, I've always been a sucker for good female jazz vocalists. For whatever reason, they simply appeal to my inner musical soul. On these several selections, Ms. Eastman definitely joins an exalted group.

The sonics of this CD are very clear and quite natural sounding. The miking has been done to create a very realistic portrayal of the performers' proper dimensions and stage location. In light of this, and based on the distinctive musical content of this album, I believe there is good reason to be mad about Madeline!

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R.E. Designs LNPA 150 Mono Block Amplifiers

Bill Wells

This review covers a pair of solid-state amplifiers from R.E. Designs designated as LNPA 150. Over an extended period, I have used the amps in various audio systems. This has provided me the opportunity to become quite familiar with their overall sonic performance. These units are the brainchild of Dan Banquer, founder and chief designer at R.E. Designs. Since receiving these

electronics. He is a person of strong convictions regarding high-end audio's overall high cost with respect to performance. Up until the beginning of 1997, he sold his products from the factory direct to consumers, believing he could provide the purchaser a much higher value proposition. However, this direct sales approach did not generate sufficient sales. Accordingly, Banquer has just changed

to an authorized dealer setup with a limited number of outlets.

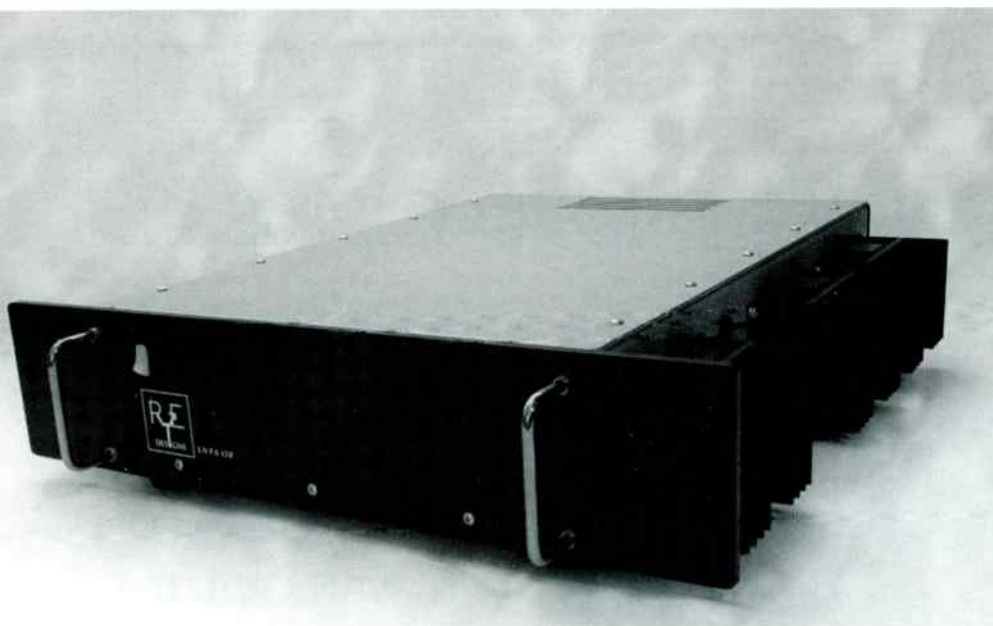
Banquer's general philosophy is to manufacture high-quality audio products at reasonably affordable prices. With the LNPA 150 mono blocks currently priced at \$3,995, and based on their overall fit and finish, along with their high degree of sonic performance, I would say that he has

amps, I have not had any operational problems or situations where their musical performance has been anything less than completely satisfying.

As a result of the generous extended loan of these amplifiers, I have had many opportunities for long and very informative telephone conversations with Banquer. Dan is an accomplished musician, playing several instruments, and attended music school as well as pursuing an education in elec-

achieved his stated goal. Banquer also has hopes that music lovers and audiophiles alike will someday realize that spending more does not necessarily get you more.

Based on information contained in one of several available white papers from R.E. Designs, along with my long telephone conversations with Banquer, I learned that his circuit designs are not considered (by him) to be revolutionary. Indeed,



he is quick to point out that he has not necessarily plowed new ground in terms of discovery. Banquer says he has gone after is an approach taken from classic design criteria used in precision analog signal processing.

Banquer also told me that the LNPA 150 was derived from an earlier prototype sporting a fully complementary, Class-AB design. In order to keep costs down, he states, "High-quality, off-the-shelf components are used. The 150 does not feature any specialty components, exotic wound transformers or custom heat sinks. This approach provides for lower initial cost, greater ease of manufacture, maintainability, and no decrease in performance."

The basic configuration of the LNPA 150 is that of a mono block design. The units are rated at 80 watts rms into 8 ohms, 150 into 4 ohms, and 220 into 2 ohms. Additionally, Banquer states that the amps have fully regulated power supplies, are equipped with r.f.i.-e.m.i. filters, and a varistor to suppress any a.c. line voltage surges. The grounding approach implemented is designed to insure excellent shielding and exceptionally low magnetic pick-up from the torodial power transformers. Dan feels this provides the lowest power supply and a.c.-line noise possible today.

Due to my high level of anticipation, as soon as the 150s arrived at my home, I quickly moved them into their position in my reference system. Although my speakers at that time were very high in efficiency and had a fairly benign impedance load (i.e. approximately 96 dB and 4 ohms, respectively), I was very curious to see just how well Banquer's 80 watt puppies would drive them. Also at that time my reference amplifier was a 200-watt per channel, solid-state stereo unit that had practically transformed these speakers performance relative to my previous 110-watt, mono-block tube units.

The installation of the R.E. Designs amps was fairly straight forward. Banquer had put the instructions on top of each amp (along with a couple of extra fuses—which were never needed). Interestingly, each unit has a set of toggle switches, one on each side of the amp, that disconnect the power supply from the amplifier stage. This is particularly handy when the user wishes to change interconnects or speaker cables and doesn't wish to turn the unit completely off. For a reviewer, this is a particularly nice feature to have.

My only complaint, during initial installation, was the type of binding posts used on the set of amps that I received. They had plastic caps and

would not back off far enough to allow me to easily use two sets of speaker cables for bi-wiring. Additionally, it was somewhat difficult to really tighten down these binding posts on the thick spade lugs found on a number of today's exotic speaker cables. In order to accomplish bi-wiring, I had to use one set of cables mounted in conventional fashion and the other set with connectors inserted into the ends of the plastic binding post. (Banquer says this situation has been rectified. He now uses a more commonly found high-end type of binding post that allows easier setup of thicker spade lugs or bi-wiring, as desired.)

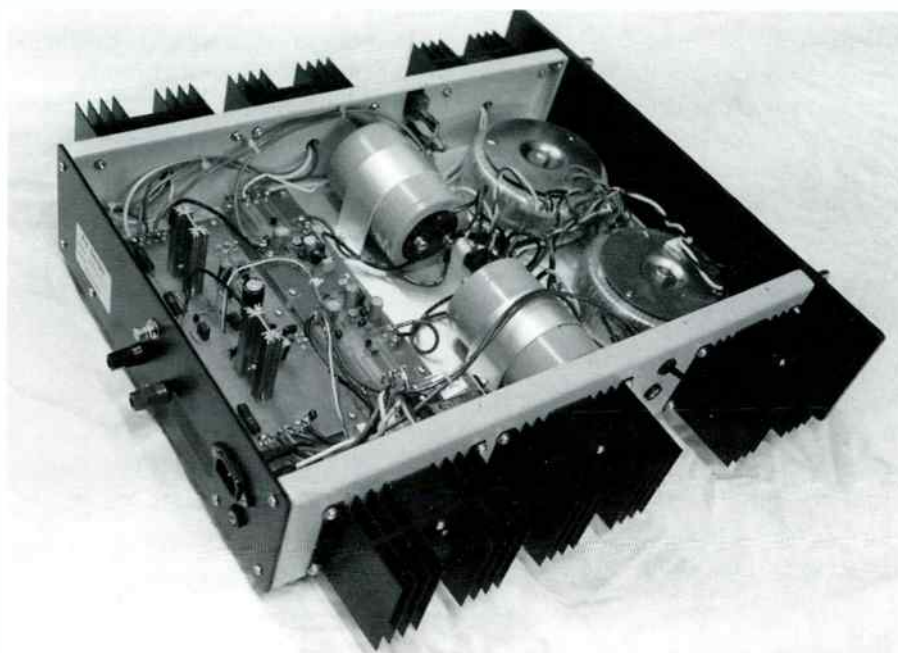
**Straight out—
these amps caught
me by surprise
with their power
and finesse.**

Once this was done, I was ready to get on with my auditioning of the LNPA 150s. Fortunately, this particular set of amps had been used previously, so I was not faced with the arduous task of several days break-in before any serious auditioning for review considerations. However, as is my usual practice whenever I place a new piece of gear into my system, I hooked the 150s up with FM white noise running through their circuitry for several hours before attempting to make any really meaningful observations. This allowed me to determine that things were working properly as well as letting the amps' power supplies to fully charge and settle in well at their new temporary home.

Rather than beat around the bush, I will tell you straight-out that these amps literally caught me by surprise. To be honest, I did not expect to hear the kind of power, musicality, and finesse that they delivered—at least, I didn't expect this right away. The bass was far more powerful than I would have imaged for an 80-watt amplifier rig. Quite frankly, in this regard, the LNPA 150s seemingly did not give up anything to my reference 200-watt amplifier. If anything, there seemed to be slightly better pitch definition and air through most of the lower registers. In order to get a better handle on things, I decided I would have to investigate this matter further.

One thing I observed early on was the generally low noise floor of the R.E. Designs LNPA 150s. Prior to the R.E. Design amps arriving at my home, my system was configured in a totally balanced

exemplary. Complementing this were an immediately noticeable high degree of transparency and overall smoothness. Transient performance was portrayed very nicely with a quickness to the leading and trailing edge of sounds. Happily, music of many types came to my ears without any observable harshness or harshness.



ing and trailing edge of sounds. Happily, music of many types came to my ears without any observable harshness or harshness.

With the wonderful transparency of these R.E. Design amps, I was also able to listen (see) deeply into the soundstage. Instruments were clearly distinguishable from one another, yet the stage was not brightly or overly illuminated. Instead, it had a very clean, see-through quality that was quite intriguing. Subtle details and ambient

clues emerged from the soundstage without any need to turn the volume up or requiring the listener to strain to hear them. The more I listened to the LNPA 150s, the more impressed I became. At this point, they were performing just as Banquer had claimed they would.

As a reviewer, I try my best to put a given piece of "review" gear into as many different situations as possible. In this context, the LNPA 150s saw plenty of action with a wide variety of system components—including speakers with widely differing efficiencies and impedances. Additionally, I tried these amps with different preamps and linestages. To the 150s' credit, they allowed me to easily tell the sonic differences between these various units. At no time did there appear to be a mismatch with any of these units and the 150s. Generally speaking, the 150s worked very well with the variety of different system components used in my system. Throughout these many system changes, the LNPAs remained unflappable and performed without a glitch. In all situations, their presence allowed the resulting system to deliver a high degree of musicality. And they themselves were simply transparent.

Getting back to my system's sound with the R.E. Design amps installed, along with the perceived improvement in bass character, there was an enhanced sense of dynamics that made my speakers come more to life. Also, the differences between the LNPA 150s and my reference ARC amp seemed to be in their overall tonal character. Both units were real smoothies. However, the R.E. Designs opened up the sound field slightly better.

As a lover of acoustic jazz music, I am particularly sensitive to the quality of the reproduction of the various instruments presented. I know what the upright acoustic bass should sound like and often I am disappointed with the sound produced in a home audio system. Whether it is a result of the recording, electronics, speakers or cables, I basically don't care. I just want it right!

With the LNPA 150s in my reference system, the sound in this region was very impressive and about as good as I had heard. The tonality, pitch definition, and overall timbre of the bass was

As I mentioned earlier, these amps were in my home for an extended period of time. As a result, I was able to nail down the specific areas of their sonic merits. One area that I do not have a problem

with, but may be of concern to some high-end users will be the 80-watt rating of these amps. Initially, I was a bit skeptical as well. However, throughout the time the 150s were available to me, I did not find any situation where their performance (power-wise, that is) was less than adequate.

In order to really test the 150s for overall power handling capability, I mated them with a variety of real world speakers. This ranged from my efficient but current-hungry largish reference loudspeakers the amazing ESP Concert Grands, to the superb but inefficient Paragon Jubilee monitors (approximately 86 dB efficient), and later the Jubilee's esteemed and moderately more efficient bigger brother, the Regents (approximately 91 dB). Throughout these different situations, not once did I feel the LNPA 150s to be deficient in terms of power. Feeling as though I had dealt sufficiently with the power issue, it was time to move on. (I realize some users will still cringe at a mere 80 watts. All I can say is, you really need to audition them before judging).

Substituting my then-reference amplifier, an ARC D-400 MkII, in place of the LNPA units

resulted in changes but not of a quantum measure. Where the LNPAs really shone was in their overall soundstaging characteristics. As with most mono blocks, they produced a very wide and significantly deep soundstage. My reference amp was similar but did not provide quite the same degree of depth and openness as the LNPA. The differences were not huge but critical listening did reveal them. Here, the LNPAs scored very well.

Listening to "Hermitage," the opening cut on Charlie Haden's LP titled *Quartet West*, Verve (831-673-1), the LNPA 150s allowed the total soundfield to develop in a very realistic manner. This cut starts out with various sounds subtly emerging deep in the soundstage. As the stage perspective gently moves forward, the 150s handled this passage with delicacy and finesse. Once the artists really get into full swing, with Ernie Watts' wailing saxophone and Billy Higgins' mystically floating percussive sounds, the 150s reproduced these instruments in a very musically authentic manner. Haden's upright acoustic bass was reproduced very naturally with a warmth and roundness reminiscent of live music. Cymbals had

a nice shimmer and sheen to them. The sax also came through with an appealingly correct tonality.

Another of my favorite recordings is the all-male acappella group Take 6. On their self-titled debut LP *Take 6* (Reprise Records 1-25670), the LNPA 150s handled the critical vocal range superbly. These singers have a unique singing style, as well as a wide range—from bass to falsetto. The 150s simply nailed their performance on this recording. Although there is a fair amount of reverb on this LP, with the LNPA 150s, I was able to clearly distinguish each individual singer as well as catch their distinctly differing tonal characteristics. Throughout this recording, the 150s produced a very clear, articulated, open and smooth midrange, with the vocals sounding very real.

Similarly, on the Isley Brothers' LP titled *Smooth Sailing*, Warner Brothers 1-25586, the LNPAs handled the vocals very well, while dealing with the mix of complex instrumental underpinnings. In addition to the clear sound pro-

NOTES

R.E. Designs LNPA 150 Mono-Block Power Amplifier, 80 watts into 8 ohms, 150 watts into 4 ohms, or 220 watts into 2 ohms; 1.2 V sensitivity; 0.1% THD; 5 Hz to 80 kHz power bandwidth; weight 40 lbs.; \$3,995.00. R.E. Designs, 43 Maple Ave., Swampscott, MA 01907; 617/592-7862.

Associated Equipment

Preamps/Linestages: Balanced Audio Technologies Vk5, Convergent Audio Technologies Signature, R.E. Designs LNLSA-1, Sonic Frontiers SFL-2; amplifiers: Audio Research D-400 Mk 2, Sonic Frontiers SFM 160; analog playback system: Well Tempered Reference Turntable, Cardas Heart and Blue Oasis moving-coil cartridges, Audio Research Ph-2 phono stage, Sonic Frontiers Signature phono stage; digital playback equipment: Adcom 600 DAC, Audio Research CD-1 CD player, Sonic Frontiers SFD-2 DAC, P S Audio Lambda CD transport, Theta Data Basic CD transport; speakers: Audio Physic Steps, ESP Concert Grands, Paragon Jubilees and Regents; cables and accessories: NBS Signature interconnects and speaker cables, Transparent Ultra interconnects and speaker cables Art digital cable, NBS AES/EBU digital cable, ARC AES/EBU digital cable, Transparent Music Link phono cable, Shakti Stones, ASC Tube Traps, and Ultra Resolution Cornerstone isolation platform.

duced by the LNPA amps on this recording, they provided a good sense of power and control. This attribute allowed the many different sounds to emerge in their own acoustic space without any noticeable smearing. High frequencies on this recording were very extended, open, and airy, and there was no so-called "transistor etchiness."

During my long-term evaluation of the R.E. Design LNPA 150 amps, I also had the opportunity to compare them to another manufacturer's 160-watt tube mono-block amplifiers. On these same recordings, these tube amps produced a

Accurate and neutral,
the R.E. Design's
LNPA 150s give you
lots of performance
for your money.

wonderful sound (especially when mated to their very highly touted companion all-tube linestage). However, putting the R.E. Design amps back into the system, the sound improved significantly.

In terms of sheer neutrality, detail, and resolution, speed, power and authority, the R.E. Designs amps delivered the goods more convincingly. It was interesting to observe that the LNPA 150's 80 watts seemed noticeably more powerful than the 160 watts of tube power. On the other hand, compared to my reference amp's 200 watts, these differences were not as much in evidence. To its credit, the R.E. Designs amp ran a very close race. From what I could tell, the real differences were in the overall drive capability with the marginal differences slightly in favor of my reference unit.

Venturing into other types of music, further allowed me to assess the LNPA 150s overall sonic capabilities. For example, listening to highly-charged fusion such as that found on Weather Report's LP titled *Sweetnighter* on Columbia (32210), the 150s were solid performers. When mated to the Paragon Regent loudspeakers (approximately 91 dB efficient and 6-to-8 ohm impedance load) for this recording, the 150s really sailed. This LP provides a wide range of instrumental sounds with a varying soundstage due to

the recording engineer's mixing techniques. The LNPAs handled these all very well. Very similar results occurred with the unique Miles Davis/Marcus Miller recording titled *Siesta* on the Warner Brothers label.

Although I am primarily a lover of jazz, particularly natural acoustic performances, I listened to several recordings of chamber and orchestral music with the LNPA 150s. With these types of music, the performances were consistent with my expectations from my previous experiences with these amps. The tonal characteristics of the instruments were accurate, and the soundstage was properly developed with good width and depth dimensions. Layers within the soundstage were easily detectable, and the imaging was precise and rock-solid.

As I try to wrap this review up, I find myself scratching my head trying to figure out where the shortcomings of these amps are. From my long-term experiences with the LNPA 150 mono blocks, I am hard pressed to find any glaring deficiencies. For the most part, they do what they are called on to do. Also, and very importantly, this is a product that remained extremely reliable. Even driven hard for extended listening sessions,, the LNPA amps remained in control. By the way, during these times, the amps never got beyond slightly warm to the touch.

The LNPA 150s overall sonic virtues alone warrant consideration by serious music-lovers and audiophiles. At their current price-point of \$3,995 from one of the newly named dealers, you get a lot of performance for your money. I believe they are contenders that can be placed up against units costing considerably more than the R.E. Designs' asking price.

For those looking for something other than an accurate sound portrayal, the R.E Design LNPA 150s will not please you. Their hallmark is accuracy and sonic neutrality. Also, for those concerned with its transistor-based operation, you will not get the sensation that you are listening to a lean, mean, sterile-sounding solid-state machine. Instead, you will get just the music as it is presented on record or CD. The LNPA 150s excel by reproducing recorded music in a very convincing manner.

Bottom line is this: These amplifiers sound good. In fact, they sound REAL good. I can only recommend you check them out for yourselves. Also I suggest you give Dan Banquer at R.E. Designs a call and find out more about what I've been enjoying.

Jim Dowd

I've never had much luck with power conditioners. Either they had the effect of closing down my system's soundstage or they left me rather unimpressed after I'd compared the dollar value/performance ratio of those that did work in my system. For the buck to be spent well, I waited long and patiently for just the right one to come along.

Then, in November 1995, the Tice Power Block "Signature" arrived in my apartment, following a brief telephone conversation with George Tice. At the time I was reviewing the PS Audio Ultralink II with HDCD, using the Lambda transport and Jadis J.P.L. preamp going into a Krell KSA-300S amp. (I also own the Krell KPS-20 iL CD player and an old NAD 4080 tuner, which had been passed down to me by another reviewer for the princely sum of \$25.00.)

I approached Tice's 50-lb. power conditioner with some caution, making sure that I read the manual from cover to cover, preparing to methodically plug in my reference system one component at a time for "out of the box" first impressions. These impressions of the Power Block 3 "Signature" were quite positive and after a brief description of this impressive unit, I'll explain why.

The "Signature" is best described in two parts, and in fact, the unit has two power cords. One powers up what Tice calls the "Ultra Isolator Transformer" side of the unit. An a.c. voltmeter on the front panel will function only when this side of



Tice Power Block "Signature" 3 Power Conditioner

the unit is powered up. Simply put, there are three of these transformers, each with four outlets for signal-source components. Two of these transformers are switched by means of on/off switches located on the front panel and labeled "Circuit 4" and "Circuit 5." The other transformer does not have an on/off switch and is intended for components meant to be left on all the time or which do not like to be turned on or off by anything but their own switches.

Each transformer is separately fused, and common spike and surge protection is provided, as is a 15-amp circuit breaker to protect this side of the unit. The transformers are rated at 300 watts each. However, if you wish to use the "Signature" with something like a big front-projection video unit in a home theater application, an additional 300-watt transformer can be installed on circuit 4 and wired in parallel to the existing transformer. The resulting circuit is able to handle up to 600 watts. Interestingly, this variation is modular and can be installed in the field by the dealer or by the owner

if it hasn't been ordered already installed at the factory. This option will cost you only \$200.00, and if you have need for an installation like this, I think the extra cost is well worth it.

The second cord brings in a.c. power to the high-current filtered side of the Tice "Signature." Here, circuits 2 and 3, are similarly switched on the front panel. There are two outlets for each of these circuits on the back of the unit. These circuits are intended for use with power amps and are rated at 1,875 watts. To accommodate the larger power-hungry amps like those from Krell, Levinson, or Classè, an "HP" or high-power version can be ordered for an additional \$350.00, which brings the rating of these circuits up to 2,500 watts. I felt that the "HP" option was needed to get the best performance from my Krell KSA-300 amp. While circuits 2 and 3 are not separately fused, there is a 20-amp breaker on the back of the unit, as well as the usual spike and surge protection. All outlets are high-quality, hospital-grade types, as are the plugs on both 8-foot power cords hard-wired to the unit.

The review sample was a Power Block 3 HPTS, where the "HP," as above, stands for high power, "T" for the optional additional transformer, and "S" for a silver faceplate. A stock Power Block 3 costs \$1,499.00 with the "T" and the "HP" options priced at \$200.00 and \$350.00 respectively. I liked the silver faceplate, which looks sharp; it is a \$100.00 option. Before you ask, yes, I did buy the review sample.

FINALLY...THE SOUND

Considered individually, the performance of each of my reference system components appeared to improve as I plugged them into the Tice unit one at a time. When taken together, the combined effect on all my source components was profound.

My soundstage became immediately more dynamic. Noise that I had not previously realized was there dropped out of sight. Dynamic contrasts were more easily perceived without any undue sense of forwardness. Layering of individual instruments was clear-cut and their definition improved. The exact locations of instruments in the soundstage of live recordings became more obvious.

Bass was clearly more defined and sounded harmonically improved. Cymbals were cleaner and more pleasant sounding, without any sense of excessive sibilance. The overall dynamic and spatial characteristics of instruments in my sound-

stage were so improved that I would have bought the unit for this alone.

While listening to Keith Jarrett's *Paris Concert* (ECM 1401), I found that the improved attack and decay, together with quieter silences between the notes, made the playback of this recording truly captivating, rather than merely technically correct or simply interesting. The ebb and flow, the feeling, and the magic of this recorded evening were brought that much closer to me in my listening room.

I listened to my system for several months with just the source components getting power via the

Taken together, the effect
on my source components
was profound.

Tice Power Block "Signature" before I plugged my Krell KSA-300S into the 2,500-watt "HP" section. The improvements I experienced here were even more staggering. The performance of the top of my soundstage "took off" compared to the somewhat "closed down" earlier presentation. Tice obviously has the right ideas about the high power demands of the Big Amps. The \$350.00 additional for this option seems at this point a paltry sum when weighed against the sonic benefits the "HP" option provided.

Every instrument in the sound stage was obviously harmonically improved and more truthful. Most notably improved was the timbre. Bass performance improved in tone and definition. Cymbals sounded more natural, with every trace of artificiality removed. Vocals through the midrange became more open sounding with a naturalness that was uncanny, and this was true for both male and female vocals. Track 9 on Patricia Barber's *Café Blue* recording (Prem 737-2), "Too Rich For My Blood," was a perfect example of this. It was obvious when she steps back a couple of feet at one point in the song. The openness and depth that the "Signature" unit assisted the KSA-300s in providing was astonishing. I also tried this unit with a KSA-200S while driving the Apogee Divas at a friend's house, and the results were the same.

If your components are top drawer, this power conditioner will make them shine. Fine detail in the far reaches of the back of the soundstage was solidly placed and delineated. Classical recordings with massed strings and strong transients benefited

greatly from having the Tice unit in my system. Piano timbre was, again, more truthful, while acoustic guitar was a delight, and chords from both instruments produced a new ease and simplicity. In fact, the use of the "HP" version made all music easier to listen to, an endearing attribute. I found I was listening to my system for longer periods, literally hours on end, and I would finish up these marathons with no sense of fatigue at all.

VIDEO USE

I decided to try the Tice unit in a friend's video system, specifically with a Vidikron VPF-40 front projection unit, which we plugged into the Signature's "Circuit 4" that included the additional transformer. We immediately realized that the resulting picture was smoother and easier on the eyes. We went back and forth as quickly as we could, attempting to see if there was any loss of detail when the smoothness was added, and found that just the opposite was true. The 7-foot screen portrayed seascapes and mountain terrain in a more vivid, focused, and realistic manner, and both my friend and I felt that there was an additional three-dimensional component to the picture. We also tried the standard circuit—with just the 300-watt transformer—and this appeared to improve the picture as well, but in the sense that one perceives a photograph as being very good. While we used the Vidikron in the 600-watt circuit of the Tice, you could often catch a breath of three-dimensionality with, say, clouds floating above and around mountain peaks, in the way that an extraordinary painting could portray it. I felt more drawn into the picture, which seemed more realistic. It seemed that the Vidikron just needed to be plugged into the "Signature" to put this painting on the screen as it was intended. There were also similar improvements for the associated Pioneer Elite LD-S1 LaserDisc player, particularly in the sound area where everything we played seemed easier and more natural.

I could go on, but the bottom line is that high-end home video systems will reap benefits perhaps only dreamed of when used with Tice's Power Block 3 HPT. My home theater buff-friend has a Levinson ML-3 driving B&W 801 speakers, both front and back, and as this is being written, he's begging Tice to get him a unit. He "needs" the "Signature" for the home theater system in his living room, and he wants to put one into his audio system in the basement. (That's the Krell-amped system I mentioned.) I can't say I would

argue. I can say that I'm a bit annoyed; it took me two weeks to get the Tice unit out of his house and I'd only meant to stop over there for an afternoon. But then, people like my friend tend to get crazy when things as effective as this Power Block gets into a system. Like me, my friend never had much luck with power conditioners—until now.

CONCLUSION

The Tice Audio Power Block 3 "Signature" is a reference power conditioner in every sense. It is versatile and acceptably priced, and it will allow all systems, both audio and video, to play up to their full potential. For serious audiophiles and videophiles, a conditioner of this caliber becomes a necessity once it is given a fair trial.

There is one thing I should warn you about here, and that is once you get your ears and eyes opened by this most-serious of power conditioners, make the purchase and get it home to install... remember to keep it in your house.

NOTES

Tice Audio Power Block 3A "Signature," price: \$1,499.00 base; \$2,049.00 as reviewed (see text for options). Manufacturer: Tice Audio/Video Technologies, 1530 Cypress Dr., Suite C, Jupiter, FL 33469; phone 561/575-7577, FAX 561/575-0302.

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Alon V Mk II speakers; Krell KSA-300S amplifier; Jadis J.P.L. preamplifier; PS Audio Ultralink II HDCD processor; PS Audio Lambda 1 transport; Krell KPS-20 iL CD player; Acarian Systems Black Orpheus and Tara Labs Golden VI speaker cables; Tara Labs Generation 2, Cardas Golden Cross, and Discovery Signature interconnects; Tara Labs Luminary ST glass and Generation 2 AES/EBU digital cables; Illuminati coaxial digital cable; Arcici Levitation stand; Bright Star Audio Big Rock Titan isolation platform; and Bright Star Little Rock isolation pod.

The Mesa Baron Stereo Amplifier

Mark Block

“**T**his is a tale of two amps...” Don’t you hate it when a review begins that way? (Let me tell ya, not as much as the reviewer hates it!) Well, here we go again. My review of the Mesa Baron was edited and ready for the printer when Mesa requested that we update our review sample (which I had purchased) and give it another listen. Not wanting to review an out-of-date product—and, of course, eager to hear an improved amp—we complied.

The danger in this situation is that it can become an endless cycle: By the time any review is printed, changes have probably been incorporated into the most recent “production line” samples. That’s the way it is in the world of high-end audio. Volumes are low so changes are relatively easy to make, and designers are constantly tweaking—often after getting feedback from dealers and customers. On the whole, it’s a good thing. But it also can be used to thwart the review process.

In any event, Mesa promises to leave well enough alone for awhile, and the update did directly address my biggest complaint about the amp, so I’m happy the review didn’t go out as it

stood. Without further ado, here’s the original review, followed by my thoughts on the latest amp.

LAST YEAR’S MODEL

A prototype stereo tube amplifier from Mesa Boogie’s guitar amp guru Randy Smith had been making the rounds since 1989, building up a good



buzz in high-end circles. When the production Mesa Baron amp finally came down the pike in 1995, I saw it as the audiophile equivalent of a BMW M3. With near race car performance at a surprisingly affordable price, the M3 is a super-serious driver's automobile adaptable enough to take the family to church on a rainy Sunday morning. Likewise, the Baron seemed to have a personality capable of morphing from tiger to pussycat—from racer to minivan, if you will—depending on the needs of its owner. The reality is... different.

Having used the Baron as my primary amp for over six months, I've come to see through the chameleon-like camouflage. The adaptability is a facade, a front. The Baron is not a mutable M3—it's actually more akin to the Lotus Super-7 that Mesa Engineering's founder/designer Randy Smith

loves to race in his spare time. Yes, the Baron is an awesome performer at an exceptionally good price. But it's also a tweaky, hand-made, and in some ways an uncompromising design with a somewhat limited practicality. Read on, but don't be

scared off. If, after reading my caveats, you feel that this amp suits your style and your system, go for it—you'll be rewarded with one of the best sound-for-dollar components in high-end audio today.



FEATURES

One way to look at the Baron is "16 amps in 1." The banks of 6L6 power tubes (six per side) use four different combinations of triode/pentode operating mode, and the circuit allows four negative feedback settings (from 0 to 11dB), all

selectable "on the fly" while music is playing. So the "sound" of this amp is actually 16 different sounds. It's a tweaker's dream (which is the same as saying a neurotic's nightmare), and that flexibility also makes a good selling point: You feel safe buying this amp because it can be tuned to your taste and system; no getting it home only to discover that the magic you heard at the dealer's showroom doesn't happen in your living room. Experience with this amp, however, has given me another perspective, but we'll get to that in due time.

My personal amp wish list—based on experience with a frustrating but beautiful-sounding Jadis Defy-7—seemed almost completely satisfied by the Baron. Number one on the list: Easy bias adjustment. The Baron's got it, along with large VU meters on the front panel that can be switched to provide bias or power output readouts. Number two on my list: Balanced inputs. Again, the Baron has them. Number three: High power in a compact package. The Baron is no lightweight (65 lbs.), but I can easily carry it around, and its rack-mount dimensions give the chassis a good, chunky rigidity. While the Baron's power changes with operating mode—150W in pentode, 60 in triode, with 80 and 100 in the combo pentode/triode configurations—in all cases it's enough to drive my 85-dB sensitive speakers to fairly high listening levels without clipping.

The amplifier is a virtual pair of monoblocks mounted on a single chassis. Everything is duplicated right/left except for the rotary feedback control on the back, which affects both channels. The speaker binding posts from Esoteric Audio are big and sturdy; hand-tight with these things gets things really tight, but they'll accept a wrench if you want to get "nutty" about it. I prefer dual posts for bi-wiring, but instead the Baron has the traditional 4- or 8-ohm taps with a common ground. As almost no high-end speakers are really 8-ohm loads, the 8-ohm tap is a waste. I favor the Defy-7 configuration: It's set at the factory for 4 ohms, but an internal strapping arrangement allows for 8; the space saved by nixing the 8-ohm tap is given over to an extra set of binding posts. But that's about my only wish list item not accommodated by the Baron.

A little bonus feature I hadn't expected is a pair of ground isolation switches: The circuit can be floated from ground without the kludge of "cheater" plugs at the wall. From my experience, lowest system noise always results from grounding only one component (the CD processor or pre-amp). When an amp is grounded, the intercon-

nects can create a ground loop, resulting in hum. The switches on the Baron allow you to easily try it both ways.

ON THE TRACK

Then there is the sonic wish list: Transparency, high resolution, tonal neutrality, liquid midrange, soundstage depth, extended but sweet highs, powerful yet controlled bass. You know—the usual dream world stuff. Several friends in whose ears I trust had given me glowing reports on the Baron's performance before I got it in my system, and after months of use I don't dispute any of it. The Baron fills my sonic wish list as beautifully as I could have hoped.

Which brings up the familiar reviewer's problem of describing a component that does almost everything well. Sonically there's little here to criticize. Of course, the Baron doesn't give you the speed, control, and in-your-face resolution of some of the "ruthlessly revealing" solid-state champs. But then tube lovers aren't looking for that—they're generally looking to avoid it.

The Baron is a favorite amp of Platinum Audio's Phil Jones, who values above all else (based on the sound of his speakers) transparency, dynamics, and bass slam—areas in which big solid-state amps normally better the best tubes. But the Baron more than holds its own against the transistor regulars, and it stomps all over the tube competition. Suffice it to say that the bass punch and dynamics of the Jadis Defy-7 are equaled by the Baron at half the price.

And what of that voodoo that tubes do so well? Stuff like depth and spaciousness, midrange liquidity, treble detail with high frequency smoothness. Yes, the Baron has the magic that makes my heart keep coming back to tubes even when my head knows better.

So why not run out and buy the Baron right now? I might as well end the review here, no?

BUMPY ROADS

Well, it turns out I have a new wish list, based on my experience with the Baron. Although the

Mesa amp makes a great race car, it still has a few rough spots as a minivan. Sixteen amps in one? Make that two.

In full triode mode, it sounds soft and polite. The rough edges of Emmy Lou Harris' voice (*Cowgirl's Prayer*, Asylum 9 61541-2) are smoothed over, and musically significant details are blurred out. If the triode Baron were a car, it would be a Lincoln Town Car in need of new shocks. *Faux* luxurious, but not to be taken seriously.

Likewise, in full pentode mode the Baron is hard and edgy. Vibrant and lively, yes, but harsh to the point of distraction. As a car, it's a good go-cart. In the Eagles' "Hotel California" from the *Hell Freezes Over* (Geffen GEFD-24725) live album, about 5:12 into the piece Don Henley sings, "I



The Baron shows its beef

Photos courtesy Mesa Engineering

was running for the door." He hits a note on the word "for" that just drives the pentode Baron crazy; it jumps out of the speakers as if it's overmodulated. But the recording is definitely not overloaded, because the note sails through other amps—including the non-pentode Baron—quite cleanly. This behavior may be dependent on speaker impedance, as the full pentode mode puts the output impedance of the Baron at its most susceptible to the vagaries of one's speaker load. However, it happened also on the mild mannered, amp-friendly Paragons over at Arnie's.

Arnie had wanted to borrow the amp for a few days as a personal "sanity check." (He was unsure about the way his system was sounding, so he needed to throw in a new component; all us audio neurotics get that feeling from time to time.) I called a few days later and asked if he was using the Baron. "I used it for a short time," he said,

then asked, "Mark, what do you think of the amp?" "I dunno, what do you think?" I wittily shot back. Arnie spilled the beans, "Well, it sounds very hard and edgy. I really couldn't listen to it." I knew immediately what had gone wrong. Indeed, Arnie had all the switches in pentode.

The amp can realistically be used only in one of the two combo settings. In the two-thirds pentode mode, I think I hear just a trace of residual hardness, and likewise in the two-thirds triode mode, I think it's just a hair too sweet—but I wouldn't swear to it. It sounds pretty fine either way. What about the feedback settings? The effect is subtle—and difficult for me to pin down, because changing the feedback changes the gain of the amp. As my preamp is only adjustable in 1.5dB increments, I couldn't do a properly level-matched comparison. My unscientific feeling, however, is that a little feedback is necessary to tighten and clean up the sound, but that the maximum feedback position (11dB) seems to put a damper on the amp's dynamics, openness, and sense of bloom. Advice: Dial in one click stop of feedback and don't worry about it.

So the amp really isn't as adaptable as it's cracked up to be. Big deal, it still sounds great in its optimal set up. Practically speaking, however, I wish for more:

1) A reasonable input sensitivity. The Baron hits full output at a mere 0.5 volts—and the gain goes up with less feedback and more tubes in pentode. That kind of sensitivity almost precludes the use of a preamp, particularly with audiophiles who listen primarily to CDs. We've suffered for years with high-output CD processors that prevent optimal use of a preamp's volume control, and with the Baron we have a power amp that makes the problem worse. Furthermore, this kind of sensitivity means that your preamp had better be dead quiet... or else. So in addition to being a great power amp, the Baron can double as a preamp tube tester. Unfortunately, you may discover, as I did, that the noise floor of even the best 6DJ8 is just a little too high for the Baron.

The Mesa people report that they've had good luck with the Emmanuel Go's Presence Audio tube preamp, but I would certainly try out the Baron with your speakers and your preamp before committing to it. The safest bet is simply to use a passive unit. [See sidebar.] When I asked Mesa why they didn't make the input sensitivity a little more normal, I got the standard high-end response: It sounds better this way.

2) Quiet transformers. The transformers on my Baron hum a bit (both at my house and at Arnie's).

It gets a little better with a couple of VPI bricks on top, but it's still audible—not bad, mind you, but if you sit near the amp (as I do) and if your room has very low ambient noise (as mine does), your CD tracks will fade to hum (and noise) instead of silence. My old Defy-7 never hummed, so I don't think the juice out of the wall is causing it.

3) Balanced circuitry. Although the Baron has balanced inputs, the signal is immediately converted to single ended. (A true differentially balanced circuit would add substantially to the cost and complexity.) Unless you have a long run of cable in an RF-noisy environment, you're probably better off using the single-ended inputs.

4) Individually-biased tubes. The biasing is easy, although Mesa ought to provide one of those engineering-nerd "tweaker" do-dads to get at the little pots, which are situated too close to the power tubes for comfort. However, bias adjustments affect groups of three tubes together. Mesa tubes are all thoroughly checked and sorted, but if the tubes drift with age, there's nothing you can do. Does it make a sonic difference? Probably not, but it makes me nervous, and most of the audiophiles I know are even more neurotic than I am.

NOTES

Mesa Baron stereo amplifier, \$3,695.00. Mesa Engineering, 1317 Ross Street, Petaluma, CA94954. Phone: 707/778-9505; fax: 707/765-1503; e-mail: audioguy@mesalogic.com

Reference System

Sonic Frontiers SFD-2 MKII digital processor; Sonic Frontiers SFT-1 and JD Transforms transports; Well-Tempered Turntable and arm, Marigo Labs arm clamp and mat, Monster Cable Sigma 2000 cartridge; Sumiko phono amp; Mesa Baron, BAT VK-500, Amherst A-2000 and Rotel RB-990BX amps; Sonic Frontiers SFL-2 preamp; Platinum Audio Duo and Reference 1 speakers; Discovery Signature and Esoteric Audio Artus interconnects; Discovery and Esoteric Audio speaker cables; Atlantis speaker stands; Bright Star Big Foot bases; ASC SuperTraps, tube traps, flat panels and RPG Skyline diffusors; Audio Quest, TDK and Radio Shack ferrite noise filters; Sims Navcom feet; AudioQuest UltraConnect cleaner; Nitty Gritty Model 2 record cleaner, DBX 14/10 analyzer.

Passionate Neutrality

*The Audio Synthesis Passion V
passive preamp*

Because of the Mesa Baron's abnormal input sensitivity, I was going crazy replacing Sovtek 6DJ8s in my Sonic Frontiers SFL-2 preamp. The V2 position in the preamp was the culprit, and although my old, original tubes were fairly quiet, the newer tubes kept going noisy every couple of weeks. (In fairness to the Sonic Frontiers preamp, it's perfectly quiet into other amps, including the 0.7 volt sensitivity Jadis and Rotel amps I've had on hand.) At a certain point, I simply decided to stop making myself nuts. The Baron was demanding to be fed from a quieter source, and like a bratty child, it finally got its way.

I had been intrigued by Ben Duncan's DIY passive preamp projects in *Hi-Fi News and Record Review* (August '88 and May '91). When I saw that Ultra Systems (a division of The Cable Company) was distributing the Duncan-designed Audio Synthesis passive preamps, I decided that a two week audition was in order.

Audio Synthesis makes a D/A converter, a solid state power amplifier, and a full line of both passive and active preamps. The one Ultra Systems sent me is called the Balanced Passion V. At \$2395, it's a little pricey, but it is a full function control center, sporting 5 inputs with a tape loop, a "direct" input (which bypasses the tape loop), bi-amp outlets, and an additional fully balanced input and output. A stripped down version called the ProPassion, with only the single balanced in and out, retails for \$1295. The Passion 8M is a jazzed up version with remote control, selling for \$3995. The standard unbalanced Passion is \$1495.

All the Audio Synthesis preamps feature WBT plugs, silver wiring with Teflon insulation, and Vishay bulk foil resistors in the stepped attenuators. Being dual mono, two separate attenuators control the gain, so close attention must be paid to channel balance. In practice, the marked click stops make it fairly easy, but I did get it wrong once or twice when simply "eyeballing" the two controls—upon sitting in my listening chair, my ears immediately told my eyeballs to be more careful.

In the main part of their range, the attenuators operate in .5 dB steps—which is quite good compared to other preamps with stepped attenuator volume controls—although at the top of the range (least attenuation) the steps are 3 dB, while if more than 42 dB of attenuation is

required, the resolution of the click stops is reduced to 6 dB.

The bugaboo of passive units is compatibility, and Audio Synthesis cautiously recommends a 600 ohms output impedance from your source (i.e., CD processor or phono preamp), along with an output of 2 volts or more. On the amp side, they'd like to see an input sensitivity of 1 volt or less for full power, and an input impedance of 20 k ohms or higher. The Mesa's .5 volt sensitivity and 57 k input (newer Barons are even higher at 100 k) makes it an ideal match, while my Sonic Frontiers SFD-2 Mk. II processor barely squeaks in under the recommendation.

In literature sent to me by Ultra Systems, I see that the Audio Synthesis circuits are "classic short path L pad" designs. (What makes it "classic?" Is there a museum for this kind of thing?) If you choose the "Direct" input, all switch contacts are out of the signal path; in all input configurations, the Passion V switches the grounds and the signal to minimize interference from components not in use.

Sound?(NOT!)

Here's a riddle for you: What doesn't make a sound but plays music? Answer: an Audio Synthesis Passion V. Containing no active circuitry, the Passion V is a "straight wire without gain." Barring an impedance mismatch, it simply lets you hear what the rest of your system is doing. Unfortunately, a passive preamp in most systems will create exactly such a mismatch, sounding undynamic and rolled off at the frequency extremes. Paired up with the Baron, however, I heard nothing of the kind.

With the Passion on-line in place of the SFL-2, my system sounded a little more forward, but in a good way. High frequencies stood out in sharper relief; recordings seemed to have more "contrast." On the down side, many recordings had slightly less apparent depth, but I attribute that to a euphonic effect of the SFL-2s tubes as opposed to a subtractive coloration in the Passion V.

Passive preamps aren't for everybody—they severely limit your choice of amps—but my two weeks with the Audio Synthesis unit proved it's a perfect partner for the Baron, and a very cost-effective way to banish noise and colorations from the vital link between source and amp.

5) Long tube life. I've had two sets of tubes go noisy on me in about six months. I could be accused of abusing the tubes, but there are the extenuating circumstances. Here's what happened. The Baron has a standby mode, which keeps the tubes warm without running them at full power. Because my job typically keeps me out of the house for 12 hours a day, and because my wife and children occupy most of my remaining waking hours, I get very little "quality time" with my beloved stereo. I began leaving the amp permanently on "Standby" so I could have the system up and roaring at a moment's notice—from dishwasher to dirty diapers to Willy DeVille in three minutes flat.

Unfortunately, after about a week and a half of being on all the time, the tubes started crackling and hissing. Mesa kindly sent me a new set, and on a hunch I replaced only the tubes running in pentode. Bingo, that did the trick. Several months later, I decided to push my luck and try it again. Bummer: Two weeks of being in "Standby" cooked the tubes again (all the tubes this time). The "Standby" mode is yet another feature of this amp that doesn't quite do what I expected. In fairness, I should mention that the normal bias setting on this amp is 38mA per tube, which is pretty conservative, and should result in long tube life—probably 2,000 hours or more—under normal use.

FINISH LINE

So the Baron isn't the perfect amp I thought it would be. (Maybe that's *my* problem.) The *raison d'être* of this amp's design is, seemingly, its flexibility; for me, however, the chief drawback is its stubborn lack of flexibility. Yet it remains one of the best sound-for-dollar and power-for-dollar tube amps on the market. In a way, this amp is what the high-end has always been about: Original, quirky, uncompromising thinking in the pursuit of the best possible sound. If my nits seem picayunish, good. The Baron is probably right up your alley, so buckle up and enjoy the ride.

THE TUNE UP

The amp came back from its "Day of Beauty" at the Mesa factory with a nice, new Owner's Manual—and an excellent one it is. Design, philosophy, and nitty-gritty usage are discussed thoroughly. I'd like to quote from the last paragraph, because it neatly sums up the philosophy behind good high-end companies:

We thank you for trusting us with your hard-earned audio investment funds. We take this responsibility quite seriously and will do our utmost to become your amplifier company of first choice. More than a business, this is a life-long passion with many of us here at Mesa Engineering and we appreciate nothing more than hearing from very happy clients who, like us, enjoy the Spirit of Art in Technology.

Right on.

The revisions to the Baron were relatively minor, but one of them has resulted in a much more system-friendly amplifier. I'll get to that last. The biggest change, in terms of operation, is a new power switch and start-up procedure. (This update was not made to my amp, but it's worth mentioning.) The switch now has three positions and requires the owner to manually hold it down for two seconds, which results in a "soft-start." Many of the first generation Barons suffered from switch failure at start-up (the switches would stick in the "on" position), and this new feature is said to cure the problem. Further, the stand-by switch now also has three positions, one of which is a "warm" function—so the tubes can be kept warm, warmer or HOT, depending on how hot *you* are to reach maximum sonic altitude as quickly as possible. The manual states that the amp can be left on indefinitely in the warm position without cooking the tubes.

Internally, some Yomomura hook-up wire has been added, which adds a touch of refinement to the amp's sonic signature. Another change affects only those users who prefer balanced XLR interconnects: Pin 3 gets shunted to ground through a 57k resistor, which creates a more benign load for the preamp. Also internally, the input impedance can be raised from 57k to over 100k by unsoldering two resistors; this will make the amp even better suited for use with a passive preamp.

Which brings us around to the issue of why one needs a passive preamp with the Baron: the unusual input sensitivity. That issue is now almost moot. The revised Baron is 6 dB less sensitive, so the amp is significantly kinder to its partner at the front end of the system. In the preferred two-thirds pentode mode (with a little feedback), it seems to be about 3 dB more sensitive than a European amp I have on hand, and 6 dB more sensitive than an American one—so it's still ideal for use with a passive preamp—but overall my system is now acceptably quiet with the Baron powering things. I can even go to zero feedback and keep tube noise from the preamp's 6DJ8s from intruding, whereas with the original amp the noise was loud enough to be distracting. What this means is that I can

finally recommend the Baron to most audiophiles with tube preamps and CD sources; it's not so picky about system matching anymore.

Why not cut the sensitivity even further? In order to allow for the Baron's cursed "flexibility," the sensitivity has to be a compromise between what works best for pentode operation and what works for triode.

Sonically, the amp sounds a little smoother than it did before, which makes the full-triode Baron really unnecessary. You'd have to have seriously fatiguing speakers—or a warped idea of what real instruments sound like—to want to use the Baron that way. The two-thirds pentode configuration is really the way to go if you value accuracy and faithfulness to the recording. In fairness, however, it's possible that a particular speaker system might have a frequency vs. impedance curve that mates synergistically with either all-triode or all-pentode. So don't let my admonitions stop you from experimenting. Try it; you might like it.

Lately I've been using the super-punchy, super-revealing Platinum Reference 1 mini-monitors—which are a few dB less sensitive than the Duos I had been using—and found that going to zero feedback took the system up a notch to a new level of life and palpability. A little feedback will reduce the system's noise, allow the amp to better control woofer motion, and produce a flatter frequency

response by lowering the output impedance. I *wanted* to like the feedback; it *should* sound better. But every time I turned the feedback knob down to zero, I got blown away by the increased dynamics and bloom—and was consequently more drawn into the music. The best feedback setting may be speaker dependent, but I think Baron owners would be wise to keep it to a minimum.

A very good amp is now even better, and finally appropriate in a wide range of systems.

POSTSCRIPT

Just before deadline I had time to audition a production line sample of the current Baron, and found that it's even quieter than indicated above. Although some 60-cycle hum is noticeable if you put your ear up to the woofer, the transformer has been thoroughly de-hummified, and tube noise is very low. The audible refinement is a "have your cake and eat it too" situation: The amp has better resolution while sounding smoother and less fatiguing. By the way, the upgrade costs 300 bucks, which is the difference in price between last year's Baron and the new one. And one other thing: Mesa took my suggestion and enclosed a nice, long tweaker for easy biasing without burned fingers. Thanks.

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JUST 10 MIN. FROM
 MID-TOWN MANHATTAN

B & W P-5 Loudspeaker

Gerald J. Walsh

If you don't know that Bowers & Wilkins (B&W) is from jolly old England, has been around for over 25 years, and is regarded as one of the finest trademarks in the business, then shred up this magazine, donate it to the cat's litterbox, the Watergate archives or whatever, 'cause you've got to "go out and come in again," friend! I suppose B&W vies with KEF for honors as the top of the British boxes, although B&W might take exception, as might Mission, Spondor, ProAc and several others.

One aspect of note about the B&W P series, even though it hails from a storied maker, is that here in the States this range constitutes something of a niche entry and is a bit more obscure than most of their other models. Thus, for someone interested in making "a find," chasing this speaker can worth the work. Interestingly, the "P" stands for Preference, according to the U.S. marketing manager. Three models comprise the series, all floorstanding: P4 at \$1200; P5 at \$1500 and P6 (with the free-air mounted tweeter a la the Matrix line) at \$1800. The Ps came ashore here in the latter part of '95, but have been available in their native Britain since late '93 or early '94, and have reportedly been a really hot seller over there...

To be politically centrist—nah, just 'cause they're what I own!—the P-5 is under the microscope for this, the first P-series review of which I am aware in the United States. The P-5, of course, falls neatly in the middle of a series which itself falls rather in the middle of B&W's product range, encompassed at the lower end by the just-revised "600" line and at the top by the acclaimed Matrix group. Well, technically, the very "top dog" is the

Nautilus speaker, but at a lofty \$35,000, it is understandably a limited-production item, for REAL (rich) audiophiles.

The finish of the P series is of true Scandinavian-wood veneer, and it's fabulous. There are three choices: Black ash, "rosenut" and cherry. The black ash looks much like most black ash I've seen. As to the "rosenut," I can't honestly say if that's exactly the same wood as rosewood, but to my perception it is a little brighter red than other rosewood with which I'm familiar. In fact, at least two B&W dealers have confided to me that they thought the rosenut was the cherry and vice versa. In any event, the cherry is what I own, and the wood is of European origin, and this may be the reason why it has a sort of "orange" or lighter hue than most of us Yanks would associate with the wood. I've had this pair of mine several months now, and they seemed to have darkened just slightly.

The grain matching on my pair is tops, and demonstrates the legendary craftsmanship of B&W. But one word of warning: When I first removed my new pair from the cartons, I was dismayed (detail freak that I am) at what appeared to be a couple of small black scratches on top of the cabinets. Turns out to be just character marks in the wood.

As befitting the legendary B&W name—and spending 1500 smackers—the P-5s are quite stunning in appearance, an elegant joy to behold. These speaker cabinets are of the now-fashionable (and acoustically justified) slim-line style, measuring just a hair under eight inches wide. Sleek, beveled grille frames are covered with black cloth and beautifully rounded at the bottom to grace the

While B&W's
P-5 speaker
should not be
thought of as an
ultimate system,
it does offer
good value.

cabinets, which are themselves beveled for diffraction benefits. With the grille, depth falls just short of a foot, while they climb to a height just under a yard, without included spikes. (Some tiny, thin, adhesive-backed rubber feet are also thrown in by B&W for those bare-floor applications.)

Weight of the P-5 is in the neighborhood of 32 pounds; they are considerably lighter than the confident, authoritative appearance which they project in the room. By the time you read this, dedicated stands for the P series should be available from Sound Anchors of Florida to use as a stabilizing tool. And, if you travel to the UK, maybe you can snap up a pair of the B&W-crafted plinths, marketed for the P line there but not imported by the distributor here.

There's a school of thought that because of exchange rates and perhaps the benefits attendant to government-underwritten anechoic chamber research, Canadian speakers are the very best value around, followed by domestic wares, with European merchandise a limping horse trailing the field. Whether there's truth to that is open to debate, but I can only deal with the here and now.

And here and now, as I gaze at these B&Ws, noting the sturdy, gold-plated binding posts configured for biamping or biwiring, I have to think that, on cosmetics alone, they represent a good if not totally world-beating value for money, coming closer to

stellar if you can find a "demo" pair or an authorized dealer willing to enhance the deal in some other way.

So, for some of us audiophiles, it's already a closed case. They look great. We can make the neighbors jealous. The wife will not even mind treating them like fine furniture and dusting them once in a while. SOLD!



Do I like these speakers?
Well, I bought them before the editor asked me to review them.

But, alas, there are bound to be a few totally unreasonable picky party poopers out there, known as "music lovers," who actually have the audacity to want to know how these limeys SOUND! So, to mollify them (and the editor, who probably needs it by this time) I'll go the extra mile and provide listening impressions. (Just call me a full-service reviewer in a self-service age!)

First up, here's a caveat! (No, not a Fiat, a caveat!) I'm old enough to be set in my ways. I'm also NOT a zebra or a chameleon or whatever, so can't change my stripes.

The confession, padre, is "I don't listen to classical music." If that makes

me too big a Neanderthal, check out some neighboring caves. But if you appreciate my candor if not my repertoire, there you have it. However,

ditch the Tums, hun, 'cause I can offer you some non-medical relief: I also do NOT listen to the opposite end of the spectrum, psychedelic or acid or "grunge" rock or heavy metal either. So, the music referenced (all CD) will be of folk, country, devotional genres, with maybe a smidge of straight-ahead rock thrown in. Maybe.

Obviously, since I own these speakers (and my CDs, for that matter), I've listened to much more music for this review than the smattering listed in the Table, but the ones listed I played at least twice while concentrating on the task of formulating a review.

While I may make cursory comments on some of the discs, my own philosophy is rather against passages like "Listen to the third female canary to the right on track x of disc y." Why? Because relaxing and partaking of the therapeutic benefits intended by most music for most of our readers is no more about rushing out to buy a particular disc for one or two five-second gimmick snippets than it is about trotting out a battery of laboratory meters. Simply put, many of you won't have most of the Compact Discs that I have referenced, so giving you lots and lots of highly detailed specifics about each one strikes yours truly as far less to the point than using each disc to be part of a varied musical body to reach a general idea of what properties and qualities, strengths and weaknesses, the speaker at hand possesses.

It's my opinion and my taste, but musically I'm enthusiastic about all of the discs; sonics may be another matter in some cases, but, for me, if we only bought so-called "audiophile" pressings, we'd be spending a premium each time and denying our own access to a lot of extremely valid musical (as opposed to technical) expression.

The first two are contemporary devotional selections, Troccoli's rocks a lot, while

Alayra has such an addictively sweet voice that, beware, listen too much and you may need a fat farm fast.

M'Carver has the other really tender, beautiful voice in this group, but the genre in this case is contemporary folk. Black, the Irish legend, has a comparable vocal quality and her music generally needs very little explanation.

Wonderful bluegrass with gospel tinges are carried by the whimsical voice of relative newcomer Lynch, while Browne rounds out the group and belts out some straight-ahead, high-energy country-rock, with one blues styling thrown in for variety.

Here are a few random assorted notes about the P-5 and the amp interface. My Bryston 2B puts out 50 watts per channel at eight ohms, 100 wpc at 4. But this is HONEST Oregon Lumberjack type beefy power; in all the years, I've used several pairs of boxes with the amp (all dynamic), and it has never balked once, although I do recall it got a little "hot under the cover" with a pair of AR-9Is I had ages ago. With the P-5s, it ran quite cool, but the P-5s are a rather easy load, and are fairly high in sensitivity, rated at 90 dB SPL 1 watt/1 meter.

Unusual in my experience, these P-5 speakers came out of the carton equipped with teenyweeny lil' plugs, colored black and red, fitted into each of the binding posts, so as to seemingly block access to the banana plugs (kind of an electronic chastity belt!) The solution is to unscrew the binding post lug nut by turning counter-clockwise (to the left for digital dudes) and removing the nut, then extracting the plug. Finally, reattach the lug

**With no hint of
box coloration,
the P-5s also do
a good job of
imaging.**

- | | |
|---|--|
| Kathy Troccoli <i>Sounds of Heaven</i> | Reunion Records (CD) |
| Claire Lynch <i>Moonlighter</i> | Rounder CD 0355 |
| Jann Browne <i>Count Me In</i> | Cross Three Records CTR 9503 |
| Mary Black <i>Looking Back</i> | Curb Records 02-77718 |
| Kimberly M'Carver <i>Inherited Road</i> | Philo CD PH 1179 |
| Jana Alayra <i>There Will Come a Day</i> | from artist, P.O. Box 57033-405
Irvine, CA 92619-7033 |
| | CD \$14.50 postpaid
cassette also available |

Recommended CDs

nut. If you use the single-wire option, then leave extra plugs intact, as apparently they are there to block dust. Quirky but cool!

Also oddly enough, the instruction manual indicates that for single-wired operation, the BOTTOM binding posts should be used and, of course, the jumpers should be left in place. Now, that's if I'm reading those clever pictographics in the manual correctly. Yep, for your 1.5k outlay, you get an owner's manual with enough sign language that you'll think your back at the DMV taking your road-sign test! For anyone other than hieroglyphic fans, I think this "owner's manual" is skimpy and must be B&W's bow to the new world/one world order.

Now, a tour of the front baffle, from whence the songs sing. Near the very top is a one-inch metal dome tweeter, which is billed as having a very powerful Neodymium-iron-boron (sounds toxic!) magnet. As with nearly all tweeters these days, it's fluid cooled. Just below, resides a 6.5-inch Kevlar bass-midrange driver. If B&W was a diner, Kevlar would be a house specialty. The same stiff-yet-light material that's supposed to keep cops safe (as in bullet-proof vests) turns out to be just dandy for conjuring up music.

Next comes a flared port, and several inches down the pretty veneered baffle is the 6.5-inch bass unit, this of Cobex, a kind of plastic. Its own flared port is immediately underneath. (Next feature you'll find is the floor!) And just for your reference, B&W throws in a pair of foam plugs to put in the port, if you wish to experiment with frequency balance.

According to the P-series promotional booklets (I've seen the versions printed for distribution on both sides of "the pond" and both are elegant and informative), mixing the types of materials used for the mid/bass and bass drivers was an important sonic consideration, since use of disparate compounds yields better frequency-specific performance than using homogenous ones does. For those of us who enjoy the "snob-appeal" (and arguing sonic benefits) of in-house, proprietary woofers and tweeters, the firm B&W obliges.

For the listening tests, the P-5s seemed best about two feet out from the back walls, and away from objects to their sides, and toed in slightly,

with their baffle surfaces facing in and just a smidge away from the listener. Auditions were conducted with grilles on. Not for sonics. Just cats around and I didn't want to take any chances.

Perhaps the major immediate impression is of a lot of power, vividness and spaciousness issuing forth from these dudes, a kind of Texas-sized presentation. (No, junior, these B&W's are not your father's laid-back British boxes!) Image depth, height, and center-fill were all above average, as was transparency.

Although some vibration could be detected when I placed my hands on the cabinet walls as music played, I would characterize these P-5s as being absolutely free of any vestige of closed-in "boxiness." Likewise, unwanted resonance wasn't

detected. For the most part, vocals were at the forefront of the soundstage; no upper back balcony syndrome here!

If pressed, I would have to admit being a little more partial to the bass and midrange performance over that of the tweeter. This is

not to say that the sound was less than integrated and seamless; my ears waved no red flags over transition from one driver to the next. What I am saying is that, just occasionally, vocals had the tendency to be a tad strident, or "spotlit," perhaps with a slightly unnatural decay artifact. Mind you, never enough to pain the ears, or even put a damper on most of the enjoyment—just enough that, as a reviewer, I feel duty-bound to mention it in passing. Maybe with your system's synergy, it will be no problem.

Before I run out of typing ribbon, it seems the ideal opportunity to reach some conclusion.

Did I like these B&W's? You bet! I own 'em, after all! Are they the world's greatest? Not likely. Are they the world's greatest \$1500 speaker?

Here's the juncture where I imagine I'll sound lame, like I'm not doing my job. But, if I said an absolute yes, and told you to top your shopping list with them, then I'd be doing my job improperly!

That's because I don't know your system, your room (I would venture that the P-5 would sound even better in a larger room than mine), and your preconceived ideas of what your Utopian loud-speaker would look and sound like.

BY THE NUMBERS

To put the lid on it, I wondered if you'd enjoy the ol' 1 to 10 rating system that has persevered lo' these many years. 1 is pitiful, 10 is pinnacle.

Bass Performance	8
Treble Performance	6
Sound-Staging	8
Cosmetics and Construction	9
Value and Price	7
"The Forest Effect" (or "getting lost in the music" or "magic carpet quotient" or "the end, I promise!")	8

I know of one model of another brand of speakers that (again, for me) does a more enchanting job with vocals. And another model that at least equals the bass of the P-5s. And so on.

But, as one package, as one company's take on sonic compromise (and face it, all electronics do compromise) and at the tough \$1500 price point (that is, real money to you and me, but really just upper entry-level in the absurd world of "high end"), I feel that these B&W's are real contenders. Throw in the truly distinguished aesthetics and that tilts this speaker system ever nearer the top of many short-lists in their category.

I can see it now, a dastardly, diabolical, hidden "feature" of all these B&W's, sitting seemingly innocent enough in the audio salons of America: The tiny "P-Chip!" buried in the innards of each one. Yes! Each time the unsuspecting audiophile saunters by, an insidious "psycho-magnetic field" draws him or her into total submission: "You are growing tired, tired, more tired, except for your Golden Ears. Now on the count of three, you will

reach for your wallet (or purse)." Well, "P" does stand for preference, after all.

Women may well be from Venus and men from Mars, or some such place, but back here on Earth, I can't promise you'll be totally smitten with these Ps. That's a matter up to the four winds, your Ouija Board, and mainly careful auditioning. However, I truthfully can't feature a soul being less than rather impressed by this package. And many listeners, much more so. These B&W speakers will play on—with the best of them.

NOTES

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Bryston 2-B amplifier; Audio Research SP-5 preamplifier; California Audio Labs DX-1 CD Player; VPI "Magic Brick;" van den Hul "The Clearwater" speaker cable, banana-terminated; interconnects by Apature and Prisma.

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Dynaco PAS-4 Preamplifier

Ron Nagle

Dynaco. Oh boy, does this take me back, way back to the days when most of my time was spent on the street just hanging out. If I was lucky, I had a pack of cigarettes and enough bread to buy a cheeseburger and coffee at Mike's Diner. Luckier still if I found some guys who wanted to "hit notes." The subway arcade was good, but the best place was in the marble-walled hallway of my uncle's apartment house. There, in that reverberant space, just every once in a while, magic would happen. It is burned



into my memory, those moments when everything just seemed to fall into place. The harmony, moving in waves, hung on the air like a church bell peeling in a cool mountain valley, with the echo lighting up the distant hills all around.

With longing, I remember Andy Yager and the Dedications singing "Since I Don't Have You"... The late Eddie Perez caressing "The Ship of Love"... The echo of "Tear Drops Follow Me" while I blended the haritone. The numbing winter cold, the cops "tossing us" (up against the wall). I miss it dearly. It was a place where time was frozen and sadness couldn't find me. This is how it all began, the music to chase away the pain, the warm and glowing tubes to once again become a part of it.

DOO WOP DYNACO

Accessible, used, cheap, repairable, by transforming old wounded equipment back to life, it was possible to make them sound better than new. Far better than my mom's Zenith console at pumping out 45-rpm rock and roll. I still have solder scars to remind me of long nights spent modifying, then concentrating to hear a single capacitor, not then realizing that I was in ear training. I still have my totally rebuilt and modified home-brew assault on the state-of-the-art Ultra-PAS 10 preamplifier gazing down on me as I scribble this story.

Dynaco remained a memory until the rights were purchased by the Panor Corporation in 1992, who gave it a new lease on life. All those long

years ago, I never would have dreamed that I would have an opportunity to evaluate a new Dynaco preamp, the PAS-4.

OUT OF PANOR'S BOX

"Retro Dynaco?" I pondered as I lifted this new, sleek, sexy, black-clad Dyna PAS. I wouldn't be surprised; after all, we are currently riding the crest of a classic, back-to-basics tube revival. But if the exterior of this component wasn't enough to convince me, then a peek inside banished any lingering doubt that this is an entirely new breed of Dyna.

THE MEANS TO A MUSICAL END

Gone are the familiar four tubes on two brown phenolic printed circuit boards that I'm so familiar with. On a single blue PCB, which fills the interior, are six (in my sample) Sovtek tubes. Four are 6922s, the ruggedized commercial version of the common 6DJ8. In addition,, two 12AX7s drive the first phono stage. All are dual-triode amplification devices.

Before I move on, I would like to note that this Russian version of the 6DJ8 is probably the creme de la creme of this type of tube. Impressive, as even Audio Research knows full well by supplying them with my \$2,500 SP-9 Mark III Preamp.

SO WHAT DID THEY DO?

Well, as soon as you get past the neat circuit-board layout, you find some very respectable things soldered to it. My eyes first locked onto a bevy of German-made WIMA (red) metalized-polypropylene capacitors. These I know well from my Dyna-mad experimenter days. Although mass-produced and not audio-specific, these are great sounding capacitors.

A closer look reveals still more goodies, e.g., Roederstein metalized resistors and neat ceramic tube sockets, as well as quality built details like drilled ventilation holes circling the base of each tube. My only minor criticism is the choice of RCA connectors. This variety has a plastic bracket holding the female RCAs, which poke through holes in the back panel (they seem to be a cost-cutting choice and I believe aren't audible).

All of the preceding tidbits arise from a visual inspection of the interior (a trip you should embark on as well). So far, so good. I can see some intelligent, albeit cost-conscious, planning went into the construction. As I read through the well-written owner's manual, I can't see that anything was omitted. Eventually I paused to peruse the circuit schematics, and once again I find signs of intelligent life.

By means of interstage buffering and star-grounding techniques, this topology goes to great lengths to minimize stage-to-stage interactions. As an example, trace the wire from the power supply up to the plate at each tube location. In that line, after the power supply bridge rectifier, you find an "N" channel FET network isolating and filtering the plate supply. This device, with its high input resistance and low output resistance, allows the tube to obtain plate power from a constant source impedance. The result is isolation, in that the plate never sees what's going on in the rest of the circuit. (This is neat stuff.)

CONTROL FUNCTIONS

Across the front panel are five control knobs and three push buttons. The left most knob is the input source selector, five positions: Aux, Video, CD, Tuner and Phono. The next two knobs control tape functions. One is for tape dubbing with three positions: 1 to 2, Source (both) and 2 to 1. The other is for the tape monitor function for tape 1, source and tape 2. The fourth knob from the left is a balance control with a single center detent. The largest and last control knob is a non-detented volume control.

The three black push buttons select EPL, Mono, Power on/off, in that order. As you can see, this preamp has some very useful functions such as two-way tape dubbing which you can utilize while listening to another source like the phono input section. In addition,, that EPL (external processor loop) button opens up a host of possibilities once you understand it.

On the rear are four RCA jacks labeled "External Processor" in and out. With this loop switched in, you can utilize an external signal processing device such as an equalizer or noise reduction unit. Which is intriguing, if you consider a multi-channel video surround sound

This Dynaco preamp is not just a memory teaser for aging hi-fi addicts.

processor. In addition, there are two pairs of output connections for biamping your system. Strictly speaking for myself, nothing I would want has been omitted.

LET'S GET DOWN...

And listen to the new Dynaco sound. Let me say at the beginning that I believe in first impressions followed by methodical open-minded investigation. Approximately 40 seconds after you press the *On* button, there's a soft click and a red-colored LED turns green announcing the PAS-4 is up to temp. About half an hour after turn on, I sit down to gather my preliminary earful.

Surprise! Surprise! What I hear is modern, maybe even high-tech; control, speed, detail, high-frequency extension galore. Not what I expected, so after a short listen, I decide to let it run in a bit longer. About two hours later, I come back, no change. Hmm... this is not my Paradyne of old for sure. But it's not just the sound, there are other traits of the PAS-4 to ponder.

For example, this six-tube component settles in very fast. By that I mean it seems to come up to

operating temperature and locks in the sound very quickly. Again, not what I expected. Even my reference Audio Research SP-9 Mark III takes longer to settle in.

AS I LISTEN

The stage takes shape between my Quad ESL 63s and has good depth and width, extends back to the rear wall behind and out to the outside speaker edges on left and right. Mentally, I make a note that this is a vacuum-tube type of staging. In addition, a sense of high-frequency extension allows me to hear details like vocal sibilance and reverberant echo effects.

I next turned my attention to the lower portion of the spectrum and the tight control exerted over the bass and mid-bass region. It seems to equal or surpass my old Audible Illusions 2C which I used to feed my music hunger in years past. This is not typical tube-shaped bass response.

Compared subjectively to my reference SP-9 Mark III, the PAS-4 didn't extend quite as far down. By comparison, it had less body and power, but was well integrated and continuous. Mid and high frequencies blended together overall in what seemed to be a ruler-flat tonal balance.

It was the lower frequencies that shaped my first impressions because I subconsciously expected to hear tube bass colorations, and they just were not there. At this point, I realized I would need a sharper knife to cut away the surface layers that my CD source system had revealed.

I pulled a vinyl disc off the rack, reasoning that this is where the nuance truly resides. Okay, let's try this James Taylor record (Columbia JC 34811). I know the sound of this man's voice. And in the final analysis, it invariably is the human voice that tells me the musical truth.

My listening notes speak again of a lighter overall frequency balance with a bit more vocal sibilance and more noticeable record surface noise. The two-stage, four-tube, triode phono section of the PAS-4 has, Lordy Be, more clean gain than I would have thunk. It's handling the Monster Alpha One's one-third millivolt output in a very respectable manner, albeit with the volume control pushed up to the midpoint.

NOTES

Dynaco PAS-4 Preamplifier, from \$999.00.

Dynaco, Division of Panor Corp., 125 Cabot Court, Hauppauge, N.Y. 11788
516/434-1200

Reference Components

Analog Source: Sota Sapphire Mark II with electronic flywheel powered by high-current power supply; Sumiko Blue Point Special and Monster Alpha One cartridges mounted on a Grado Signature tonearm.

Digital Source: Magnavox 624 CD used as transport feeding Assemblage DAC-1 converter reclocked by Sonic Frontiers Ultra Jitter Bug.

Additional Equipment: Audio Research SP-9 Mark III preamp feeding Audio Research Classic 60 amp powering Quad ESL-63 and Proac Studio 2 speakers connected by AR Litzline and Esoteric Audio Ultra Path cables. Interconnects are too numerous and various to list them all but include Monster M1000 II, new Monster M1000 Silver, Esoteric Artus, Numericus Digital Cables, XLO Type 4, and Autobahn Digital Cables.

Accessories: VPI 16.5 record cleaner, VPI bricks, Radio Shack SPL meter, Arcici Quad stands, Target amp stand, Audio Quest DM-1000 cartridge demagnetizer, etc.

My brain switches back to the recording. James Taylor's voice is lacking some of the chesty resonant quality in the lower registers. So there is an element of flesh and blood performance missing here. But it is slight and my attention quickly turned to the higher frequency spatial detailing brought into greater relief than the Audio Research voicing.

At this point in the reviewing process, two things occurred that proved to be very revealing and for me, decisive. My old Quads went down and I substituted a pair of Proac Studio Two mini-monitors. The painstaking process used to set up these speakers in my room acoustic was ultimately decided by what came out of those metal dome tweeters. It was those same tweeters that let me hear deeper into the PAS sonic fabric.

The 1996 New York High-End Audio show was the second factor. I came away with a much broader sense of what good equipment can do and a handful of small system upgrades that opened up and heightened my system's resolving power. This was brought about primarily by a loan of speaker cables and interconnects from Esoteric Audio USA. In addition, I clutched to my chest a shopping bag full of audiophile-grade vinyl and gold CDs from Rock the House records, a division of Classic Records. I couldn't wait to get home to hear how they had remastered my long-term reference source, Jennifer Warnes *Famous Blue Raincoat* vinyl RTH 5052-1 and CD RTH 5052. By now, I had almost memorized each and every line. Indeed, the reissues rewarded me with better dynamics and detail; tiny threads of sonic fabric that had once eluded me were now laid bare.

The next thing I did provided this audiophile with a sonic kick in the pants. It was one of those

**At a list price of only
\$995, the Dynaco PAS-4 is
a tremendous bargain.**

things we all long for, spend tons of money to find, and most often leads us to ask "Was all that worth it?" I replaced my long-term reference Audio Research speaker cables (the first version, the Litzline) with an eight-foot pair of Esoteric Audio Ultra Path cables.

Even though the literature admonished me to spend 50 hours or so burning in these oxygen-free copper under Teflon gray hoses, I was irresistibly

drawn to the music by the first few notes that passed down their length. I heard bass and mid-bass guitar lines I never heard before, and this was from an FM radio station!

Quick as a wink I grabbed my Eagles *Hotel California* CD (Geffen GEFD 24725) and played "Hell Freezes Over," track six. I sat mouth agape as the music now flowed freely with a spacious lack of effort, rising and swelling with delineation and expansive dynamic detail I never knew existed. The stage grew as though it were a balloon that now was fully inflated.

At one point I thought, damn the expense, Esoteric is not getting these back; I'm keeping them! If these speaker cables do burn in over the ensuing months, I dearly hope it is by a very small margin; I like them just as they are, raw right out of the box. But we shall wait and see.

FINALE

Through these cables and the Proac metal dome tweeters, the Dynaco PAS-4 presented me with a lovely velvet-smooth silence that is the canvas on which is painted the music's tonal colors. The PAS-4 allows the music and the listener to flow, as one, along with the stream of sound. A slight grain that once overlaid the PAS-4 was ameliorated and the soundscape grew so that what was once pressed shoulder to shoulder was now better delineated and set free.

If the Dynaco PAS-4 cost anywhere near the \$2,500 of my reference Audio Research preamp, I would wish it could unravel complex compositions at the edges of each performer with a sharper knife. And if this component cost but one half the price of the AR, I would tell you I wish it contained a dollop more warmth within its harmonic structure. But at the list price of \$995, it's a good deal, very worth the money.

Now consider that it can be purchased through a national mail order company at a discounted price of \$850. Also consider that this is a full-featured preamp with an extraordinarily quiet tube phono section, which I certainly do not consider optional.

The Panor Dynaco PAS-4 has delivered long hours of enjoyable music even, on one occasion setting this writer doo wopping like a dervish across the living room rug to the sound of the Five Discs singing "I Remember."

The Dynaco PAS-4 is quite simply at the head of its class, the leader of the pack. Go and buy it. Stay cool, man. Catch ya later!

The Castle Severns

John Gatski

I first sampled a pair of Castle Acoustic speakers at the recent Hi-Fi show in New York. Distributor QMI had a small pair set up in a cozy Waldorf-Astoria suite. The several minutes I spent listening with a jazz CD revealed a smooth appealing speaker. A longer term evaluation with the floor-standing Severn model in my home has enhanced my opinion of the Castle line even further.

DESCRIPTION

The Severn is Castle's best bass reflex speaker, priced at \$1,159 per pair in standard finish. Every model above it uses the company's quarter-wave bass loading. The Severn uses 130mm (5-inch) bass driver enhanced by a front-mounted port. The composite dome tweeter measures 25mm (1-inch). The woofer is mounted near the top of the cabinet, with the tweeter and port placed underneath. Sold in pairs, the tweeter is positioned to the inside of the cabinet.

Castle prides itself on cabinet construction and the Severn is a beauty. Measuring 30 inches high, 8 inches wide and 9 inches deep, my sample pair came in an antique oak; other finishes include rosewood, yew, walnut, cherry wood, mahogany, natural oak, medium oak and black ash. The cabinet is well braced to prevent unwanted resonances, and a quick rap of the sides and top revealed no hollow sounds. However, the speaker weighs only 25 pounds. It also comes with a mounting platform and spikes to help control any possible room resonances (not a problem in my concrete-under-carpet studio). Grilles are included, but I did most of my evaluation with them off.

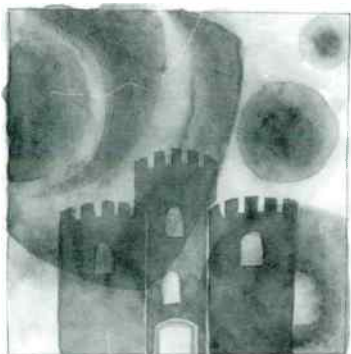


Despite its slender build and small bass driver, Castle rates Severn's frequency response from 47 Hz to 20 kHz (no tolerance given). Sensitivity is listed at 87 dB with 1W power at 1 meter. Nominal impedance is 8 ohms. Power handling is 25-110 watts. The crossover frequency is 2.8 kHz.

SET-UP

My only complaints with the Castle stemmed from the speaker binding posts. The bi-wireable speaker connectors are designed for banana plugs and spades, but the recessed connector area would not accommodate my 10-gauge Alpha Core flat speaker cables with angled spades. I then switched over to banana plug connectors and found four silly little plastic plugs blocking my way. I had to pluck the plugs out with tweezers and, finally, I was in business.

In initial auditions, I played around with the placement, finally settling on a distance of seven feet apart using the stands and spikes—with moderate angling inward for each. After trying a number of amp/pre-amp speaker combinations, I finally settled on using the Briston BP-20 and the Legacy with the Severns.



Sharon Pitts

As I had remembered the smaller pair I heard at the Hi-Fi show, the Severns really sounded nice on jazz recordings, but with more bass. On the John Scofield CD *Time on My Hands*,

the bass drum and bass guitar were well produced by the small driver and port without being too bloated. There was a little midbass emphasis at times, but not offensive (and believe me I am offended by the too-fat bass that some audiophiles and home theaterphiles crank out of their systems these days). Guitar plucks on Ottmar Liebert and Luna Negra's *The Hours Between Night and Day* revealed detailed acoustic guitar plucks and strums without unnatural emphasis. The percussion on that recording came through in fine fashion as well.

On Chesky Records' *Johnny Frigo Debut of Legend*, the jazz violinist's tone was relayed with most of the realism that this recording contains. Recording engineer Bob Katz's ability to record the stereo information as live as possible, a Chesky signature, was clearly portrayed by the Severn. The instrument spread was wide, and each player in the septet was plainly heard.

A Sony Columbia Jazz sampler with several cuts of trumpet and other brass instruments allowed the Severns to blast those with most of the bite intact. The dmp recording Chuck Loeb *Simple Things*, showed off the Severn's precision on percussion. My hall-of-fame budget disc (\$3.99), the 1983-recorded Derek Smith Trio's *Dark Eyes*, sparkled through the Severns—especially the tinkle of the piano.

On classical music, I sampled the Laredo-Robinson *Duos for Violin and Cello* on the Second Hearing label and Mobile Fidelity's *Aturo Delmoni: Sonatas of Franck and Faure*. Again, the violin tone impressed me and the cello's richness was plenty convincing.

On pop recordings, my opinion of the Severns was more positive on recordings that were not ultra processed and thick. For example, Jennifer Warnes' *The Hunter* and Sinead O'Connor's *I Do Not Want What I Haven't Got* brought out the many fine sonic qualities of the Severns: Good Bass, precise stereo image, vocals without sibilance.

However, rock recordings with added distortion and processing, such as the Gin Blossoms' *New Miserable Experience* and Hootie and the Blowfish's *Cracked Rear View Mirror* came across as a bit thick and hard sounding. I have auditioned some other speakers which can reproduce these recordings with a bit more precision.

SUMMARY

Overall, I liked the Castle Severns a lot and got used to them very quickly when listening to numerous and varied jazz recordings as well as a number of my favorite classical CDs. The 5-inch driver had significant bass kick. More than I expected. If this model is any indicator, the company's larger speakers with the quarter-wave loading, must really be something. As mentioned, the Severns were not as pleasing when playing more processed pop music, but the leaner pop recordings sounded pretty good.

Based on my evaluation, the Castle Severn's should do well in modest-to-medium audiophile environments. Although I settled on a solid state amp for the bulk of my listening, the Severns projected nicely with tube amp and hybrid preamp. Bass was a touch plumper with the tube amp, but not overbearing.

All in all, the Severns are an excellent buy and the various finishes allow these speakers to be matched to almost any room.

NOTES

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Hafler 9505 trans-nova MOSFET amplifier (250 watts per channel), Legacy Amplifier (250 watts per channel), Dynaco ST-160 triode/pentode tube amp (75 watts per channel), an Audio by Van Alstine EC tube/FET preamp and Bryston BP-20 solid state preamp. Sources included Luxman PD-264 turntable equipped with Audio-Technica ML150 cartridge, Sony TCD-D7 DAT recorder/player, Denon DCD-1015 CD player with Alpha Processor. Interconnects included Alpha Core Goertz as were the speaker cables. The speakers were already burned in when I took delivery.

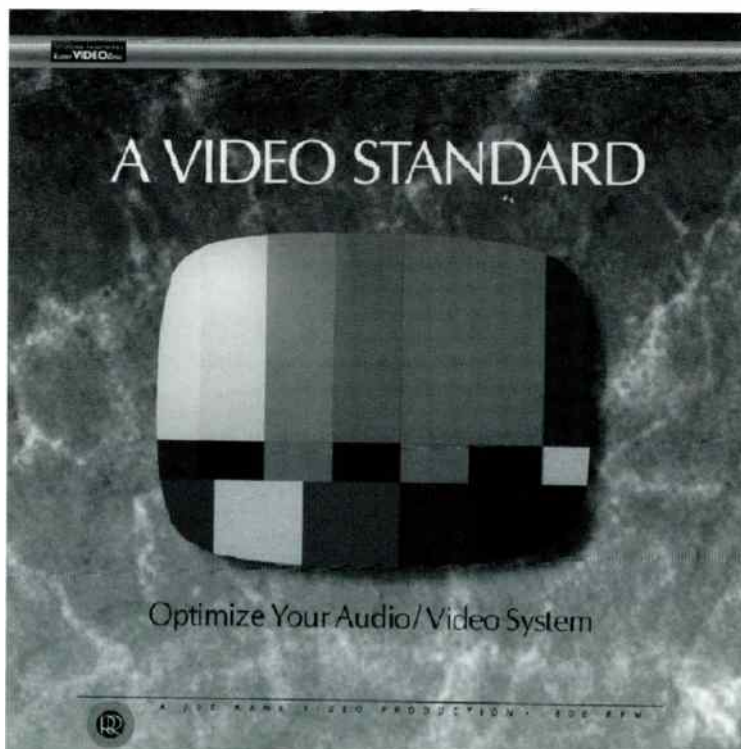
John Gatski is a freelance audio writer and editor of Pro Audio Review magazine.

Reference Recordings' A Video Standard

Jim Morello

Two years ago, I bought my first LaserDisc. It was a boxed set put out by MGM entitled "The Al Jolson Collection." It brought together for the first

time all eight of Jolson's Warner Brothers' movies—from 1927's "The Jazz Singer" to the 1936 musical, "The Singing Kid." The supplementary material included original trailers as well as a 1936 Warner Brothers cartoon featuring "Owl" Jolson. I've been a lifelong fan of Jolson and, to me, this was a dream come true.



immediately mesmerized by the quality of the LaserDisc medium. I eventually expanded my collection to include titles in the CBS/Fox "Charlie Chaplin: A Legacy in Laughter" series. Now, I even own letterbox versions of classic movies such as "The Graduate," "Raging Bull," and Clint Eastwood's "Academy Award-winning "Unforgiven."

I learned a lot about LaserDiscs in the last two years and thought that it couldn't get any better. After all, I was watching them on an RCA 35-inch television, and as for the discs themselves, I thought they give us the closest possible thing to the original theatrical experience. In many cases, they seemed even better. I was in heaven.

However, a business acquaintance suggested I check out a disc entitled "A Video Standard" from Reference Recordings, and was willing to loan me his copy. "What is this?" I said to myself. "After all, I know now to get my monitor to look good. Turn up the sharpness all the way and fool around with the other controls until everything looks right." However, I was still curious to see what kind of difference this test and setup disc could make.

As it turned out, it made all the difference in the world. First, I as instructed to let my monitor warm up for at least 30 minutes. As I was waiting, I decided to read the booklet that accompanied the disc. There was a very intriguing section entitled, "Environment Around The Monitor." Viewing angle, color of the room interior, amount of space between the monitor and the wall, and the

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amount of light directly hitting the monitor were all scientifically discussed. I think you should take some of these recommendations cautiously; if a married man were to follow each and every one of these recommendations, it could lead to divorce proceedings.

Using this tune-up
LaserDisc could be
dangerous—you may
need to buy it.

Once the half hour was up, I proceeded. There is series of test patterns which help the viewer attain proper contrast, brightness, color, and hue. Because all of these setting work in conjunction with each other, constant readjusting is necessary. Once everything is balanced, the next thing to do is get the sharpness at correct level. Until I ran the test, I never realized that the ghosting or distortion occurs when the sharpness is setup too high.

But there's even more to this disc than treats for the eye. There is an entire check for the audio system, and there's a chapter on the disc which shows how film is transferred to video.

Well, at this point, I was ready to test the fruits of my labor. I grabbed the letterboxed version of

"Jailhouse Rock" and let it spin. Incredible! Next, I went for the restored "Lawrence of Arabia." Every grain of sand seemed to sparkle from the screen. The flesh tones were real, and the overall quality of the disc was suddenly full of warmth. Breathtaking! I was so excited that I went to two other people's homes and brought their monitors up to their full potential. Now, when I visit, they can't stop raving about the picture quality on their monitors.

The manufacturer of "A Video Standard" suggests that recalibration be done once a month to compensate for normal drifting of the monitor. Since I've got to return this disc to my friend, I have to put "A Video Standard" at the top of my list of LaserDiscs to buy.

NOTES

A Video Standard, list price, \$69.98. Available from the manufacturer or from better LaserDisc retailers nationwide. Manufacturer / distributor: Reference Recordings, Box 77225X, San Francisco, CA 94107; phone 800/336-8866; fax 415/355-1949; e-mail rrec@aol.com.



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A

CESSORIES

Allsop CD StrongBox

Gene Pitts, Jr.

Okay, okay, so I only turned 16 a couple of weeks ago, but I still know more than you do about computers and about music—and especially about how to take care of my CDs. I mean, who but a kid who's living on that cheapskate handout my half-haired father, the editor of this rag, calls an allowance would know why it's important to have jewelboxes that don't break.

Really, I don't think that there is much I hate more than dropping a jewelbox on a hard floor, because every time I do that, one of the @\$%&\$ ears breaks off the jewelbox. And, of course, you can't buy just the lid to a jewelbox—oh, no, you've got to buy the whole three pieces that make up the box, two of which go right in the trash. It's like buying a whole car when all you need is a new set of tires. And you can't buy just one jewelbox, you've got to buy three, which sets you back about half the price of a new CD. So, you can see why a whole lot of my current crop of CDs have jewelboxes with busted ears.

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CONTENTS: 2 SINGLE COMPACT DISC STORAGE CASES

disc STORAGE CASE

Okay, okay, so don't have a fit like my old man who's constantly pulling his age-discrimination routine on me. I mean, I do have to admit that sometimes he does do some cool things... like when

he brought home the samples of this CD StrongBox that Sarah Parker of Allsop sent him, bless her promotion-minded heart! "So, what's so cool about your dad bringing home yet another free-

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bee, kid?" Well, it wasn't so much that he brought home something that me and my brother needed, I mean he needs good replacement jewelboxes too, 'cause he drops them more often than both my brother and I do put together and he's got a lot more CDs, too.

No, what he did that was way cool was to say we could do a test of Allsop's StrongBox and, if we wrote a report (he'd help us) that he could use in the magazine, then we could have almost all the StrongBoxes that Allsop had sent.

So, my brother starts up, like he's got some college engineering degree or something, talking about Young's Modulus and coefficient of elasticity and a bunch of other weird things that aren't even in the dictionary or encyclopedia. I mean, he's still only 13, but he gets into some pretty weird websites, and I don't know anyone else who actually *likes* the Smithsonian Museum's website.

So, we get into a big argument about how we're going to do the testing, 'cause I figure that the only things we've got in the house that measure are the bathroom scale, the thermometer that my mom uses on us when we get sick, and a ruler, and my rotten brother won't buy into those.

Anyway, my dad shows us the promo picture inside the StrongBox, where the album insert booklet usually goes, and both my brother and I go "Cool!" 'cause it shows a big hammer coming down right in the center of the Allsop StrongBox.

So right away, my dad knows he's in for trouble, but before he can stop us, both me and my brother get logs from the fireplace and start bashing the

%%&%% out of the samples that Sarah Parker sent him.

Well, it turns out to be a bummer and a half 'cause the worst either my brother or I can do is to put only a little bit of a cloudy crease into the front of one of the StrongBoxes. Even when I take the cover off the jewelbox, I can't bust it like I wanted—even when I used like the biggest log I can pick up. I mean this log is BIG! Like I'm five feet, 10 inches tall, and the log comes all the way up to my chin

So, me and my brother are really doing a very heavy beat-down number on this StrongBox thing, and I start to figure, like maybe we're having too much fun. I mean, maybe my brother shouldn't have gone to the basement, and gotten the hammer, but I think it was okay to try to stomp the StrongBox 'cause he had his sneakers on and everything. And I started to think that my dad doesn't really like all that log stuff 'cause he's starting to scream and cough, and then he sees we haven't hurt the StrongBoxes, so he says, in his deepest, most school principal voice, "Well, boys, all you have to do now is write up what you did." Which is what I'm doing now, and I guess it's okay, even though it's sort of like extortion, maybe.

But I have to admit that Allsop's come up with a pretty nice replacement for the crummy plastic that the record companies use for the regular jewelboxes when they send CDs to the record stores, and the StrongBoxes really aren't all that expensive at \$2.99 for two because they've got an unconditional guarantee never to break. (Now if I can just get my dad to loan me the car, I can drive to the record store and buy a few...)

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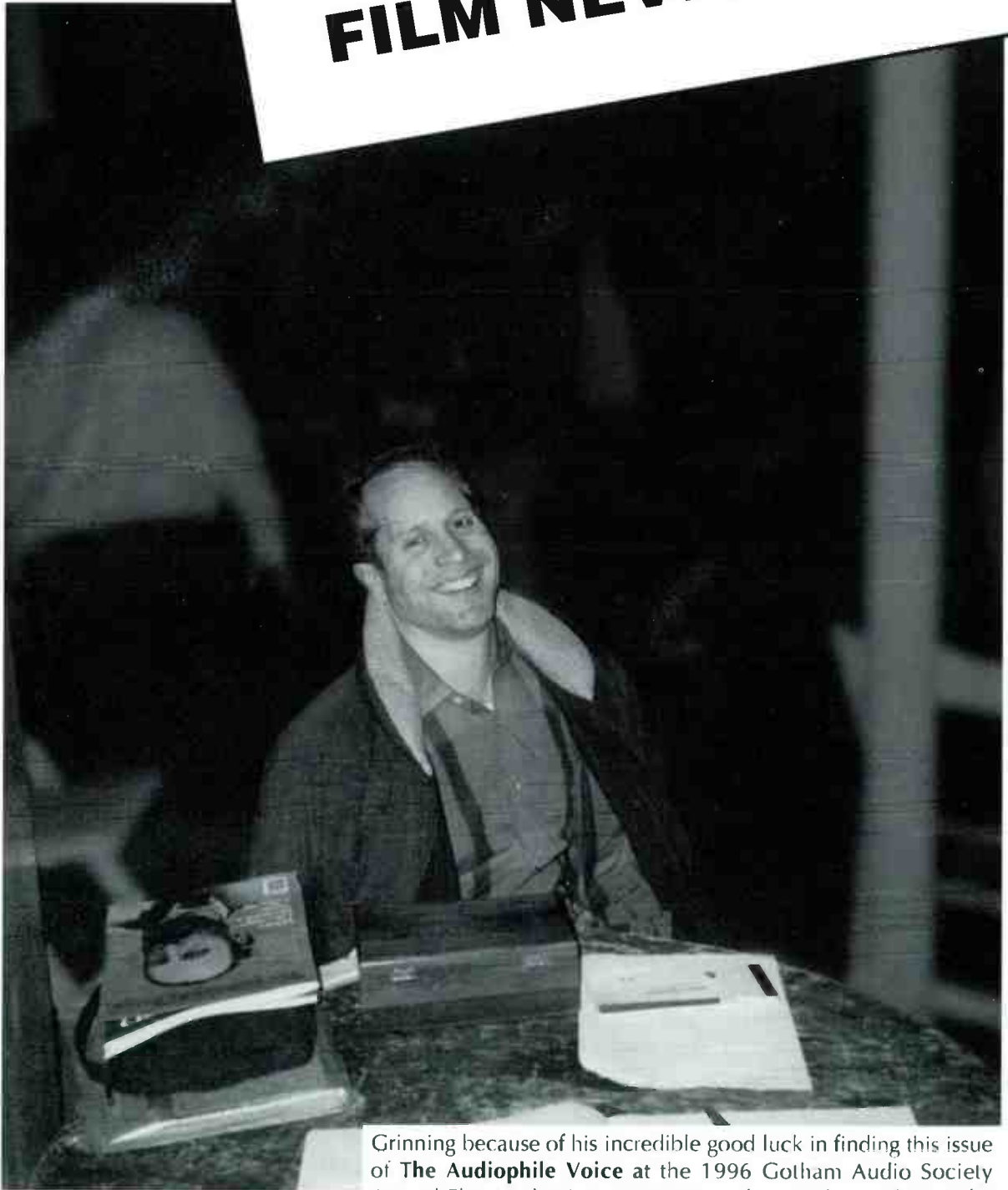
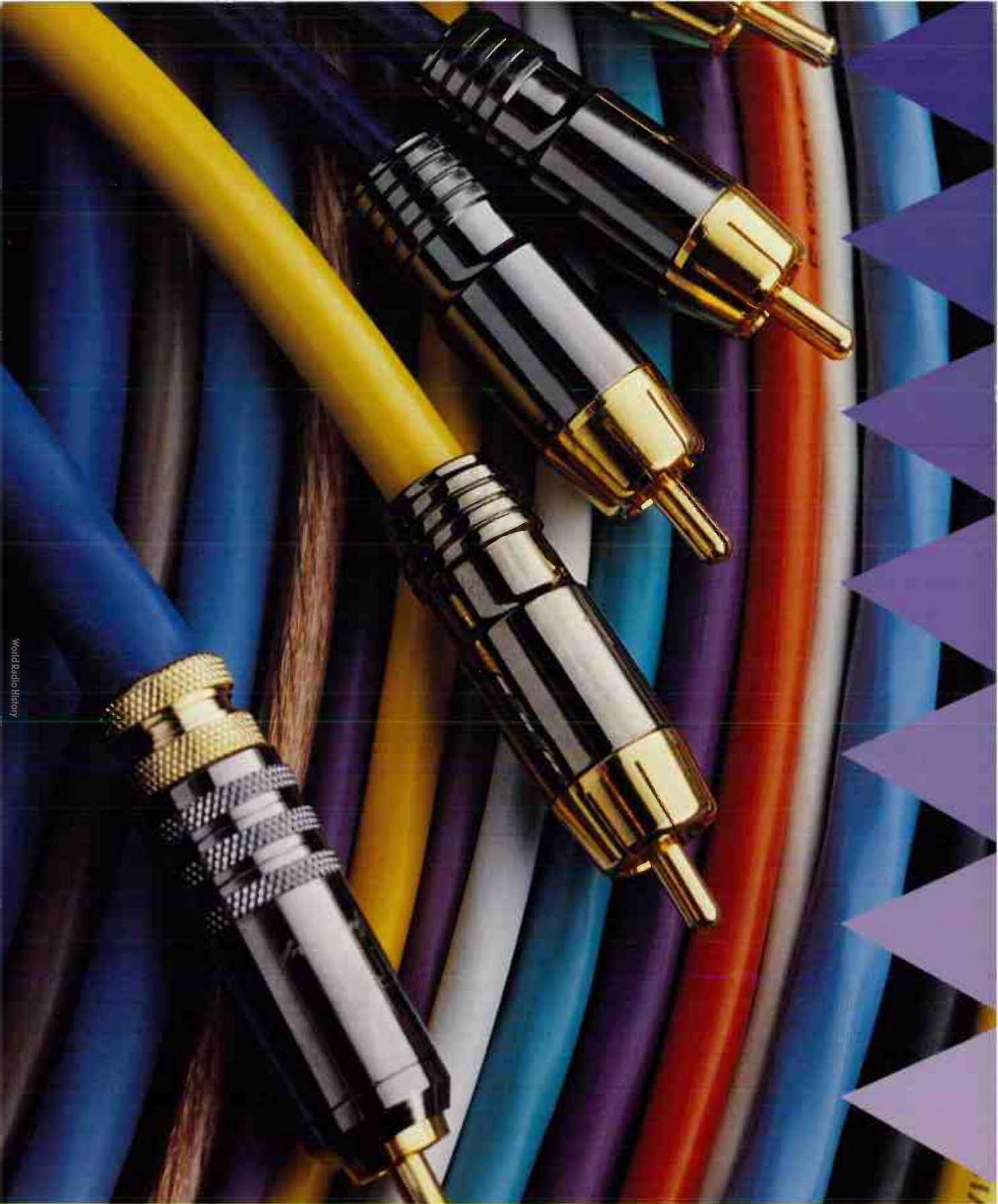
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Photo: Clement Perry

Grinning because of his incredible good luck in finding this issue of **The Audiophile Voice** at the 1996 Gotham Audio Society Annual Flea Market is Louis Manno, who acted as cashier at the event for a short period. Manno is currently about five years and \$4 million from accomplishing the World's Largest Data Base on the Development of the Hi-Fi Equipment Industry.



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