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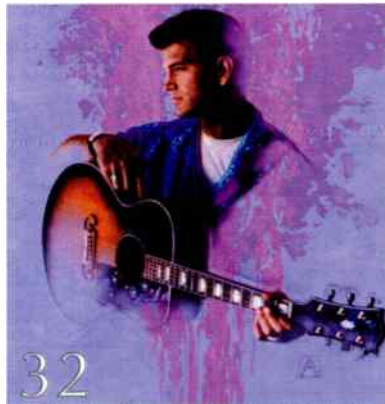
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Stereo Review

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Edward J. Fritter, Audio, September 1996, AV-705x amplifier

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Steven Stone, Stereophile Guide to Home Theater, Summer 1997, AV-705x amplifier

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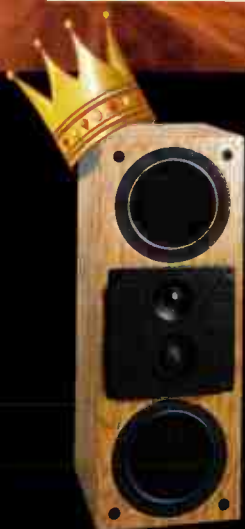
incorporates a hybrid transformer, class-A vacuum tube MC/MM phono section with three line-level using pure class-A vacuum tube circuitry. Powered by an internal rechargeable battery to prevent line noise, this full-function preamplifier includes a mono/stereo switch, an RIAA EQ option, extra capacitance in the line stage, and switchable options for MC cartridges in the transformer, not to mention the traditional quality that has made Nagra famous for nearly 50 years. \$9,500.

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L ETTERS

We're Beached

Dear Editor:

Many thanks for Arthur Paxton's glowing review of Arturo Delmoni's CD of the violin sonatas of Brahms (No. 1 in G) and Amy Beach (both with Yuri Funahashi), which we issued as JMR2. We are grateful that Mr. Paxton praised this recording's "compelling musicianship" and imaginative coupling."

Mr. Paxton says the Amy Beach sonata "offers much good writing," a statement I wholeheartedly agree with. He also says "following Brahms (forgive this unfair comparison)...." I am not sure that I can agree that this is an "unfair" comparison.

Perhaps I am oversensitive on this issue, but too many other reviewers over the past hundred years have said of Amy Beach what amounts to "she writes pretty good for a girl," hence this letter. (If I am perceiving a double standard where none exists, since Paxton doesn't say this, I apologize.)

The list of composers of any era, genre, or gender, whose violin sonatas will come in second when directly compared to Brahms' G Major is very long, while the list of composers whose violin sonatas will come in first, when directly compared to Brahms' G Major, is either very short or, in my opinion, non-existent.

In my estimation, among violin sonatas, Brahms' G Major stands alone as a perfectly realized work of art, although I know that many people would give that distinction instead to the Frank Sonata or Beethoven's Kreutzer.

When dealing with such a "gem," as Mr. Paxton quite properly calls Brahms' No. 1, the issue of coupling becomes challenging, to say the least. The usual choice of another Brahms' sonata (or perhaps all of them) totally fails to persuade me for musical reasons. I can't imagine a live violin recital containing more than one Brahms sonata, and the reasons for that should be obvious.

Combining the Brahms' No. 1 with a sonata from even such a musical titan of the stature of Shostakovich or Beethoven brings its own set of problems. The musical world-views are so far apart that it might as well be two separate CDs. The sonatas do not illuminate each other.

The path we chose was to pair the Brahms' No. 1 with a sonata from a composer whose musical world-view was largely congruent with that of Brahms'. To the great surprise of nobody, every work, from every composer who fits that bill, turns out to be somewhat less perfect than the Brahms' No. 1. The list of composers whose violin-piano works come in second runs from



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Ultimately, these jewel-like components could have you listening to music from a whole new perspective, while providing the kind of satisfaction that comes from possessing a timeless classic.

So instead of kicking yourself, you can sit back and enjoy the company of a long-lost friend.



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Smetana, Saint-Saëns, Dvorak, and Janáček through Nedbal and R. Strauss, all the way up to Poulenc.

Are these comparisons unfair? No. Some compositions are just better than others. However, a musical diet consisting only of universally acclaimed masterworks would eventually get bor-

ing. Furthermore, not everything a great composer wrote is great; Beethoven's mandolin output leaps to mind. (I am not making this up.)

Your readers may be interested to know that the sequencing of this CD was a subject of lengthy discussion, and that the final decision was made only at


Bob Ludwig's mastering studio on the morning of the mastering session. One view was that the end of the Brahms' sonata was so poignant, the only thing that made musical sense would be to end the CD with the Brahms. The other view was that the proposed sequence might be construed as making a statement that we thought the Beach was more "important" than the sonata.

The solution we came up upon was as follows. We put the Brahms first, but asked Bob Ludwig to add 20 seconds of silence to the end of the last track of Brahms, to allow for the shift of musical perspectives. Mr. Paxton didn't comment on any extra time there, so our solution must have worked in musical terms.

The Amy Beach sonata is unjustifiably neglected, and I am confident that this recording (which is, as far as we know, the first new one on CD) will bring great musical pleasure to those who hear it. Furthermore, reflecting upon the Amy Beach sonata may bring an even deeper appreciation of Brahms' sublimity.

Again, thanks for caring about the music .

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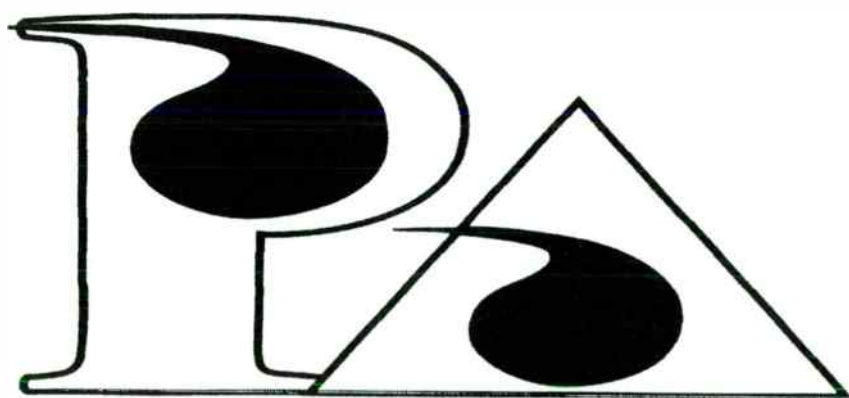
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Reviewing Reviewers

Dear Editor:

The first three issues of my subscription has freshened my attitude towards audio journals. The inclusion of women and youth is particularly appealing. Please clarify, however, where and how to write the editor.

That said, sadness has motivated me to write to you that an evolutionary product has been virtually ignored by the audio



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press and hi-fi retailers. The high-end society with its claims of ingenuity and devotion to the music has somehow passed over these simple, practical devices. Read carefully as I will say this only three times: These are tuning devices, these are tuning devices, these are tuning devices. These are not common

dampening devices that isolate vibration or mass load vibrations. This is "inner work" or "under the hood" stuff. I am talking about the Marigo V.T.S. Tuning Dots (TAV, Vol. II, No. 4). The Counterpoint article to Taylor's review, written by Mark Block, supported Rick's findings, yet he chose to delay exploring

dot application to his electronics. How sad. Block began his article claiming to "respect" Ron Hedrich's Marigo turntable mods, agreed with Taylor's findings, and then abruptly closed with "I'll get around to it soon." "Respect"? I suppose it is more exciting and romantic for a reviewer to hook up the next whiz-bang amplifier than to remove the cover from a piece of gear, dot a couple of dozen key places in the electronics, and finish the review. Mark, your employer's publishing company is named "Guts & Elbow Grease Publishing." Please, take notice and just do the work.

Most of us enjoy reading about the megabuck products. Having sampled a few of those flavors, my moderate system is far removed from that capacity. Yet, in this hobby, we must leave room to improve upon what works. Years ago, I owned a 1970s McIntosh 200-watt, solid-state amp. It had a glitch and was returned to the dealer. He loaned me a little 45-watt, '60s vintage "tuner." I have never forgotten the pleasure that amp delivered. It is similar to what these dots are now delivering. Mar, please, just do it and let us know. One of the reasons I stopped subscribing to high-end journals is because of the empty promises to do this or to review that. In the same way, corrections are dealt with in later issues. I think an editor should be assigned to make certain all these promises are kept or explained in the subsequent issue. Please write for us, the readers, and not for yourselves.

Rick Taylor, you said I'd thank you in the morning. Well, "Mornin', thank you!"

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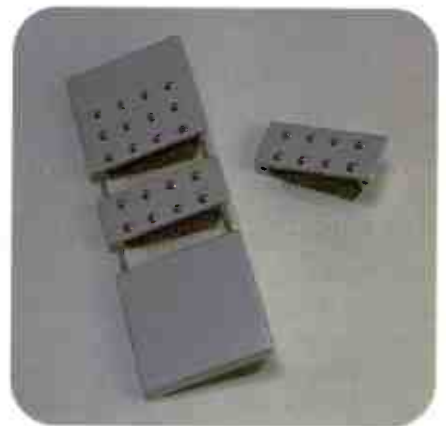
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Digital balanced drive to the five converters assures the lowest distortion and noise possible today.

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

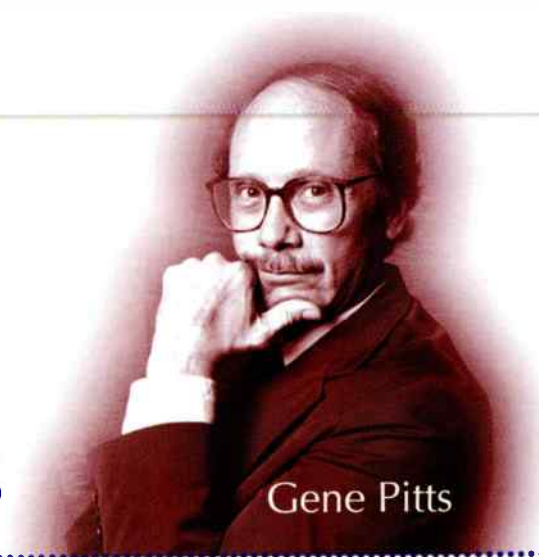
The Series 2000 Modular Remote Control operates both products, expanding as your system grows.



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

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

Boulder



Gene Pitts

Goofs & Gaffs

I apologize. I didn't mean to do it, and I wouldn't have done it if there had been any other viable choice in the matter. After waking up in the middle of the night, several weeks running, I really didn't see that I had much choice, what with the economics the way they were. But only two people have complained, and those weren't actually complaints. Really just questions about issues presumed missing or waylaid by the local postman

It may look from your end of the world that I have skipped an issue, and I can't easily argue with that, but what I really did was miss a publishing date. I had planned to have six issues this year, where we had four last year, but multiple personnel changes in the key ad sales position left the magazine adrift for a period.

The result is that subscriptions will be extended by one issue number, and for those who are responsible for such things, this same "accounting method" will be applied to advertising contracts. That is if your subscription or ad contract was going to expire at the end of this year, with Vol. III, Issue 6, it will not expire with Vol. IV, Issue 1.

If you have questions or comments about this, please write, phone or FAX me, but I think it might be a good idea for me to pontificate about how I view magazine publishing.

One of the things that *The Audiophile Voice* is, is a periodical, that is new issues are supposed to appear at regular intervals and at appropriately timed intervals. We editors, and especially those of us who also suppose ourselves to be high-end hi-fi magazine publishers, traditionally haven't paid sufficient attention to this end of the sport. In subscription and sales promotion material, magazines describe themselves and monthly, bi-month-

ly, quarterly, semi-annual or irregular, and usually the announced frequency is met by the staff. Those who do not are felt by their colleagues and bosses to be less than professional and sometimes they lose their jobs over this failing.

However, this irregularity (along with several other characteristics) became so "usual" in high-end "little" magazines, that it became to be expected or at least considered normal by readers and advertisers. One of the other characteristics is the "digest size" made popular by *Readers Digest*. There was a large shock in the Kingdom of Hi-Fi Publishing when the *S_____* magazine changed to full magazine size. I consider the larger size the only proper size for a magazine, though some inaccurately believe it is the size used by those who've sold out. But the owners and operators of the *S_____* magazine are to be congratulated for getting out such a large magazine, fat with ads, on a regular monthly basis. The rest of us skinny magazine operators . . . well, we've got to closely watch our budgets, try to tell the truth as often as we can, and apologize when we get in a time bind.

Even the Good, Grey . . .

If you can't trust *The New York Times* to get the facts right, who can you trust? The title of the July 28, 1997 story on the front page of *The Times* was "After 15 Years, the Music CD Faces and Upscale Competitor." It described how the "leading record companies and consumer electronics manufacturers have agreed on broad technical guidelines for a new format, called DVD Audio."

The problem is, folks, that there have been only broad technical *discussions* about the possibilities, and no agreement was inked.

D

id you actually consider

naming your *first born*

Ringo, Wolfgang, or Miles?



P

PARASOUND

You live for it. That moment when the violins are soaring and the drums are pounding, and you suddenly realize you've been holding your breath. It's this transcendent moment that keeps us working here at Parasound. That keeps us combining ground-breaking circuit designs with premium audiophile parts. Take, for example, our four most affordable high-current amplifiers. With independent power supplies and direct-coupled inputs, they pull you deep inside the music one moment, and then launch you out of your seat the next. And now they even turn themselves on whenever they receive a 12 volt control signal. They're all part of our obsession to create great sounding audio components that are so well-built you'll be able to hand them down to your son Thelonius.



My Favorite Catalogs

Gene Pitts

Okay, okay, I admit it; I *am* a pack-rat. I'd rather be called a collector, which has a somewhat nicer, friendlier meaning. My wife has called me a garbage-picker, because I "recycle" lost hand tools, loose change (including pennies), and "liberated" screws and nails I spot on the street. It's just that I really can't bear to pass by a cast-off or dropped something that still has value.

Every once in a while I go through the following mental exercises. They're the sort of questions I think the rich ask themselves, to find out how much self-esteem they have on any particular day. Here are the questions: How small does the bill or coin have to be before I won't stoop down to pick it up? How big does the bill have to be before I don't give it back to the person from whose hand it's just dropped?

But it's true. I save almost everything I have ever found of the slightest interest or might ever find of interest. Yes, there are still 18 linear feet of LP records in my listening room, despite the fact that I have been "de-acquisitioning" some of the less-interesting Big Vinyls for more than two years.

Catalogs, like many of the things that are sold in them, can be collected. Some catalogs are quite amazing.

And it's similarly true that at least 90 percent of them have not been played in the last three years. Yes, it's true, too, that over a third of the Compact Discs in my collection are ones that I don't expect to play ever again.

But I might . . . and the problem is that I don't know which ones. So that's the point—or at least that's what I tell my wife. I keep so many different,

but unplayed recordings because I am aware of how my tastes in music have changed over the years. Lordy, my wife is lucky that my tastes in women haven't changed anywhere near as much. At least, she doesn't twit me about how I'm always visually checking out other women to make certain she's still one of the very best. (Has been for a while, too.)

What she does twit me about are the piles of catalogs that are stacked up in too many places in too many rooms. But little did she know that I was planning this article, the point of which is to share with you some of the rare and the wonderful things one can purchase through the mail. She was just glad that I took some of them to the office.

Instant Collections

All this started because I did a "sort job" on my collection of catalogs recently, because . . . well, I mean, you really ought keep *only* the most-recent issue of a catalog . . . that is, unless you actively pursue a hobby that requires you to have an intimate working knowledge of the parts for your, let's say, bicycle or the seeds for that "potential garden." I mean, don't you really want to know what chain was compatible with the 1955 Sun Tour derailleur you saw on that flashy Italian road racing bike at the yard sale last weekend? Or maybe what the potential for growth is in your shady area of that tomato hybrid your neighbor is offering you seeds for?

But I found, and this certainly should be to no one's amazement, that most of my catalogs are either for records or for hand tools. So, let me sort them out that way for you, into a "records by mail" pile and an "electronics tools and parts by mail" pile. I'll put them into alphabetical order in each section, so you can estimate how much longer I'm going to bore you.

And, unless you think that this will be just a scam, that is just some way to foist off my old catalogs on you by means of this article, let me assure you that I called up each of the firms involved and got either a new catalog or the assurance that the one I had was still current. No, this is not TAV's answer to *The Whole Earth Catalog*, *Access to Tools*. While I won't pretend that you are or necessarily should be interested in these offerings, I will warrantee that these catalogs do have the Really Good

And Now, The Record Catalogs

Billing itself as the "one-stop source for audiophile recordings," **Acoustic Sounds'** thick catalog is directed to the high-end or audiophile record collector who values the sonics of the recording at least as much as the performance of the music. Aside from carrying an unusual variety of Japanese and sometimes obscure domestic labels, Chad Kassem, the guru of Acoustic Sounds, features recordings from the generally accepted group of audiophile record labels: AudioQuest Music, Cardas, Classic Records, DCC, Delos, dmp, Golden String, m.a recordings, Mapleshade, Master Sound, Mobile Fidelity, Reference Recordings, Sheffield Lab, and Telarc. (There are others, but that's what's on the front cover.) Kassem also makes a market in used "collectible" LPs, which to my mind is a pure labor of love. In addition to the BIG, FAT 300-page catalog, which is in Vol. 5 right now, there is a 64-page Update (5.5 is current) which features their Analogue Productions 5-LP Miles Davis boxed reissue. I am tempted to corrupt some ad campaign ("This is the one to have when you're having only one!"), but instead I will only quote Mr. Spock, "Live long and prosper, Chad."



Stuff or the Wonderfully Bizarre Stuff or the Stuff You Can't Find NOWhere Else. But before you jump to conclusions about which is which, let me remind you I just put each pile into alphabetical order.

American Gramophone features Mannheim Streamroller's Fresh Aire series which is "often described as 18th Century Rock & Roll," according to the catalog. I don't disagree with this characterization, but it doesn't really tell you enough about this unusual and very often compelling music. I hesitate to call any music unique, but the resident genius of this organization, Chip Davis, is certainly mining ore where he has staked a claim to a major part of the vein. His Fresh Aire series is up to number seven and has won a Grammy, there is a remake of *Classical Gas* with Mason Williams, there is a "Day Parts" series which ranges from *Sunday Morning Coffee* through two *Party* recordings to *Dinner* and



As an editor, I will claim my right to be obstinate and not apologize for not including the obvious nominees, particularly in the hand tool category; I mean, what buyer of socket wrench sets doesn't know about Sear's? And, truly, while I think every record collector ought to have his own set of *Schwann Opus* and *Spectrum*, they really aren't catalogs in the sense of supplementing the local disc emporium.

However, I want to hear from readers who have their own nominations for the list of favorite catalogs. Those letters I print will be gifted with a one-year subscription, except in the case of mail-order company marketing managers who will receive—free of charge—thrice daily phone calls from TAV's Advertising Director.





inevitably *Romance*. Lots of other interesting things. Don't let "line extensions" like cookbooks, coffee mugs, T-shirts, caps, and the like put you off. You really ought to have some of this guy's music.

Atomic Beat specializes in the original rock 'n' roll and blues sounds on labels almost not big enough to make Schwann.

For example, there's the Gene Vincent reissue of all his Challenge label sessions on Hollowbody. On Del-Fi, there is a "best of" collection of Ritchie Valens tracks, remastered, with many in stereo for the first time. There's an even dozen CDs by Marc Bolan and T. Rex on the Edsel label (Hint: Buy, immediately, any disc with Bolan's "Jeepster.") There's Hot Tuna's *Trimmed and Burning*, Mitch Ryder & The Detroit Wheels' *Breakout!!!*, three CDs by master guitarist Bert Jansch (but still no CD reissue with "Lucky Thirteen.") There's the Everly Brothers "Original British Hit Singles" on Ace, which is just one of several dozen wonderful reissues on this label. There is a big batch of the best blues you'll ever want to hear on Ace, Excello, Charly, and Fat Possum (!) with headline artists such as Chuck Berry, Lightnin' Hopkins, Little Willie Littlefield, Big Mama Thornton, and "Guitar" Watson, not to mention several excellent collections.

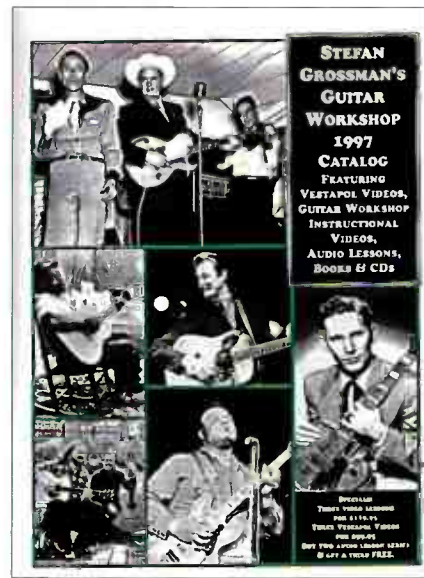


Elderly Instruments has put a title on their catalog that pretty well tells the tale, "CD's U Need," and frankly I have found through the years that indeed I do need quite a few of the CDs, and cassettes, they offer. (That's "need" as opposed to

"desire.") I found Alison Krauss and Union Station through a phone call to Elderly when the local Tower Records person didn't know who I was talking about. (There is an edge to Alison's voice that puts daggers into the crossover between midrange and tweeter, and I've heard otherwise perfectly good tweeters go into convulsions at only moderate drive levels. There's a mandolin on one of her songs that turns a bipolar speaker I know of, one usually well-behaved that normally livens up the ambience, into a ricocheting sound effect, annoying but accurate. The emphasis here is on what I call "folk" and on stringed instruments. Thus, the flat-picked, classical, flamenco, slide & bottleneck, dobro and steel guitar discs are to be expected, but they also offer CDs of clog dancing; of blues, bluegrass, cajun & zydeco, and concertina; of world music from such exotic areas as Zouk in the French Antilles, Africa in many forms, Tex-Mex, the Balkans and Turkey, and fiddle, but there also a smattering of excellent jazz, pipes (Irish, Scottish, and Northumbrian), and flutes & whistles.

I'd be remiss if I didn't mention the related catalog, from whence the firm's title, which makes a business of selling fine acoustic instruments and supplies. If you've ever played an acoustic guitar or a banjo or a mandolin or even a kazoo, then you will want to explore this one, too.

Stefan Grossman's Guitar Workshop is an exploration at the blue edges of the known universe. Stefan's has a treasury of videotaped performances by the world's best guitar players (mainly blues, country, and folk, but with some jazz thrown in), which is followed in Stefan's catalog by lessons on how to play all that stuff with the education being given by guys who are master guitarists in their own right. Which guitarists? Well, aside from Stefan himself, there's Chet Atkins, Merle Travis, Doc and Merle Watson, Tony Rice, Ricky Skaggs, Bela Fleck, Norman Blake, Mike Seeger, Howlin' Wolf, Skip James, Son House, Bukka White, Big Bill Broonzy, Mississippi John Hurt, Robert Pete Williams, Mance Lipscomb, Leadbelly, Josh White, Furry



Lewis, Johnny Shines, John Lee Hooker, Lightnin' Hopkins, Albert Collins, Freddie King, Ry Cooder, Robert Cray, John Hammond, Bonnie Raitt, Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, Elizabeth Cotton, John Fahey, Leo Kottke, Adrian Legg, Bert Jansch, Jorma Kaukonen, Larry Coryell, Wes Montgomery, Barney Kessell, Kenny Burrell, Joe Pass, Charlie Byrd, Jim Hall, Tal Farlow, Herb Ellis . . . and yeah, I know that not all of them are guitarists, but if you like good guitar, you probably already like these musicians,

too. And if you don't, you should. I would be unfair to Stefan if I did not mention the particularly great homage he has paid to his idol (or is it mentor?), the Rev. Gary Davis, who I assume is Grossman's nomination for the title of Greatest Bluesman Ever. I'm not certain that I agree, simply because there are so many other fine bluesmen out there, but Rev. Davis has got to be in the running.

Mobile Fidelity celebrated their 20th year in business by starting the Definitive Collector's Club which has a catalog through which club members can get MoFi's Ultradisc II CDs and Anadisq 200 LPs at a fair discount, \$5.00 off a single CD or \$3.00 off a single LP. If you're reading this magazine, you almost undoubtedly already know their catalog, which is pop, jazz, eclectic. If you haven't looked at it recently, you will probably be surprised by its depth. I thought for a while that what company guru Herb Belkin was doing, was assembling a personal "best of . . ." collection, but there's more to his game plan than that

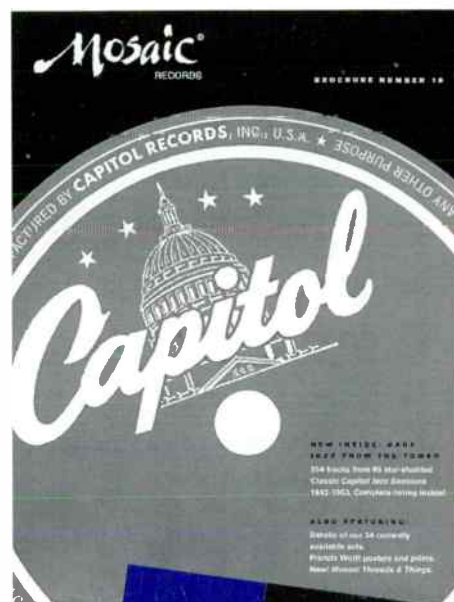
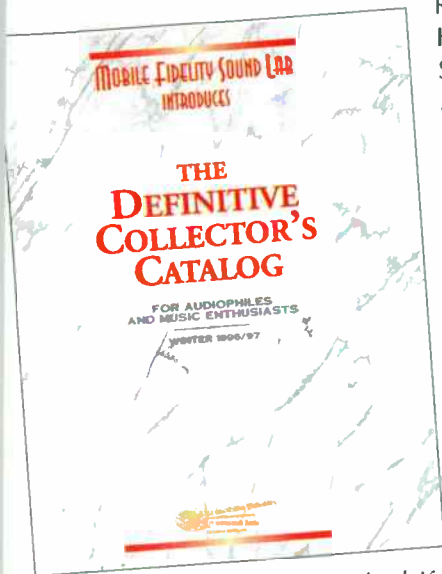
**Mobile Fidelity
has some
uncommonly good
LP reissues.**

simple assessment suggests. It sounds a bit stilted when you write it out, that MoFi believes reproduced music should sound as close to the real thing as possible, because, well, doesn't everybody? However, if they really do have this as an operational philosophy, this explains a lot of what they do. I think it starts with the original selection of the recording

to be worked on, that MoFi apparently only chooses recordings that are capable of high quality reproduction. They master direct from the master tapes, never from running masters where missing or distorted musical data are almost guaranteed. Their GAIN system—for Greater Ambient Information Network—is the result of a collaboration with famed designers Nelson Pass and Mike Moffatt. Pass simplified the signal path in the record cutting lathe, reducing a 17-op amp series to a minimum number of gain stages. Similar attention to detail was paid by Moffatt to the analog-to-digital converter, which uses eight-time oversampling.

The Anadisq 200 LPs are limited-edition recordings, all mastered with the GAIN System with the master disc cut at half speed. In addition to the low noise floor of the GAIN electronics, the detail and accuracy of the signal are preserved by the half-speed mastering transfer to disc. In short, these guys are as fussy as they come.

Mosaic Records and **True Blue Music** are two more guys doing it right. Charlie Lourie and Michael Cuscuna each had a distinguished career with major record labels. (We reviewed their Basie and McLean sets last September.) But they started Mosaic because they "couldn't convince any company to reissue the musical legacies of America's greatest jazz artists in a manner we felt would do them justice: Discographically complete, well-annotated,



deluxe boxed sets, containing however many meticulously-remastered records it took to do the job right." They've done 60 so far, and many of the early or more popular sets are simply gone, sold out; they really are limited editions. If you like jazz, you really owe it to yourself to have some of the Mosaic sets. Many are of true importance historically. A recent addition is Malcom Addey's set of 1980 recordings of Bill Evans for Warner Bros., which join the Dean Benedetti recordings of Charlie Parker; both are the stuff of jazz mythology. Lourie and Cuscuna also make a fetish of each set being "complete." For example, they offer "The Complete Plugged Nickel Sessions" of Miles Davis or "The Complete Columbia J.J. Johnson Small Group Sessions." And they mean it, everything, alternate takes, anthology stuff, previously unreleased cuts, everything. All done up in the finest way, with work from the

Mosaic and True Blue, quite simply, offer the very best jazz recordings available.

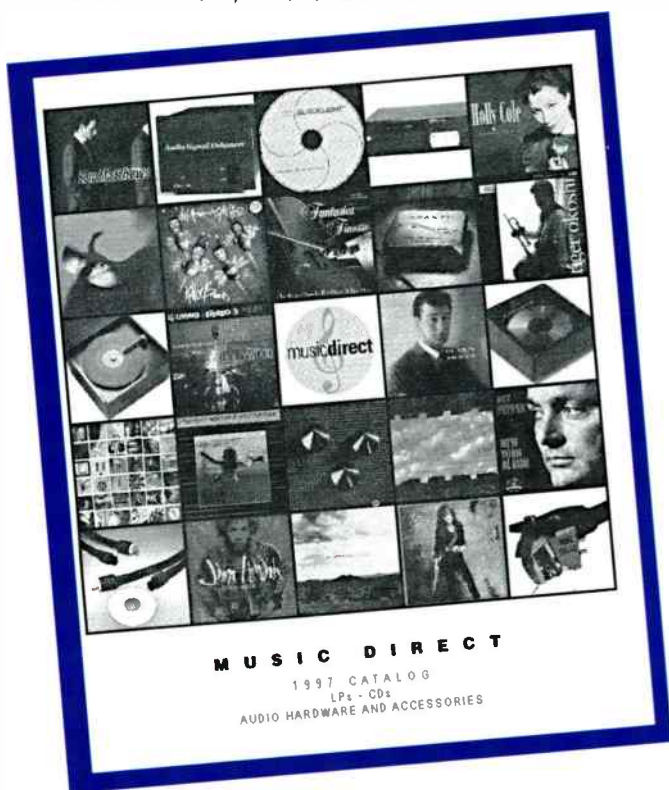
best writers and photographers to supplement the first-rate pressing work. Lourie and Cuscuna are amazing!

True Blue is the CD side of their operation, a response to "customer's requests for a guide to the better non-Mosaic sets and individual titles that [have been] reissued by the carload on CD. Not another laundry list of every jazz album available, the True Blue catalog contains only those recordings that meet [Lourie's and Cuscuna's] own high standards from the standpoint of performance, recording quality, and presentation." Those words are from their most recent cover letter that's sent out with catalogs, but all I can add is "Amen, brother!"

There are 50-plus pages to the True Blue catalog, and as befits a performance-oriented audience, the listings are by performer, rather than by label. The artists listed start with Pepper Adams and end with Lester Young. I wouldn't swear that everyone of any importance in between gets listed, but it seems like it. (I suppose that L and C would argue that for certain artists, there *wasn't* any decent Compact Disc, that is if you can find someone missing.) Let me give you just two recent titles, for flavor: Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers' *Like Someone In Love*, which had been previously deleted from the Blue Note catalog, and Lester Young's "*Kansas City*" Sessions on

Commodore. If you are a CD buyer of the jazz ilk, then it is essential you have a copy of this catalog.

Music Direct offers an interesting combination of audiophile-oriented LPs and CDs from a broad range of companies, plus as interesting a selection of hardware and accessories as you are likely to find in your local high-end emporium. Amongst the disc makers, there David



Grisman's Acoustic Disc (see the cover review from last issue!), Analogue Productions, Cheskey, DCC including the Everest series, Mapleshade, John Marks, Telefunken and Three Blind Mice. I've skipped a lot of labels, and you should note that there are abbreviated reviews of particular discs in the catalog's margins.

It was the range and quality of the accessories that made me keep the old catalog, and I am pleased to see how wide the selection of accessories has become. For example, in a very quick selection for the LP lover, there is the DB Systems p h o n o alignment protractor, the Fulton headshell l e a d s , Japanese rice paper inner LP sleeves and resealable outer sleeves, The Rega Torque wrench, Shure's stylus force gauge, and VPI's strobe disk.

Music Direct seems to specialize in audiophile gear.

More broadly, they offer Audio Prism's Isobearings and Quietline a.c. filter, Black Diamond Racing's The Shelf, connectors from Cardas, Edison-Price Music Posts for replacement of your speaker's binding posts, Creek phono stages and passive preamp, and Grado headphones. They are a dealer for Marigo interconnects and cables. They've got McCormack's Micro Line Drive, Power Drive, and Phono Drive. They've got Blu-Tack and Arrow-Hart's hospital-grade duplex a.c. wall outlet. They stock Mobile Fidelity's Geo-Disc and the MAGIC Box from Mondial. They have the Panamax surge protector. They offer the range of Roomtune-Michael Green treatments and racks. The entire line of Target stands is available. They have Top Hats tube dampers. Versalabs r.f.i. removers are there in each version. Highly recommended by Music Direct are the VPI turntables and record cleaning machines.

How are they to deal with, considering your purchase will probably be by mail? Let me quote part of their note about break-in: "One of the most critical aspects is the break-in period. Part of the reason Music Direct gives customer 30 days to try accessories is to allow proper break-in. Your serious evaluations will require it, so try products in your own system when you're got the time to evaluate their effectiveness." All dealers should be so generous with timings.

Rediscover Music is, well, it's The Kingston

Trio (yeah, right, their big initial hit was "Tom Dooley") and friends. The current catalog celebrates "the 40th Anniversary of the Folk Era" with a 40% discount on selected albums; it's 40 years since the Trio was founded. Some times we go on from the music of our youth, forgetting how much we loved certain tunes or artists or groups, forgetting how strong an influence something was at a certain period of life; "When I was 17, it was a very good year . . ."

The "friends" are pretty interesting musicians in their own right, so let me list the people mentioned on the catalog's cover: John Stewart; Chad Mitchell Trio; Glenn Yarbrough; the Limelighters; Gibson & Camp; Clancy Brothers; Brandywine Singers; Brothers Four; Peter, Paul and Mary; The Weavers; Joan Baez, and Judy Collins. It is much, much too easy to just dismiss this as a nostalgia driven catalog, so let me expand a bit on the "friends" bit by mentioning some of the other fine musicians who dropped by.

There are three boxed sets of Bill Monroe, each with four CDs. Where else could you find Tex Ritter's *High Noon* CD,

with both the American version and the rare British version. There's lots of Judy Collins; Mimi and Richard Farina take a bow. Rediscover is hip enough to cover the recent Irish smash hit *Riverdance* in both CD and video. They've got Donovan and Tim Hardin and Bob Dylan and Gordon Lightfoot and even Johnnie Ray with Cry.

There is a very warm tribute to Bob Gibson, who died late in September last year. Again, let me quote: "One of the 'giants' of the folk era, Bob Gibson is credited as an inspiration for many. Bob also gained a reputation as a discoverer of new folk talent. For instance, he is frequently credited with introducing Joan Baez to the folk music world, something he later brushed off, saying, "They say I introduced Joan Baez. So what does that mean? You think that girl was going to remain unknown in Cambridge? It wasn't my saying, 'Hey, look at what I discovered.' It was, 'Hey, you wanna hear something great?' That's all it is. You don't discover anyone; they're going to become known. I'm just glad that for a few people I was the lucky one who got to say, 'Hey, you wanna hear something great?'" A week before he died from a form of Parkinson's Disease, Gibson hosted

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On page 3-6 our bold reviewers list their favorite 1996 CDs. (These are some of the winners.)



Celebrate

The 40th Anniversary of the Folk Era with...

The Kingston Trio
John Stewart
The Chad Mitchell Trio
Glenn Yarbrough
The Limelighters
Gibson & Camp
The Clancy Brothers
The Brandywine Singers
The Brothers Four
Peter, Paul and Mary
The Weavers
Joan Baez
Judy Collins
Cowboy Songs

40% Off on selected albums!



Folk Era

a Farewell Party for his friends. Sporting a button reading, 'I'm not dead yet,' Bob visited with his friends and was, in his words, 'an audience of one' for those playing and singing at the party. Movie critic Roger Ebert, one of the guests, later wrote, 'Bob Gibson hosted his own hootenanny . . . and attended his own wake.'" A rare level of loyalty to friends and grace in action, these folks at Rediscovery show.

Roots & Rhythm used to issue a newsletter but their art director "Mayne Smith has been neglecting his dobro and pedal steel to work on our catalog makeover," says the page 2 intro letter to customers getting this 72-page compendium of "hundreds of candid reviews you can trust, from experts who love the music." Yeah, that's right, these guys do love the music, and though you may feel closer to one reviewer than another, because his taste more closely matches yours, I have never doubted one word they print. Their orientation is more towards the "great performance" than the "great pressing," but they will let you know if something is a "low-fi but terrifically exciting set," as they wrote about Lonnie

Brooks' *Live at Pepper's*, a Black Top blues CD. On the other hand, they point out that two Sonny Boy Williamson CDs were "newly remastered using the Wilson Audio custom Tube Facility" for Analogue Productions (see Acoustic Sounds above).

R&R is heavily into blues and have truly pulled together some of the very best blues-related

recordings. "What does 'related' mean?" Means blues and gospel, rhythm & blues, soul, doo-wop, vintage rock 'n' roll, rockabilly, country, bluegrass, old-timey, ethnic, world

music, some jazz, dance bands, etc. They have the "essentials" and the stuff that influenced the essential artists; follow it down to the roots any way you like.

Rounder has been around as one of the very best independent record companies since 1970, and currently their mail-order side offers issue #12 of their flyer (30 pages) and a HUGE master catalog (280 pages). The flyer's cover features Roomful of Blues, a band which puts me in mind of the great Paul Butterfield Blues Band during the East-West period, a hard-blowing, heavy-rocking, no-let-up or let-down blues-music machine. Rounder is actually a group of labels, more than 30 in all, each with an abiding appreciation of the deepest musical roots. All their records are listed in the catalog; incidentally, there is a very hip

cover illustration by David Coulson. As the catalog's intro says, these guys go "from blues to bluegrass, from African to Hawaiian, from folk to reggae." I hope they don't think it's snotty of me to point out they forgot to mention the rock, and they've got a lot of very nice jazz recordings, too. And there's gospel and Cajun and folk and zydeco, not to mention R&B and soul. It would be easy, and work out to be an insult to the unmentioned, if I just wrote in here the dozen or so firms in the Rounder group I'm familiar with. But isn't that what makes catalogs like this fascinating? Here you'll find one label after another, each with fascinating records, either from an artist you already know or from one who plays with a familiar artist. Or maybe in a style you like, but haven't been able to find in local record stores.



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Let me give just one example of Rounder's superb taste and exquisite style. There is a forthcoming 15-CD series, carrying the general title *Southern Journey*, which starts in V. 1 as "The Alan Lomax Collection Sampler." Vol. 2 is "Voices from the American South," V3 is "61 Highway Mississippi—Delta Country Blues, Spirituals, Work Songs & Dance Music," V4 "Brethren, We Meet Again—Southern White Spirituals," V5 "Bad Man Ballads," V6 "Sheep, Sheep, Don'tcha Know the Road: Southern Music Sacred and Sinful," V7 "Ozark Frontier—Songs and Reels from Arkansas," V8 "Velvet Voices from the Eastern Shore—Virginia Choirs, Quartets, and

Audio Advisor offers one of the broadest and one of the best selections of accessories for audiophiles.

Colonial Era Music," V10 & V11 "Sacred Harp," V13 "Georgia Sea Island—The Earliest Days," and V14 & V15 "Murder's Home—Prison Songs."

Yazoo? Well, one could make a truly first-rate collection of blues records just by buying, say, a third of this catalog. Of course, half would be better, and . . . Yazoo leads off their catalog with three CDs from Charlie Patton (and friends) who—to my ears—cuts Robert Johnson for pure blues power. They organize their catalog by state (really style), i.e. Mississippi includes Patton and Johnson et al., continues with Willie McTell et al. from Georgia, St. Louis, Texas, Memphis, . . . you get the idea. There are videos not only of blues guitar legends, but also of jazz musicians such as Cannonball Adderley, Charles Mingus and Bill Evans. One of the most interesting videos, *And This Is Free*, is a 1964 *cinema verite* portrait of Chicago's Maxwell Street, the result of a collaboration between photographer Mike Shea and guitarist Mike Bloomfield. To quote the catalog, ". . . blues and gospel musicians compete for ear space with amplified preachers, mesmerizing con artists, and vendors hawking socks at 'eight pair for a buck.' Robert Nighthawk, the legendary and influential bottleneck guitarist, plays 'Down at Eli's' in a back alley surrounded by a wildly dancing crowd. Within a few blocks, white street evangelists sing about Jesus. Blind guitarist Jim Brewer backs up Carrie Robinson on a jubilant gospel number and then plays his signature song 'I'll Fly Away.'" How could one resist?

— Having the right hand tool often makes the difference between completing a repair chore properly and a piece of junk that has to eventually be thrown out. One thing I learned somewhere (may have been from the *Whole Earth Catalog*) was to buy a much better tool than was initially needed for a task and then learn how to use it properly. The tool paid for itself in two or three jobs because you didn't have to hire a guy to repair what you'd butchered by not having the right tool. Following are some select sources of tools (and tweaks) that will make getting your household's hi-fi system running right and keep it operating both easy and fun.

Audio Advisor bills itself as "the catalog for audiophiles & others who love fine music." The 100 pages of the Early Spring Sale Catalog 1997 are filled with what I term up-grades and tweaks, but others might call accessories, and include a smattering of equipment such as Sound Dynamics speakers, Stax and Grado headphones, and Creek and Musical Fidelity electronics. This isn't, strictly speaking, a catalog of hand tools; a hand tool is what you'd use to crimp on the Kimber Kable spade connector you can buy here. There is, however, lots of handy stuff such as CAIG's ProGold contact cleaner for the new generation of gold-plated jacks. There are "classic accessories"

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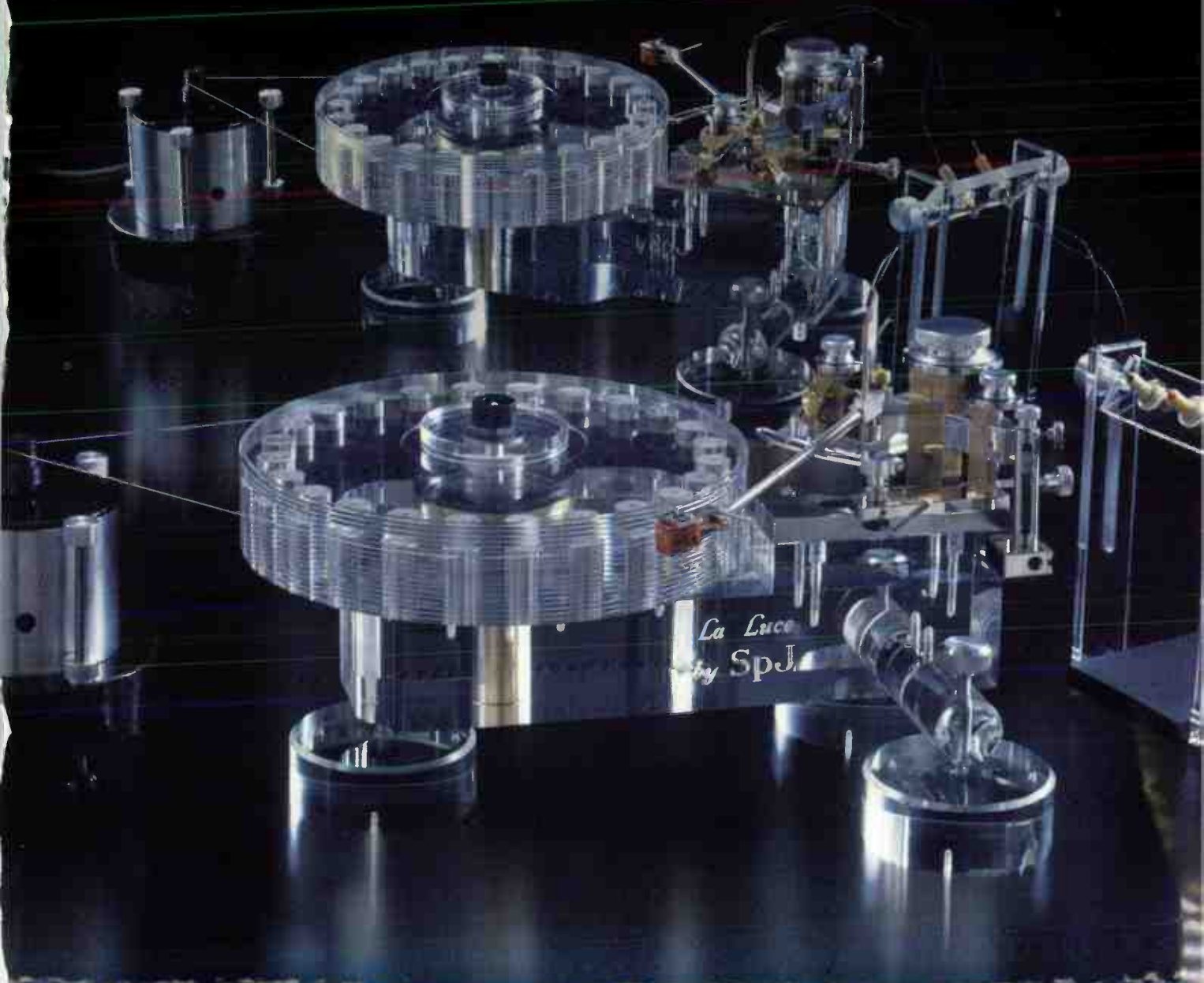
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such as the Decca 2+2 record brush, which I came of age using. There is a fairly broad range of cables and interconnects—from Tara, Kimber, Cardas, Straight Wire, and Purist, as well as a group of a.c. line filters and power conditioners from Audio Power, Panamax, Tice, and Lightspeed. There are several brands of speaker stands and of system racks; I just sent a friend a copy of this catalog because his wife is insisting he move his electronics off an antique sideboard. There's tons more.

The first of my two most-favorite parts of the catalog is the interview of Dr. Peter D'Antonio of

RPG Diffusor Systems, Inc., a firm well-known in professional recording. This guy really knows his stuff. He got his acoustics start as, literally, a basement studio owner, but got sidetracked when he started to redesign the studio. In the interview, D'Antonio throws out a lot of names, but it's not

name-dropping; it's a short-of short-hand referencing of lifetimes of work on cutting-edge science projects that he's digested to come up with his problem-solving acoustics products.

The second is the large variety of quality tubes Audio Advisor has available. I suspect that there probably is another source of tubes that has more types, probably Richardson's APD group, but I don't think that "the other source" would place so much emphasis on quality. They have Svetlanas, Sovteks, Gold Aeros, Golden Dragon, and Teslas. They offer Roger Modjeski's line of computer tested audio tubes. They even have a batch of "New" U.S. GE power tubes, made in the early 1980s, which are from U.S. military stocks. Don't ya have to love it?

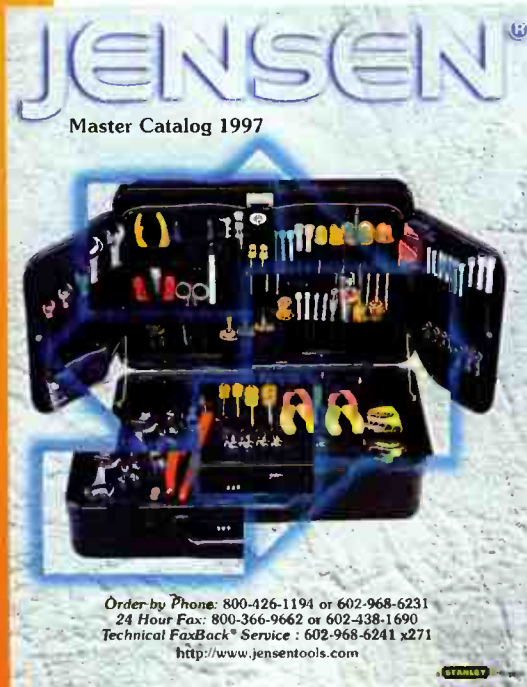
Jensen Tools has long been one of my very favorite sources for the best quality hand tools. Sometimes I read myself to sleep at night by fanta-

sizing about buying one item from each page of their catalog, which currently is 268 pages large. That's not very realistic, of course, but . . . well, you know how fantasies are.

One of the things I've wanted for several years is the Fluke 8060A hand-held multi-meter, which measures a.c. and d.c. voltage and current (right, all four), conductance, resistance, frequency, and does direct dBm readings. This last is, I think, unique in a hand-held meter, and it's got the accuracy of a bench-type meter. The Fluke meter is the class-art in this field, even if it does cost \$459.00. You can even get it with a Certificate of Calibration of performance for an additional \$37.00.

Jensen has their own line of hand tools, but are nothing to sneeze at (lifetime guarantee), but they also offer a super selection of Xcelite "99" series handles and blades, so you can make up the perfect set for yourself. Choose from nutdrivers, slot blades, Philips blades, Torx, Tamper Torx, spline blades, Scrulox blades, ballpoint and regular hex blades, and Pozidriv blades. They've also got Wiha miniature electronic screwdriver sets, and true Allen brand hex-wrench sets with T-handles if you like, Diamond and Xcelite cutters and pliers, Swanstrom cutters and pliers, Dremel Moto-Tools, genuine Victorinox Swiss Army knives, all the brands of pocket multi-tools I know of (Leatherman, SOG, and Gerber), X-Acto knife sets, and the fabulous Weller controlled-temperature soldering stations. If you don't like their General 6-inch dial caliper for \$30.00, then buy the Mitutoyo solar-powered caliper for almost 8 times as much, \$235.00.

Kelvin Electronics, at least to my mind, has taken over the "parts store in a catalog" position that Lafayette (on the East Coast) and Allied (in the middle of the country) had when I was growing up. (Yeah, I know those aren't fair characterizations, but make up your own.) In addition to offering lots of kits (phone bug, AM/FM radio,



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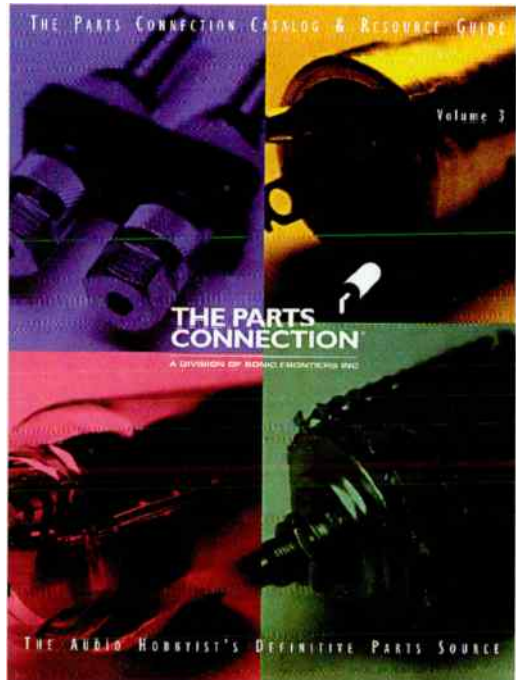
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digital bird, color organ, etc.), Kelvin has lots of parts, i.e. breadboards, wire, glues and cements and epoxies, batteries, lamps, and LEDs.

But here is my favorite item in the whole Kelvin catalog, the Model 94 hand-held multi-meter; they call it "the Ultimate Meter." Get this, for \$199.95, you can measure a.c. and d.c. volts and current, ohms, diodes, continuity, capacitance, inductance, dBm, and frequency, and it will even do logic probes. There is a maximum/minimum average memory record mode, and it has a true rms relative mode.

The Parts Connection is, as most will know, the mail-order parts division of Sonic Frontiers, the Canadian firm which so strongly shook up the hi-fi industry with its bold combination of first-rate performance and low to moderate pricing for equipment. This catalog is the high-end equivalent of, say, Radio Shack's, in that they've got everything and then some. For example, they offer UltraAnalog D20400A DACs and AES20 receivers, Gold Aero tubes (among others), Plitron and Hammond transformers, Multicap capacitors (among others), Alpha-Core air-core inductors, Vishay precision resistors, etc., etc., plus lots of resource books on how to use all this stuff. There is a wonderful kit from which you can make a volume control from Shalco silver-contact switches (!) and Holco true 0.5%-resistors (!) in a ladder

configuration. Also, they seem to have a corner on the market for manuals on tube use and substitution; they carry Gerald Tyne's book, *Saga of the Vacuum Tube*, which is the best book I know concerning the actual invention of tubes and their use in amps and radio.



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All turntables pictured with Benz Ruby 2 phono cartridge and Basis Clamp

Let me give kudos where due, to Sonic Frontiers for putting the names, titles and printed signatures of everyone from Sonic's President Chris Johnson on down to Shipper Frank Pugliano. And let me give a raspberry where due, to myself for finally finding out from the same page in PC's manual what SKU means (Stock Keeping Unit).

Specialized Products is rather like Jensen, an up-scale supplier of hand tools and related items but this one's almost totally for the people who have to keep things like computers, phones, copiers, and the like running properly. While these guys have the Weller soldering station and the Fluke 8060A meter and the Xcelite blades, etc., they have a few items that I don't know where else to buy and that I insist you buy immediately. Last week, if not sooner.

The first one is a pair of Klein's D2291 6-inch telcom pliers. These are usually meant for dealing with the 24- to 24-AWG hook-up wire commonly



found in telephone boxes. I have found these pliers the absolutely best thing going for putting together any electronics kit or, alternatively, twisting 14-AWG wire around a screw post on a wall or lamp switch. They seem to fit my hand better than anything else I've tried. This is *the* high-end in pliers.

In the "Ridiculously Expensive But How Did I Ever Live Without It?" category is the \$118.00 Weidmüller Custom Stripmaster, which is a self-adjusting wire stripper. This unit accurately strips 10- to 30-AWG wire, either stranded or solid,

without nicking or scraping the conductor. This unit uses a counterbored hole to grip and center the insulation so that the die-type blade doesn't contact the conductor. A sweetheart!

Taft Electronics in with a group of electronics stores in midtown Manhattan and has been going at it for more than a quarter century. They have a

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Rediscover Music (Aztec Corp.), 705 So. Washington St., Naperville, IL 60540-6654; phone 800/232-7328; fax 630/305-0782.

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Ken Kessler, *Hi Fi News and Record Review*, June 1997



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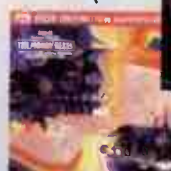
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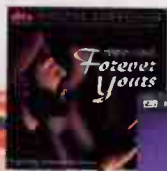
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for surveillance and security. While I don't think I would buy their oyster pH meter kit, I might well buy their digital sound level meter, which at \$229.00 offers a better combination of features and quality than Radio Shack's, I think.

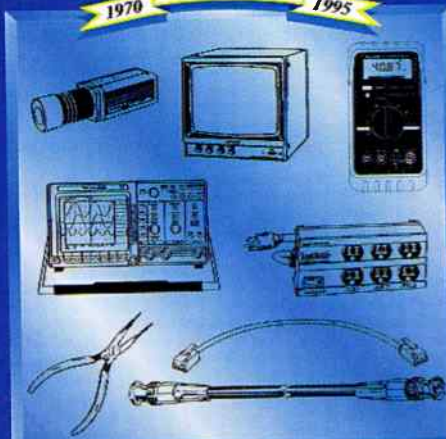
At this point, let me just bow my head and ask for you contributions to this line-up. If you haven't gotten the central idea by now, well then maybe you aren't a catalog collector. And don't forget my promise; I'll give a one-year subscription to anyone whose letter I print that nominates a great catalog.

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Stereophile Magazine (USA), Recommended Components:

- 1996:** RCD950BX CD Player
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- 1995:** RP900 Turntable
RSP960AX Surround Processor
RT990BX Tuner
RHT10 FM Tuner
- 1994:** RCD955BX CD Player
RCD965BX CD Player
RB980BX Power Amplifier
RHT10 FM Tuner
- 1993:** RCD955BX CD Player
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RB980BX Power Amplifier
RB960BX Power Amplifier
RHT10 FM Tuner
- 1992:** RCD955BX CD Player
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Sound & Vision Magazine (Canada), Critics Choice:

- 1995:** RB970BX Power Amplifier
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RSP960AX Surround Processor
RTC940AX Tuner Preamp
RT940AX Tuner
RCD930AX CD Player
- 1995:** RC980BX Preamplifier
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RSP960AX Surround Processor
- 1994:** RC970BX Preamplifier
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RX940AX Receiver
RX950AX Receiver
RCD945AX CD Player
RCC940AX Carousel CD Player
RSP960AX Surround Processor
- 1993:** RX950AX Receiver
RC960BX Preamplifier
RB960BX Power Amplifier
RB990BX Power Amplifier
RA980BX Integrated Amplifier
RT930AX FM Tuner
RT950BX AM/FM Tuner
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Hi Fi Choice Magazine (UK), Hi fi Choice Awards:

- 1996:** RA920AX Integrated Amplifier
- 1993:** RA960BX Integrated Amplifier
RA935BX Integrated Amplifier
RT960BX Tuner
- 1992:** RA930AX Integrated Amplifier
RC960BX Preamplifier
RB960BX Power Amplifier
- 1991:** RCD965BX CD Player

Audio Video Intl, (USA), Hi Fi Grand Prix Awards:

- 1996:** RCD950 CD Player
RA985BX Integrated Amplifier
RX950 AM/FM Receiver
RCC945 CD Changer
RSP980 THX[®] Surround Processor
RC995 CD Player
RT940AX Tuner
- 1994:** RB980BX Power Amplifier
- 1993:** RCD965BX CD Player
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What Hi Fi? Magazine (UK), What HiFi Awards:

- 1993:** RCD945AX CD Player
RT950BX AM/FM Tuner
RA920AX Integrated Amplifier
RCD965BX CD Player
- 1991:** RCD965BX CD Player
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Consumer Electronics Show (USA), Innovations Awards:

- 1997:** RSP980 THX[®] Surround Processor
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- 1992:** RB980BX Power Amplifier

Audio Magazine (Germany), Golden Ear Awards:

- 1994:** RB980BX Power Amplifier
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- 1993:** RB980BX Power Amplifier
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Consumers Digest (USA) Best Buys:

- 1996:** RX950AX AM/FM Receiver
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Home Cinema Choice (UK) A/V Power Amp of the Year:

- 1997:** RB985 Power Amplifier

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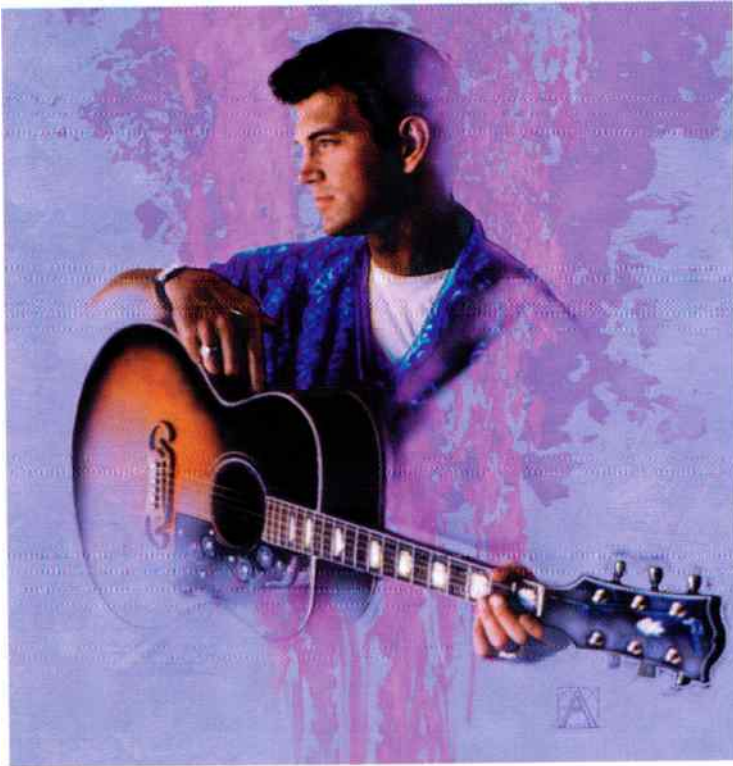
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Before I tell you how much I like this album, let me just admit that I consider Chris Isaak something of a guilty pleasure. Much of his singing style could be called Elvis impersonation—when he’s not doing Roy Orbison. I’ve asked myself, “What separates Isaak’s vocal artistry from a run-of-the-casino Elvis impersonator?” The most obvious thing is that he isn’t big on actually covering Elvis songs. The songs he does choose for *The Baja Sessions*, however, aren’t far removed: “Yellow Bird,” “South of the Border (Down Mexico Way),” and “Sweet Leilani.” Is that campy enough for you?

And yet if camp is defined as “so bad it’s good,” then Isaak doesn’t really fall into the camp camp. Isaak is so good he’s not bad. True, Isaak winks at us

when he does this stuff, but his connection to the material is too deep and too genuine to allow campiness to rule; he takes the material seriously, and performs it intensely. I guess you could say he’s assimilated Elvis and Orbison and others—from Pat Boone back to Bing Crosby (whom they all owe their microphone technique to)—without thoughtlessly aping any of them. When interpreted by Isaak, the songs become moving in spite of being anachronistic.

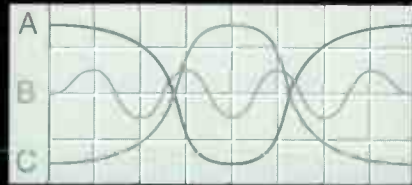
On a casual listen you might find *Baja* easy-going and merely pretty. It’s a seemingly quiet record, but also sultry and hot in a simmering and smoky (rather than incendiary) way. On one level, Isaak has given us a great make-out album—background music for locking limbs, lips and loins. But repress those thoughts

for a moment, and crank the disc up on a high-end system (all these sexy tubes in front of me are just sublimations and symbols, right?); the recording now grabs your attention, it’s subtleties becoming obvious (if you’ll pardon the oxymoron).

Orbison’s “Only The Lonely” is the most striking example of this phenomenon. Isaak seems to bring very little passion to this classic lament of misery and hurt and dim hopes. It’s a song right down Isaak’s dark alley, specializing as he does in broken hearts and unrequited love. “Only The Lonely” is the granddaddy of rejection songs, the anthem. “There goes my baby/There goes my heart/They’re gone forever/So far apart/But only the lonely/Know why I cry/Only the lonely/Only the lonely.” Short and bitter . . .

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These backward-looking companies claim that "characteristic impedance" is important. This is awfully safe ground...everyone has agreed about this since before most of us were born. CATV cable at the hardware store gets this part right, there's no reason to pay a premium for old news. However, there are many other significant, and often more important variables,

It is ironic that some of the same designers who properly argue that "while measurements are important, they don't tell the whole story," are now retreating to the test bench instead of working to provide new solutions.



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VideoQuest Video Two Pushes the Envelope

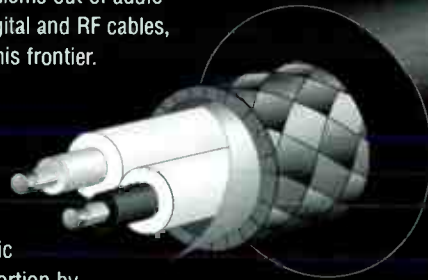
- Twin-axial construction includes two identical conductors, ensuring equally low distortion paths for positive and negative...something not possible with conventional coaxial construction.

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Etc., Etc., Etc.

There are many more technical details and underlying theories as to how to reduce distortion in video cables. For more of this information, please ask for our Cable Design brochure...or better yet, go "see" the cables for yourself.



Video Two's twin-axial construction uses special Silver Plated Long Grain Copper and Hard Cell Foam dielectric.



How does a signal become distorted?

yet odd: It seems obvious why he's crying, but is there something the lonely know that the rest of us don't? A good playback system allows us to hear the anguish and dejection in Isaak's voice. There's no lack of passion; rather a lack of false optimism. When Isaak sings of loneliness and regret, we feel the grief; we glimpse the mirac-

ulous potential of love and the remoteness of its possibility. We know why he cries. We feel it. He makes us the lonely.

A Chris Isaak song generally starts with the assumption of a broken heart. His "upbeat" material then suggests the prospect putting it back together. Mining that vein, Isaak "covers" two of his own songs from

older albums: "Back on Your Side" from the 1985 *Silverstone*, and "Two Hearts" from the recent *San Francisco Days*. Both benefit from the Mexican makeover. "Two Hearts" in particular goes from being just a nice song to being a great one: The melody is catchier, singing more romantic, emotions more powerful.

As with many of Isaak's previous albums, the recording quality is excellent. I recently replayed "Wicked Game" and thought it sounded fairly consistent with *Baja*—which is remarkable given that the new album was recorded god-knows-where on the Baja peninsula. Baja is almost all acoustic (give or take an electric guitar and organ here and there), so the sound is never harsh or "crunchy." It's also very "wet," dripping in atmosphere, aided and abetted by the HDCD mastering process. The detail, air, and transparency make this a perfect vehicle for showing off the pop potential of HDCD. I've been using *Baja* as a reference disc for many months now, and it has thoroughly washed the bad sound of Emmy Lou Harris' and Neil Young's HDCD efforts out of my ears.

Problems are minor. All that ambiance and air will give an overly enthusiastic tweeter the hissy fits. At the other end of the spectrum, the lower frequencies are a little heavy, so a system with any looseness in the bass will have boomy fits. There is some strain and edge on a few vocals, and on some cuts you can hear excessive noise riding on the vocal track; you can also hear the noise gating the engineer used to deal with it. If anything, these quirks make the CD even more valuable as a reference: Perfect recordings make any system sound good; this one requires a perfect system to sound its best.

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Remote by any standard, Ithaca was accessible by icy two-lane roads, by the Lehigh Valley Railroad (avoided by knowing travelers because of its notorious square wheels) or via Mohawk Airlines, whose propeller driven DC-3s, it was viciously rumored, had previously seen too many years of service flying the "hump" of the Himalayas during World War II. However the

Oistrakh's hands were folded in his lap. His fingers were shorter than I expected, and they were pudgy.

concert might be received, these two men deserved our respect for enduring the trip.

Not surprisingly, the concert attracted a large audience which included the passionate, the curious and those who sensed the need to be seen at such an important occasion. Without identifying the particular group to which I belonged, I admit to hurrying to the ticket line and considered myself lucky to secure a pair of seats in a far corner of the Bailey Hall balcony.

Bailey Hall is one of those all-purpose auditoriums that are vital to college campuses. Circular, solidly built of brick and stone, with massive Ionic columns around its perimeter, Bailey Hall surely met the most important priority of university planners—utility dressed in a facade of enduring grandeur.

There is no doubt that Bailey Hall was built to last, and the splendor of its Classical Revival architecture is not in question. It is certain, however, that Bailey Hall does not grace any list of the world's best acoustical environments.

Yet it was in Bailey Hall on that snowy night that I experienced one of the most profound musical experiences of my life.

At that time my classical music taste had not advanced much beyond Brahms. Contemporary Russian orchestral repertory was strange to my ears, and contemporary Russian chamber works were all but unknown to me. Oistrakh and Yampolsky would be performing Shostakovitch and Prokofiev sonatas, and in exposing myself to this strange new music, I expected a challenge.

I found my seat. (God, the stage was so distant. Would I hear anything at all from just these two instruments?) The performers walked on, no flourishes, no theatrics. Neither presented a command-

ing presence, both being shortish and a bit round as well. They wore drab, brown business suits, which were squarely cut, establishing a plainness to the event. I remember being aware of the earthy aroma of wet wool, as the snowflakes still clinging to our coats began to melt.

When the first notes reached me in the balcony, I was uncomfortable with the discordancy of the sound. The comforting cadences of Mozart and the Romantics were absent.

The dissonance even seemed exaggerated by the spareness of the instrumentation. There was no orchestra to round things out. No lush string section. No cheerful woodwinds at center rear. I was acutely aware of the starkness of two instruments alone in the vast chilly hall.

I learned from the program notes that Oistrakh, while still a teen-age prodigy, had once played a Prokofiev concerto with the composer in the audience. At the conclusion of that concert, Prokofiev rushed onto the stage, sat down at a piano, and played the work as he thought it should be heard, pausing along the way to lecture Oistrakh on fine points of interpretation.

Some 10 years after their first encounter, Prokofiev again attended a concert of one of his compositions played by Oistrakh. This time the composer was impressed to such an extent that he visited the violinist after the concert and asked if he could write and dedicate a composition to Oistrakh. Flattered and pleased, Oistrakh accepted, but could not resist reminding Prokofiev of the circumstances of their first meeting. Unperturbed, Prokofiev said, "Oh, were you that unfortunate violinist?" and continued to discuss the musical opus he would write for Oistrakh.

Prokofiev's Sonata No. 1 for Violin and Piano was written for Oistrakh, some 10 years after their first meeting.

They soon became close friends, often meeting to play chess as well as to discuss matters musical, specifically the work to be composed for Oistrakh, the "Violin and Piano Sonata #1 in F minor, Opus 80."

Just as Prokofiev began work on the promised sonata, Hitler turned his armies against the Soviets and the sound of cannons and bombs all but drowned out music in Russia. For four years

Russia was a bloody battleground; the *Wehrmacht* advanced over scorched earth to Moscow and Stalingrad, then retreated to Berlin with the Russians relentlessly in pursuit. Twenty million Soviets died, fifteen thousand civilian and military killed each day. It is no surprise that "Opus 80," composed during those wrenching times, is dark in tone.

This was the Prokofiev sonata that Oistrakh played in Bailey Hall that night. Since it followed the Shostakovitch work, the modern sonorities were no longer so intimidating. Additionally, despite the somber nature of the work, I began to hear glimpses of Prokofiev's irrepressible lyricism, and I found myself drawn into the music. I did not realize, at that moment, that Prokofiev had recently died after a long illness and that the playing of the sonata at this time must have had a special meaning for Oistrakh.

Near the end of the first movement, Oistrakh slipped a tiny mute over the strings of his violin. The musical phrases that followed,

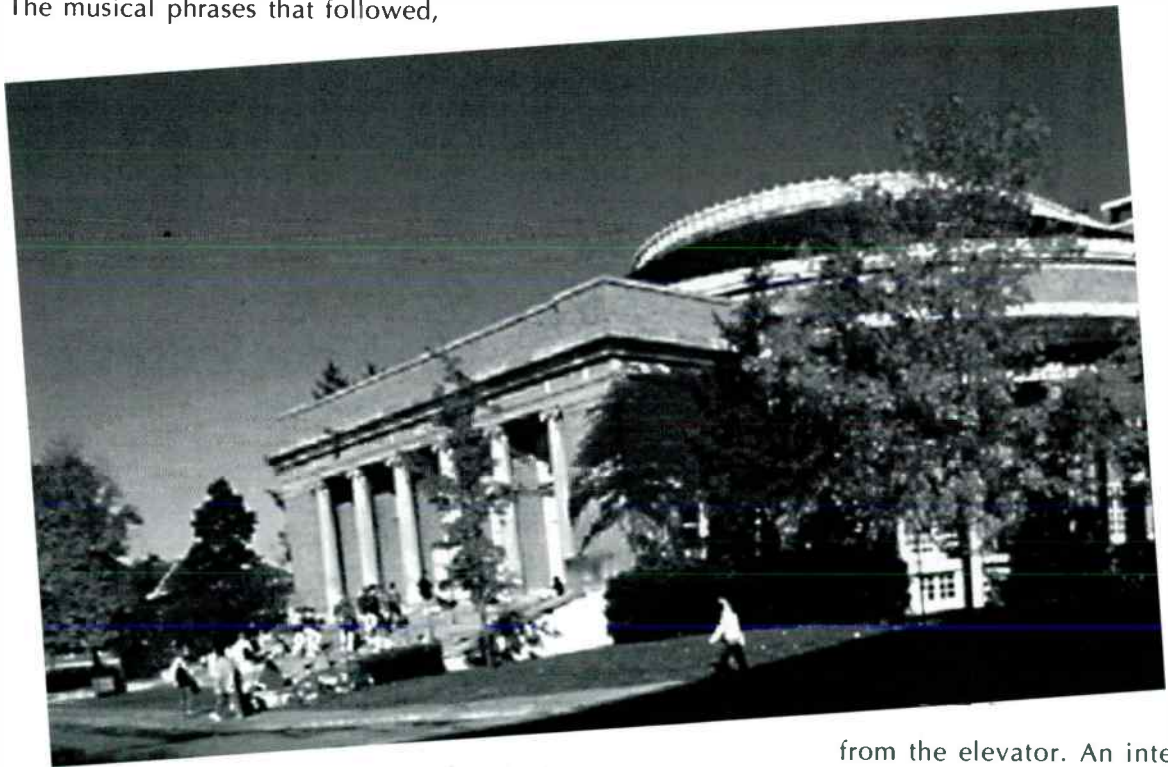
in Bailey Hall that evening seemed to respond to the depth of feeling of the music and the performance. The audience was hushed. Coughing and sniffing disappeared.

Early the next morning my phone rang. It was the assignment editor of the university's student

To Sergi Prokofiev, the voice of the muted violin in his Sonata in F minor was like "the wind in a graveyard."

newspaper, The Cornell Daily Sun. Could I get to Statler Hall, the campus hotel, and photograph Oistrakh and Yampolsky before they left?

With uncharacteristic speed, I hurried onto campus. I was in the lobby as the small group of Russians emerged



played with-
out piano accompaniment, were the most sublime I have ever heard. The quiet plaintive melody, which Prokofiev described as sounding "like the wind in a graveyard," reached into every corner of the hall. The audience all but stopped breathing. The tone of the instrument was buttery; the playing exquisitely wrought.

Again, in the third movement, the muted violin spoke again, and the effect was repeated. All of us

from the elevator. An interpreter explained my hope to make a photograph, and graciously these two small men, giants of the music world, settled into chairs I arranged near a window. Sunlight, reflected from snow piled high outside the building, suffused the room. Light reflected from a nearby wall filled the shadows. As my Rolleiflex clicked, the two sat quietly and at ease. I was aware of Oistrakh's hands folded in his lap. His fingers were shorter than I had expected, and they were pudgy.

The photos taken, Oistrakh and Yampolsky smiled a "dosvedonye" and left to continue their tour.

\$\$\$

If I have aroused your curiosity about this music, I should now provide you with a discography of Prokofiev's Opus 80, so that you might share my experience.

The catalogs list four or five recordings of Prokofiev's "Opus 80." All are competently played. I urge you to explore this music. If you are more determined and patient as well, search the mono bins at your favorite vinyl source for Vanguard VRS6019, which was recorded by Oistrakh while in Paris in 1953. You will hear the muted violin and more than a suggestion of the special quality of the live performance. But will you hear it as I heard it that night in 1955?

First, there's the question of

recorded versus live sound. We all know not to listen to a stereo system, no matter how good the system, for several days following a concert. No system's performance can match the real thing.

But the issue here goes beyond live versus recorded.

The recorded version I'd search for was by Oistrakh on Vanguard VRS6019, an out-of-print mono LP.

Can we ever recreate the emotions of a profound live music experience? Where are the audience, the anticipation, the lights, the significant other at your side? The sense of the moment, the uniqueness of the live performance can not be duplicated. It can, however,

linger in memory for decades, a musical jewel one can recall and treasure over and over again.

\$\$\$

You might wonder what prompted this memory of musical echoes of the past. Last summer I attended a Sunday morning concert at Ozawa Hall at Tanglewood. In this handsome teak-accented hall, its rear wall open to the lawns and trees of the famous grounds, a group of talented student musicians was playing a Dvorák quintet.

At the piano was a beautiful young woman with long, glistening dark hair. Her dark eyes flashed as her hands competently traced the music. She looked familiar, yet I knew I hadn't seen her before.

I glanced at the program. Miri Yampolsky, Vladimir's granddaughter.

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ROCK

Van Morrison
The Healing Game

Exile/Polydor
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Jon & Sally Tiven

Much has been made of *The Healing Game*, as it is a return to form for Van Morrison, as if somehow he had strayed from his mission, and the preacher is now returning to the flock. Truth is, Van Morrison's recording career is remarkable mostly for its consistency—there are occasional releases that don't fully live up to the legend, but most of his recorded efforts are extraordinarily great. And even some of his worst albums have contained songs like "Vanlose Stairway," which contains more meritorious musical and lyrical

content than all the albums found in Billboard's current top ten put together.

This is not to say he is immune to criticism, although I'm certain Mr. Morrison hardly welcomes it. Van sings flat from time to time (check the word "You" in the choruses on "Fire In The Belly"), although the feeling is almost always there. And when the vocals have a little pitch problem, he has a tendency to surround his lead vocal with several backgrounds (this time it's Brian Kennedy and Katie Kissoon) which tends to intensify the

"This all-tubed unit puts every other headphone amp I have heard to shame."-Harry Pearson on the Melos SHA-1, TAS, December 1992

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"The Potentiometer allows the reference to achieve a new level of tonal richness and

SHA-1, Stereophile Magazine, Oct. 1992

pitch problem as well as interfere with the power of his lead, particularly when the other vocalists are singing parallel to him. For this reason, Van gets an A- instead of an A or A+, though I'm sure, given the opportunity, he'd tell the teacher to shove it. But that's my opinion and I'm sticking to it.

In any case, Morrison is wailing this time around, with a restrained jazz influence—he opts for the horn solo over the guitar every time. He's got quite a few gems here, most notably "Burning Ground," "Piper at the Gates of Dawn," and "Waiting Game." "Burning Ground" is more up-tempo and aggressive than we've heard from Van Morrison in some time, and those who've forgotten he's responsible for "Wild Night" and "Domino" will be reminded that he's not just a balladeer. "Piper at the Gates of Dawn" is a sweet acoustic song inspired by *The Wind In The Willows*, which is (I suppose) where Pink Floyd also nicked the title, however Van's melody provides much more meat for these lyrical potatoes. "Waiting Game" is very much in the mold of "Tupelo Honey," "Enlightenment," "Have I Told You Lately That I Love You," or any of a dozen Van Morrison songs that seem to have similar chord structures yet distinguish themselves lyrically and melodically. It's not that he's ripping

himself off, although Mr. Morrison has done that in the past; he rewrote "Country Fair" (from the highly underrated *Veedon Fleece*) as "The Mystery" (on *Poetic Champions Compose*) to great effect.

This is not to say that Morrison's voice makes repertoire unimportant, but what is true is that when Van delivers with a passion, he can make what is to the casual observer a rather pedestrian song into a revelation. And when he's fulfilling a mere contractual obligation, he can render a song with all the makings of a classic into something quite ordinary.

Van Morrison may be personally erratic, but he is the greatest living recording artist to survive the second era of rock 'n' roll. He is currently in a very productive phase, making an album every couple of months. This is his best album since his last one. Bless him. Buy it.

P.S. There's a little flyer inside the CD announcing that several of Van Morrison's best albums—*Veedon Fleece*, *Tupelo Honey*, *St. Dominic's Preview*, *Hard Nose The Highway*, *A Period of Transition*, *It's Too Late To Stop Now*, and *Wavelength*—have recently been put back into circulation after being out of print for years. All of these are fine, but *St. Dominic's Preview* and *Veedon Fleece* are absolute must-have's.

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Michael Tearson

Davis' "Cocaine Blues." From his cowboy roots come the great ballad "Buffalo Skinners (On the Trail of the Buffalo)" and the rambling "South Coast" plus Ian Tyson's "Will James," which is the newest song included. From his erstwhile partner in song Derroll Adams comes "Rake and Ramblin' Boy." And there's Tim Hardin's "If I were a Carpenter," complete with some memories of Hardin.

The decision to keep the album purely a solo affair pays off big time as Jack is in peak form. His guitar picking is excellent and his singing clear and direct, never better. Brent Sigmeth engineered the session, imbuing the album with living-room intimacy.

Ramblin' Jack Elliott is a force of nature. A measure of what a treasure he is, how wide his influence, and general the appreciate of him is found in the liner notes. These are in the form of a lengthy series of testimonials and recollections of his exploits by Guy Clark, Doc Watson, Joan Baez, and many more.

South Coast is an instant classic. If you are going to have

only one Jack Elliott album, you can't do any better.

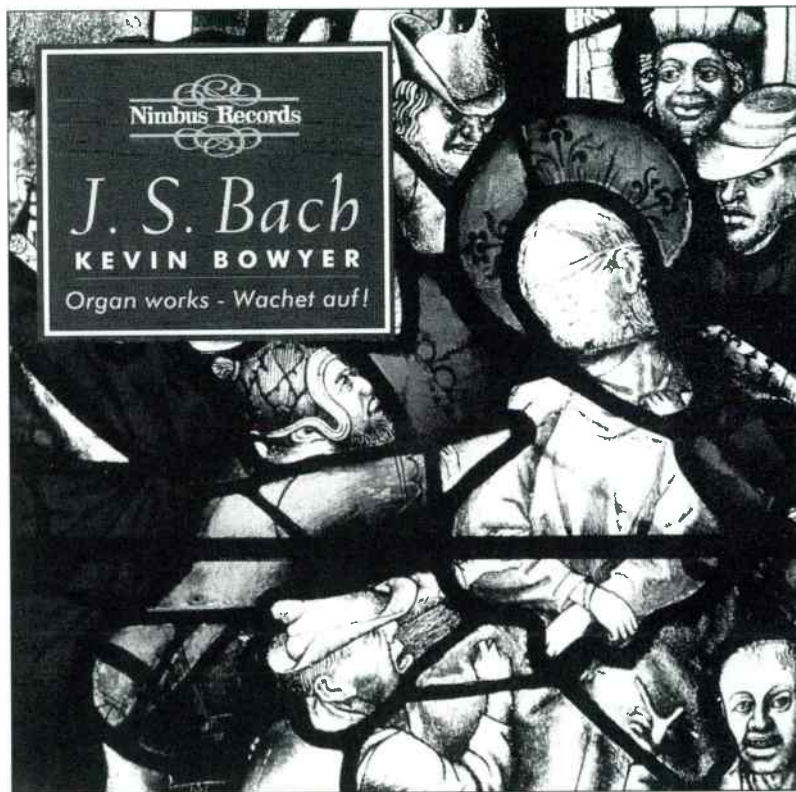
It is nearly two decades since Jack Elliott's last album, but this most recent one—almost two years old now since its release—may well be his finest.

It is just Jack. Voice and guitar. He offers a dozen of his most favorite songs including four by his hero Woody Guthrie: "Pastures of Plenty," "I Ain't Got No Home," "Talking Dust Bowl," and "Ludlow Massacre." He plays Jesse Fuller's signature song "San Francisco Bay Blues" and Bessie Smith's "Mean Ol' Bedbug Blues" plus Rev. Gary

ROCK

Ramblin' Jack Elliott
South Coast

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Classical

J.S. Bach: The Works for Organ, Vol. VIII
Kevin Bowyer at the Marcussen Organ of Sct.
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Arthur Paxton

organ chorale prelude, a form that recurs frequently throughout these discs and which was at the heart of Bach's creative life and his culture. A chorale prelude, originally a preamble to the singing of a hymn in the Lutheran service, was meant to amplify the emotional tone of the hymn and inspire a spiritual fervor in the congregation. To the frequent consternation of his congregation, always eager to get on with their singing, Bach's chorale preludes developed into beautifully focused compositions, each one a miniature marvel. With lyrical charm or with brilliance, with dramatic contrasts or the steady pursuance of a musical design, they mingle on this disc, with fugues, toccatas, and trio sonatas. This program of various kinds of organ works from different stages in Bach's life, is bound to offer a fuller, more intimate experience of Bach's art, than the usual collection of certified blockbusters.

This two-disc package represents Volume Eight of Kevin Bowyer's traversal of J.S. Bach's complete organ works. Yes, Bach was prolific. Anyone who wishes to identify the complete Bach organ works soon notices that that few of the works survive in the master's hand. Most were written by unknown copyists whose attribution to "Bach" may have referred to any of a host of contemporary organists who shared the same last name. Even when a

High noon in Dresden, 1717. J.S. Bach, the visiting organist from Weimar, known for his virtuosity and ability to extemporize, is to meet Louis Marchand, the most famous French keyboard player. The hour of the contest has been set and the jury selected. The French camp and the German camp can only wait, both sides anticipating victory. Bach wants to limber up at the big instrument, give her a good test drive. Marchand, overhearing Bach's practice session, realizes what humiliation awaits, and slips quietly out of town. Word of the German victory spreads quickly; Bach's reputation is assured (his reputation as organist, that is). But tides turn, and before long, the French could take pride in the fact that by the time Bach died in 1750, his contrapuntal technique was a relic, and *le style galant* was all the fashion. Bach was history.

Mendelssohn, who rediscovered Bach several generations later, chose to play for Schumann an

copy was made from autograph manuscript, it could become corrupt as mistakes were introduced and compounded in subsequent copies. Some pieces were simply lost. Furthermore, in Bach's day there was no clear delineation between music for the various keyboard instruments, and music intended for harpsichord was readily adopted for organ.

Kevin Bowyer, faced with various options, chooses to err on the side of inclusiveness. Thus, we get to hear (but not on Volume Eight) such unprovable works as the favorite, Toccata and Fugue in D minor (BWV 565). Including only those dubious works whose long history of Bach attribution has bestowed a gleam of respectability would mean accepting the mistakes of an earlier, less scientific age. Bowyer, after considering "a blanket ban of sheer dullness" finds that strategy also lacking, and opts to include all the surviving organ music which has ever had J.S. Bach's name attached, and that which has ever known a tradition of performance involving the organ.

Of greater interest to most listeners is Bowyer's desire to shape this massive body of work into "a sequence of recitals each complete as a concert programme in itself.... I hope that the result is, as Bach is, fresh and new." Thus, a double fugue on a theme of Legrenzi (BWV 574) gives way to a manuals-only arrangement of Vivaldi's "Concerto" from "L'estro armonico," a light-textured contrast. After three chorale preludes, we encounter the only work in this volume to have survived as an autograph manuscript, the powerfully expressive "Prelude and Fugue in B minor" (BWV 544.) Three "Neumeister Chorale Preludes," are followed by a four-movement trio sonata with a complicated pedigree. Most preludes and fugues have acquired their partners through tradition, rather than original intention, but the "Prelude and Fugue in C" (BWV 547) seems to have been written as a kind of matched pair. And that's only the first disc of this volume! (Disc Two is anchored by the "Fantasia and Fugue in C minor" (BWV 537) and the hefty "Toccata and Fugue in D minor" (Dorian).

A tireless performer of challenging modern music, Bowyer's technique must be ample for any situation. His spry tempos and clean articulation show no strain, though in the "Prelude" of BWV 531, a slight pulling ahead imparts a headlong

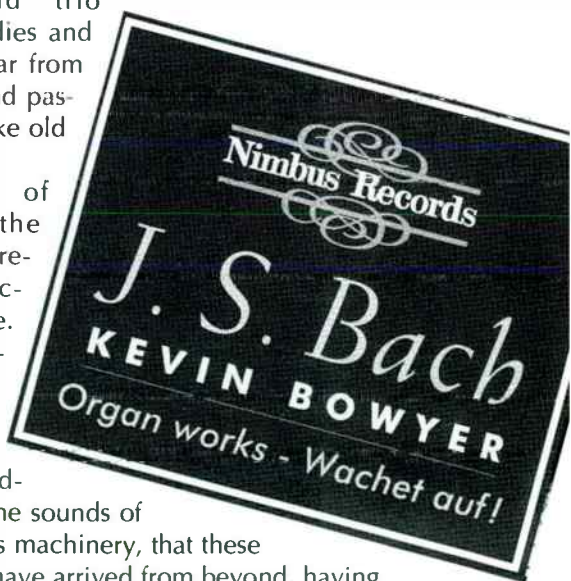
impetuosity entirely appropriate to the energy of this youthful work. His association with contemporary composers must inform his sense of color. Contrasts in registration (orchestration of the available sounds of an organ), both within pieces and between consecutive pieces enliven the performances. New voices appear regularly as Bowyer exploits the timbral resources of the Marcussen Organ of Sct. Hans Kirke in Odense, Denmark, yet the most characterful registrations are used sparingly. Thus, in "An Wasserflussen Babylon" (BWV 653b) a tremulant voice stands out, its slow cadential trill mimicking its own quavering tone. (Yes, Bach's organ could

sing with vibrato.) A nasal buzz (krumhorn?) pervades the low voice in the second of the six "Schübler" Chorales, while the good cheer of the sixth, "Kommst du nun, Jesu, von Himmel herunter," is enhanced by a registration with a distinctly effervescent attack.

Bach, like Handel, was great at recycling. He worked hard to create themes that could combine or interact well with other musical material, and as a practical man, reused the good stuff. Any improviser has a bag of runs, patterns, fragments or themes he can dip into; Bach just had more and better. He also made organ arrangements of whole cantata movements. So, in the course of the choral preludes and trio sonatas, melodies and textures familiar from the cantatas and passions appear like old friends.

A video of Bowyer at the organ could present an instructive perspective. The performances are so apparently effortless, and the recording so free of the sounds of the instrument's machinery, that these tones seem to have arrived from beyond, having bypassed the sloppy travails of mortals. Even in performance, many organists are hidden, but the physical involvement required is Herculean: This multivoiced music demands feet as well as fingers.

**A sequence of Bach
recitals, each complete...
both fresh and new.**



Indeed, the pedals carry two voices throughout the serene but rich-textured "An Wasserflussen Babylon" ("By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion").

At the end of each piece, one listens for several seconds as the final chord resonates in the air and gradually fades away. Yet Nimbus has struck the right balance between capturing the resonance of this Danish church while projecting the characteristic registrations in all their gradations from hollow to piquant.



Most importantly, the resonance never obscures the clarity of the independent lines. Well, sometimes a bit: In the densely written "Fugue in C," recurrences of the theme "pop out" only as the tightly constrained theme breaks into a downward skip on the off-beat. Those who enjoy organ music for pedal tones that register on the Richter scale, can add this to their collection, but most listeners will sim-

ply enjoy this recording for its clean and neutral window on Bach's world.

Symphony and chamber music aficionados, Wacht auf! You may be missing out, for you will not hear this music in your favorite concert hall.

This recording of Bach on the Nimbus label will appeal to a wide variety of music lovers.

New Age buffs, listen up. Bach was a flesh and blood father of 21 children, yet his music will always be a spiritual touchstone to people of different races and religions. Bach's music is busy, so enjoy the sweep of texture and emotion, then, if you ever want to put it under a microscope, see how like a crystal it is constructed. This is one place where a seeker can expect to find.

Minimalists, take note. A theme interacts with itself upside-down; backward, or even retrograde inversions appear, at first layered slowly, then piled up in stretto. Bach's music is a kind of fractal dance, geometry in sound.

B-3 hipsters, you too: Get Bach!



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RECORDINGS

Earle Stevens

The word "sonata" was first used in the 1500s to define any music not sung. Two hundred years or so later, the form had evolved into the Baroque sonata, which is the forebear of this composition presented by Janos Starker and Gregory Sebok. These works by composers who span the 19th Century are, by today's standards, classic in form—two players in dialogue, in the romantic tradition. Recorded in Watford Town Hall, just outside London, in the early 1960s on three-track masters, these recordings represent the purest form of stereo common in the USA. The recording techniques

seconds, then repeat. (Ah, the glories of CD automation.) This time follow just the piano line, a quiet room is a necessity. Now, listen again. This time do not think, do not follow and, most importantly, do not analyze. Just let the music wash over you. Afterwards, you will remember hearing music you never heard before. How can something so seemingly simple be so sophisticated? Great art! Great performance! The better your equipment, the better this CD will sound, but keep in mind that the music stands alone and is, I hope, the reason to buy this release.

Classical

Johannes Brahms Sonata For Cello and Piano, No.1 in E Minor and No.2 in F Minor
Felix Mendelssohn Sonata No.2 In D Major
Janos Starker, Cello Gregory Sebok, Piano
Mercury 434 377-2

were highly refined and the instrumentation simpler, though this was not simple to record. The result is great recording of great music by great musicians.

It is interesting that Janos Starker's first orchestral assignment at the Budapest Opera and Philharmonic Orchestra seemed to follow the route pioneered by Mendelssohn almost a century earlier. Starker met Sebok at music school in Budapest and they concertized together until the end of World War II. In this disc, they sound like life-long friends which, indeed, they are.

This is serious lights-out music, warm, approachable and cerebral. Listen and follow the cello line in the Brahms No.2, Movement 3 *Allegro passionato*; this timing is only 6 minutes, 45



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SEBOK



RECORDINGS

JAZZ

Curtis Fuller
Blue Note/UA Sessions

Mosaic
MQ5-166

Jack Skowron

It's always exciting to find an LP-sized package at the door, but this one from Mosaic had me perplexed. Was I ordering in my sleep? I then noticed the magazine name in the address, and a call to the editor confirmed that review copies had been requested. I'd wanted these boxes, but then, I covet all the Mosaic sets (and own 80 to 85% of them; a jazz lover can pin up their catalog, toss a dart, and order any set hit). (O.K., audioshrink, I confess to some initial mild ambivalence. Stereophile writers, after all, got Miles and Lee Morgan. Listening quickly soothed my tortured soul.)

The five-LP Fuller set, four from Blue Note and the last on United Artists, were recorded in the late '50s. Each has a distinct personality, with differing personnel, and they chronicle his growth during an early and fertile period. The first LP, with Hank Mobley's tenor sharing the front line, is a fine but laid back hard-bop date, with Fuller sounding slightly tentative. The second LP substitutes Tate Houston (baritone sax) for Mobley, and Sonny Clark on piano, and

things heat up. Houston, previously unknown to me, is a pleasant surprise; Clark, no surprise, is crisp, clean, clever, and creative, both comping and soloing.



Illinois Jacquet
The Complete Sessions
1945-50

Mosaic
MQ6-165

JAZZ

I.P 3 features a two-brass front line with Art Farmer on trumpet (Clark stays on). This is another relaxed date, though not at all tentative. Farmer, in a Miles bag, can be cool or hot as needed, and Fuller's playing and composing are maturing and reach a new level here. The next disc, inexplicably unreleased here previously (it was out in Japan in 1979), goes one step further, pairing Fuller with Slide Hampton for a two-bone duel. They're quite distinct, Fuller's soft, woolly, J.J. Johnson-inspired tone and discrete, boppish phrasing contrasting with Hampton's more brash, brassy sound and greater use of the slide. First-rate playing at high intensity and fine (Fuller) compositions make this an exciting album ("Fuss Budget" is a standout, Fuller playing fast and furious).

The last record, the UA, is better yet. Start with a dream band, (Hank Mobley, Lee Morgan, Tommy Flanagan, Paul Chambers and Elvin Jones), add arrangements by Gigi Cryce and Benny Golson, season with good sonics and you have a soulful stew.

Speaking about the sonics of the box, they are

quite fine, thank you. The Blue Notes have rich instrumental timbre, with astonishing presence and punch. There is good room sound and open-



ness, though they do have the hard right-left separation ("Beatles stereo") common to many early stereo (pop/jazz) recordings, horns coming out of the left channel, rhythm section out of the right. (The first three LPs have their debut in stereo). The UA has better localization and spread of instruments across a stage, though sometimes you hear tape saturation, and the Blue Notes have slightly richer instrumental texture.

So, there are many levels one can listen on. The development of a young artist at a pivotal point of his career, both in playing and composing, makes fascinating listening. Or, one could relax and just enjoy some fine music, fine sonics, or both. Recommended.

The Illinois Jacquet compilation is very different. Jacquet, while also young when these were recorded, is already secure stylistically and the recordings are consistent throughout. The sonics of the set are not as good as the Fuller, however. First, they're mono. Second, many "original masters" are no longer available, so these tracks are culled from collectors' rare 78s (this is surely the best available sound for all these recordings, however). So why should you want this box? To paraphrase another sax-slinger, "It's the music, stupid!"

The post-war music scene was exciting. Big bands, while past their heyday, were still influential. Bebop was exploding, and dancers were into the new Jump and R & B sounds. Jacquet combined these into an original amalgam. He had earlier gained notoriety for his solo on Lionel Hampton's "Flying Home" (reprised here under his own name), and had been a featured soloist in the Basie band. His sound, while an outgrowth of earlier greats such as Lester Young, Coleman Hawkins, and Chu Berry, introduced the honking, screaming tenor sound to jazz.

Years back, reading how Jacquet sired this school of saxophonists, I sought out recordings and was puzzled by what I heard. Some later ('60s) dates featured fine, sometimes impassioned, virtuosic playing, but the reckless abandon and wildness wasn't there (there was even jazz bassoon, for heaven's sake). The earlier "Flying Home" solo, while terrific, still doesn't seem to presage the raucous R & B saxmen of the next generation. As most of this material was unavailable until now, his wild reputation was difficult to fathom (I do have a digitally remastered LP The

Black Velvet Band, with some of these tracks in inferior sound, that also didn't convey what Jacquet was about). He's no one-trick pony, though, he can play with bebop fluidity, enunciate or glide over the changes, and make eloquent musical statements. Then, at times, it seems the emotional intensity overwhelms and routine fingerings and tempered notes are insufficient, and he wails (later, some of this hardens into set pieces, with one repeated note, screamed to rouse an audience). These sounds became the mainstay of R & B honkers and shouters, and the jazz avant-garde took them places undreamed of by Jacquet.

The hits are here: "Flying Home," "Robbins' Nest," "Black Velvet," and others. Jacquet preferred mid-sized ensembles (seven to 10 pieces) capable of a combo's swing and a big band's

power (there is one bonafide big-band date too). Featured musicians include brother Russell, Bill Doggett, Joe Newman, Emmett Berry (on two fabulous dates), J.J. Johnson, Leo Parker, and many others, though the star is clearly Jacquet.

Stylistic terrain covered includes mostly swing and jump band grooves, with deep blues, ballads, and some bebop.

(Let me try to illustrate the differences between these two collections with reactions of my housemates. My wife, who likes Broadway, Ella, and Emmylou, can sit through the Fuller, even comment on its high W.A.F., while Jacquet, in his hotter moments, can drive her out of the room. My three-year-old daughter, on the other hand, has little interest in Fuller, but jumps up to dance when Jacquet is playing. Shayna, my ten-year-old dog, sleeps through it all).

Again, sonics are variable, with some tracks having an immediacy and richness of timbre, while others are not as well preserved. Still, this is the only way to get this exciting music. Comparing the RCA Bluebird LP (6571-1-RB) to the Mosaic, it's obvious how much more open, clear, and natural the Mosaic is. The RCA sounds hazy, harsh, and dull, with bleached-out instruments. I have not heard the CDs (of either box) but the vinyl is great, and I assume, with past experience to support me, that they, too, are fine sounding.

So, we have two more Mosaic winners. Save your shekels, you have great some listening in store for you. Your ears will love you.

While the sonics are variable, due to the age of the recordings, the music is available nowhere else. Get it!

RECORDINGS

Al Green
Anthology

The Right Stuff
72438-530-33-2-6

JAZZ



Jon Tiven

Most box sets seem to miss the boat when it comes to walking the fine line between appealing to the uninitiated and pleasing the fans who already own all the released recordings. They either offer just a few not-so-rare recordings, mixed with all of the hits already available, or concentrate so hard on unreleased product that the sum and substance of the artist is lost. Al Green's box set is practically a textbook case of how to assemble a package such as this, delivering most of the hits, true rarities, interview material, and concentrating on the artist's best work. Considering that Al Green's career has been full of highs and lows, this was no easy task, and kudos to those responsible.

First off, Al Green is probably the last true soul singer to reach the mass audience, and he created a body of work that has stood the test of time, despite Green's

defection from the pop music world. This is not to minimize Green's talents as a soul singer, but not all of the credit for these records is entirely his. The best of Al Green's recordings display a collaboration between Green, his well-known producer Willie Mitchell, and a backup band that was much more than that. Very important to Green's success was his rhythm section, made up of the Hodges Brothers (particularly guitarist Teenie, who co-wrote some of Green's best songs, ones like "Love & Happiness" and "Take Me To The River") and the late drummer Al Jackson, all seasoned musical stylists just hitting their prime. It was this combination, and nothing less, that provided the sound that framed Al Green's emotive delivery. Without it, Green might have languished and the Hi Rhythm Section might have never been cast in the light they shared. To

the producer's credit, this is the period from which this collection is drawn (with the addition of a few pre-Mitchell tracks), because nothing he has done since holds a candle to these tracks.

The sound of these records is nothing short of revolutionary, and the mastering job allows the crispness of the snare to cut through without sacrificing the warmth or the bottom end that encircled Green's voice. Mitchell's productions ranged from the most spare (a naked rhythm section punctuated by horn stabs) to lush arrangements with major string charts, but space was always a prime instrument. The digital remastering seems to have clarified the sonic picture somewhat without disturbing it, no mean feat.

Disc one starts with "Back Up Train," a David Ruffin-type recording that predates his Memphis records, and although

it lacks what would become the archetypal Memphis Green sound, it is a powerful track. But it is essentially a recording of its time, good but derivative of Motown, unlike his version of "Can't Get Next To You" cut with Memphians just a few years later, also a Motown song but also a classic "Al Green record."

The way Al Jackson nails the groove with his snare, underpinning Teenie's riffing, is what makes this such an unusual and identifiable cut. That plus the fact Green sings the everloving heck out of the song, puts it squarely among his best-ever covers, along with "Are You Lonely For Me Baby" (which

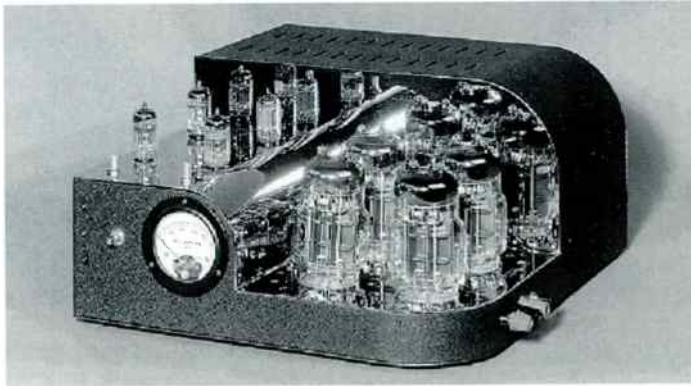
should have made it on this collection instead of the silly "I Want To Hold Your Hand"). So, when it comes to Green's material, there are some lapses, but that is a small quibble.

The album leans heavily on TV performances for the rarities, as there were several great individual things on the tube as well as a documentary done in 1978. We get treated to Al explaining his writing process, the beginnings of "Tired of Being Alone" as he plays (and sings) through a piece of it, and various live versions of "Love & Happiness," "Judy," and "Let's Stay Together." Green himself didn't always choose appropriate material, so we also have to listen through "We've Only Just Begun." But nobody's perfect; it would have been nice if there were live versions of Kristofferson's "For The Good Times" or Eddie Floyd's "I've Never Found A Girl."

However, in defense of the Reverend Al, he does a mesmerizing job, even on the material that is beneath him, and that can include some of his own songs. He can take a song, which for all intents and purposes shouldn't really work, and turn it into a hit record. When Al Green made a bad record, if the Hi Rhythm Section was behind him and Willie Mitchell at the boards, no one really noticed, because it was an Al Green record and no one sings like him. One wishes he had more insight into the difference between his great and not-so-great recordings and that he'd get in the studio with Teenie and the boys and write some new ones.

In the meantime we have this box, an undeniably fine thing, and fans should rejoice. Those less than convinced should do themselves a favor and pick up on this one.

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Positive Feedback Magazine

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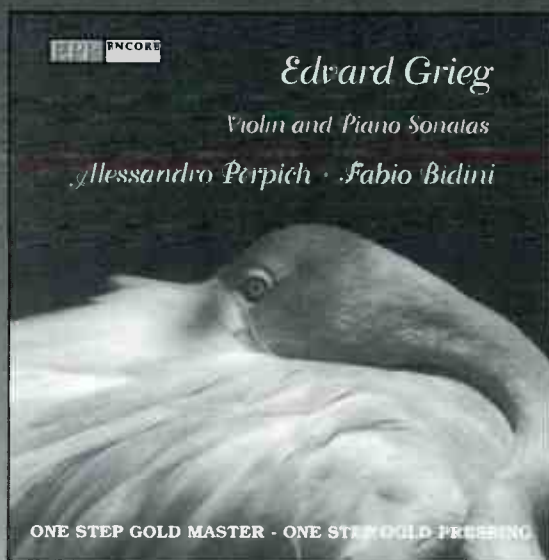
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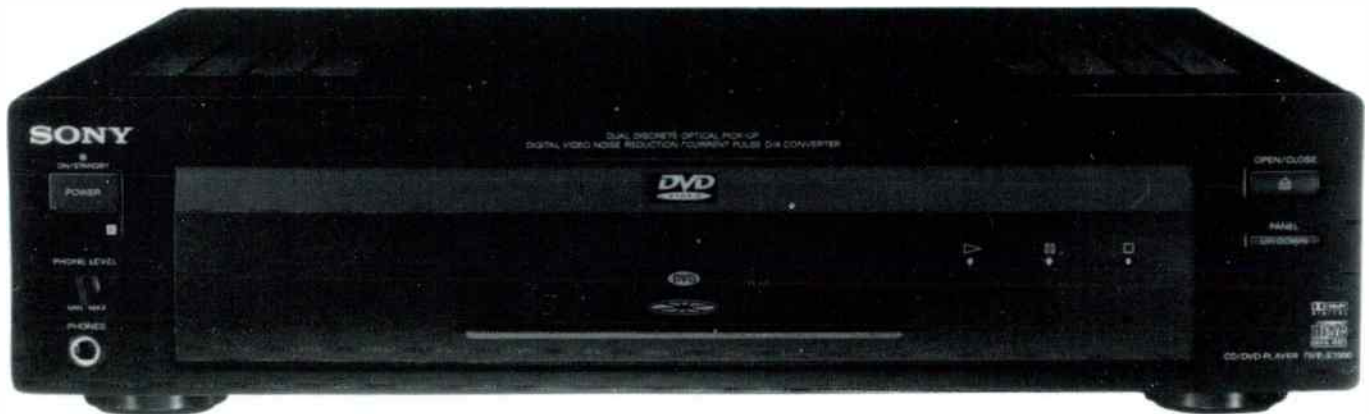
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SONY DVP-S7000 DVD PLAYER



Arnis Balgalvis, sidebar by Bill Brassington

Whoa! What's going on here? The Audiophile Voice reviewing a DVD player? Has the magazine caved in and jumped on the home theater band wagon? Is it snuggling up to big corporations in hopes of attracting big buck advertising? Sorry, folks, none of the above. It simply has to do with the fact that the Sony DVP-S7000 just happens to be a DVD and a CD player. If I were to tell you that the performance of this unit as a DVD player is remarkable, this would be merely something we would expect from a firm such as Sony premiering a new video playback format. The event would be nothing particularly newsworthy for the audiophile community.

But what if I were to tell you that the CD playback capabilities of the DVP-S7000 were exceptional? Is that worthy of some portion of your attention span? Well, folks, read on, because that's precisely the case here

It all started for me with a phone call from Bill Brassington, my friend from The Audiophile Society. He told me that Ron Meyer of Encore Performance Recordings had related to him the experience of hearing more information being retrieved from their own recordings when they used the Sony DVP-S7000 as a CD transport. Bill also faxed me a document being prepared by Encore which outlined their experiences as well as

speculating why it was possible for the Sony to perform in this manner.

That's all I needed to get into high gear. When several calls to some of my usually good sources of equipment did not pan out, and having been warned by Bill that this Sony player was hot news in the DVD world, I was forced to visit a retail establishment. It did not hurt that I work in Manhattan because, sure enough, one of the big discount houses had several Sony 7000s in stock.

But there was good news and bad news. The good news was that I was able to get a unit, the bad news was that the discount was minimal and I ended up using the subway, the train, and a taxi to finally get the unit home. I remember thinking, while dragging this unit home, it better be good!

I also recalled my first encounter with the Compact Disc. It, too, was a Sony product, the CDP-101. Another fellow member of The Audiophile Society, David Paley, in a fit of impetuosity, had purchased his unit during a trip to Japan. Not only that, but he had also brought back 10 discs. This was at a time when the CD format was just barely on the horizon and only people like the late Len Feldman had access to a player. CDs were so hard to come by that Mario Mazza of radio station WNCN (yes, Virginia, there was a time when those call letters

represented classical music in Gotham City) somehow heard about this treasure and arranged to borrow David's discs for broadcast purposes.

That was when I fell for the sound of Compact Discs. The dynamic range, the coherence, and the solid presentation were all attractive aspects of CD, despite a certain brittleness and hardness evident in the CD relative to the smooth and palpable presentation offered by the vinyl version of the recording. I also enjoyed the lack of end-of-record inner-groove distortion as well as the no-pop and no-tick, silent background supporting the presentation.

I soon found that I was in the minority group of audiophiles who found CDs exciting at this early stage. I realize now that the system I was using at the time was forgiving of the vices of digital sound, while at the same time it did allow me to appreciate the plus side of the situation. An Audio Research D-90B power amplifier and the Quad ESL-63 speakers do not qualify as paragons of components exhibiting exceptional or extended high-frequency performance; that's what I was using at the time. The CDP-101 came along, and consequently I was not subjected to the full wrath of CD deficiencies.

The system I used now is somewhat better in this respect. Ed Meitner has been working overtime and has succeeded in elevating his BiDAT processor to an extremely high degree of refinement. He has reduced jitter to vanishingly low levels, modified the filter characteristics, and worked diligently to reduce microphonic artifacts from interfering with sonic fidelity. This is not a magic fix, but a step-by-step re-examination of the various areas of the circuitry, so that a great many small improvements add up to a very significant upgrade as a whole.

In the amplifier area, I am fortunate to have the latest and greatest Krell, the Full Power Balanced 600. At 600 watts into 8 ohms per channel, with the power output doubling for each halving of the load impedance, I not only have power galore, but it is gloriously refined as well. I would like to proceed with a review of this product but am leery of doing it. The reputation of the Krell FPB 600 is practically in the legendary category by now, which leaves me wondering what more could be added.

The speakers residing in my listening room are the Quintessence Acoustics Shadows, a very seri-

ous product from a designer with very serious aspirations. In my experience, it also happens to live up to its desired place in the high-end hierarchy. A five-way, dynamic-driver design, standing almost six feet tall and weighing in at 200 lb. a side, this is a joy of a product to look at and, far more importantly, it does the music justice—in spades. Like almost all good things in high end, they come at a high-end price: \$19,000 to be exact. I hope to give you a more detailed take on this exceptional product in a future report.

All cables are The Decade version by TARA Labs. The cable situation, as a whole, is always fascinating, not only due to the wide variety of products already available, but also by the bewildering variety of evolving developments. And this

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is not to mention the attendant and staggering pricing policies. All of this is, no doubt, sparked by the spontaneous consumption in the high-end market place. Just when I thought that The Decade from TARA was something which would keep us happy for quite some time, they go ahead and introduce The One. Word has it that this cable will be made available very soon, so I'll keep you posted about improvements over The Decade, which I already consider to be an outstanding cabling system. I don't want to make too great an assumption, but my experience up to now with each of the TARA Lab product iterations leads me to think that improvements over the previous generation of product are a given.

Back To The Player

The Sony DVP-S7000 really lives up to the heavy public expectations for it as a DVD player. First, however, let me remind you that somewhere along the line of the DVD development, the "V" in DVD came to mean VERSATILE. Nice try, guys! But no way, Jose! Versatile is not something that will roll off the tongue easily and it will probably not fly with the general public. For now, it appears to me that DVD stands for Digital Video Disc. Period.

[Editor's Carp: Sorry, Arnie, but I think the "versatile" is a hellava lot more accurate and descriptive than the "video," however lightly the latter word makes the trip off one's tongue. Else why are we doing this review? Besides, it's only one more syllable.—Gene Pitts]

Nevertheless, this Sony player is indeed versatile! It will do DVD video discs, video CDs, and audio CDs. Of course, it has composite video outputs, and audio outputs for the L and R channels come out on RCA jacks for linking up to your TV. It also has both an S-Video and component video outputs for a more refined manner of transferring the video information. But the good news for us audio guys is the appearance of the digital output on an RCA jack or TOS-link connector to get at the composite digital audio signal.

That's all I needed to float my boat. Or so I thought, having had my head immersed in the sand of the two-channel sound Sahara. Could I leave well enough alone and merely concentrate on the sonic performance of the DVP-S7000? Nooooo! I have to take this unit and hook it to my TV and go out and rent a couple of DVD movies. Well, no matter what this player can do as a CD transport I am also sold on its video playback abilities. It's hard to imagine this unit's stunning video performance is delivered with such simplicity and flexibility. As far as I'm concerned, there's only one reason not to get this unit right now and that is to wait for the inevitable future models with the attendant price decreases. I do believe that you would seriously shortchange yourself in the gratification department should you decide to dally and delay.

Visually, the DVP-S7000 is quite imposing. For a player that handles CD size discs, the dimensions of 17 inches wide by 4-3/8 inches high by 15-3/8 inches deep are surprisingly substantial. At 22 lbs., it is also no light weight. Sony has implemented an aluminum front panel and an anti-resonant top plate to guard against the air-borne vibrations common in home-theater environments.

Also part of the construction execution is a high-density calcium-carbonate polymer resin, honeycomb construction panels, an isolated glass-epoxy audio circuit board, and special isolation feet that support the unit. Of course, all these are considerations audiophiles love see implemented.

Not to be forgotten is the Dual Discrete optical pickup consisting of two separate lenses and laser diodes to avoid lens switching and extend the life of the laser. One has been optimized for CDs and uses a 780-nM wavelength, while the second has been optimized for DVDs and uses a 650-nM wavelength.

It would be remiss not to mention some of the excellent DAC ideas that come as part and parcel of the DVP-S7000, which had been originally intended for application in the Sony ES Series CD Player. What you get here is the current pulse digital-to-analog converter, the full feed-forward digital filter, R-core transformers to minimize flux leakage, and twin monoaural topology to provide identical L- and R-channel audio signal paths. Not only more good news for the audiophile, but an excellent display of Sony's philosophy to provide the

But let's get back to the CD playback experience. While I will not proclaim this product to be the greatest find since the inception of the Compact Disc, I am prepared to tell you that the Sony DVP-7000 is one hell of a great CD transport. This was not a case of looking for minute improvements, the wholesome improvements in the sonic performance sprang to life loud and clear right from the very first CD.

Call it rhythm, call it pace, the musical presentation was in tune, in time, in space in spades. There was more of everything: Focus, fidelity, transparency, resolution, and so on. It was that unmistakable feeling that happens every so often that you know that something very substantial and very significant is happening. The sense of right was coming across loud and clear. I didn't want to stop listening for fear I would lose whatever it was I knew I had gained. Fortunately, the magic resumed every time I returned to the DVP-S7000.

It is simply excels at getting you to pay attention to the music. I found myself mesmer-

NOTES

Sony DVP-S7000 DVD Player, price, \$999.99. Manufacturer, Sony Corporation of America, One Sony Dr., Park Ridge, NJ 07656.

Associated Equipment

Mark Levinson No. 37 CD transport; Jeff Rowland Design Group "Synergy" line-stage preamplifier; Museatex BIDAT D/A processor; Krell FPB-600 power amplifier; Sony SS-M9, Platinum Audio Reference One, and Quintessence Audio "The Shadow" loudspeakers; TARA Labs "The Decade" interconnects and speaker cables, and ASC Tube Traps and RAG Abuser

ized by a very involving and practically seductive presentation. Performers took on a greater sense of presence and, yes, immediacy. The sound was incisive, inviting, and involving. This was particularly impressive since it was an across-the-board phenomenon starting right down in the deep bass region, moving along the all-important mid-range area, and extending right into the treble. It presented a soundstage vividly hovering between the loudspeakers, putting the whole of the performance, with each of its performers, in a palpable perspective.

Another attractive aspect of the reproduction had to do with the drive and energy portion. The music appeared to have more bounce and a more lively character. Each performer in a group seemed to be more in step with each other. I was also impressed by the sense of power and cohesion that resulted from more clearly defined attacks as well as the more natural decay times. No matter how complex the music got, a sense of order and grace could be easily discerned resulting in a very enticing and engrossing experience. And yet all this was accentuated by a feeling of calm.

The dynamics were really something to hear. The presentation had the necessary foundation from which to build the rest of the music, with the attacks being sharp and swift in the best sense of those concepts. Images appeared evenly and accurately rendered in their desired locations, but with a very firm rendition of focus throughout the stage.

The best part was the natural balance of the harmonic structure of the instruments. The timber was more in character with each particular instrument which resulted in the instrument being displayed more prominently within the soundstage imagery. This produced a rich and vibrant panorama as well as substantially increased detail in the sound space that materialized between the loudspeakers. I was pleasantly surprised to have new information revealed to me in the form of spatial cues, harmonic richness, firm focus, and an increased awareness of the recording locale.

I also found the DVP-S7000 could track damaged CDs far better than any other transport in my experience. As you have noticed, everybody is putting out CDs, even Starbucks of the coffee house fame. Such news can only come from one

source, and that is none other than Bill Brassington. When he played cut 2 of Hot Java Jazz at a recent get-together, everybody responded in unison: "What the — is that!?" What a great cut. Well, on my copy, I managed to ruin the beginning of this track, or so I thought. After having bought another copy of this great CD (of course, I got it for playing one cut, I'm an audiophile), I found the Sony DVD player able to flawlessly play the damaged disc, one I had given up for junk.

So far it appears that I am onto something right up there next to the Holy Grail. Sorry, folks! The Sony DVP-S7000 is not the perfect CD transport. When I compared it to the Mark Levinson No. 37

The Holy Grail of CD transports? No, but this dual-purpose unit IS something very special.

CD transport, there were a couple areas where the No. 37 did better. High- and low-frequency extension were two areas, while slam or power was another.

Simply put, the ML unit provided more extension

and supplied a more-informative high-frequency spectrum than did the Sony. The No. 37 also imbued the reproduction with more authority and a greater sense of power. The end result was a sonic presentation that was even more transparent and more refined than that of the DVP-S7000.

Disappointed? Don't be! What did you really expect? A free lunch? It is not even remotely realistic to consider that a transport which is part of a mass-produced DVD player, and which includes a DAC, could outperform a dedicated CD transport from a high-end stalwart like Madrigal. What does surprise me is that the Sony did perform as well as it did. And that is why I am bringing it to your attention.

While in a critical mood, let me also register some little disappointment regarding the physical construction of the DVP-S7000. Simply put, I have developed a certain level of expectation from certain companies and Sony is one of them. Call it complacency if you will. All through the years, every time I got my hands on a Sony product, I always experienced a feeling of satisfaction and value. Early on, I was privileged to live with the exceptional Sony Esprit components which ended up being not terribly well received by the general public, but as far as I was concerned, they were ahead of their time in build quality and performance. The Sony XBR televisions are always on my hope-to-get-someday list. More recently, I had

the pleasure of experiencing the wonderful Sony SS-M9 loudspeaker. If there ever was a steal in the industry this it. And that's a feeling echoed by our own John Hellow in his recent review.

But the DVP-S7000 does not have the feel of the Sony products that I'm familiar with. As I pointed out, it sure does perform well beyond expectations, but the construction, execution, and feel does not meet the standard set by the best Sony products. It started while I was taking the unit out of the packing carton. This unit seemed flimsy. Then when I pressed the button to insert a CD, the tray emerged in a labored and strained manner. Not what I had come to expect from this firm. Now, to be fair, I have not yet made the complete rounds and familiarized myself with all of the competing units. But I never had the urge to do so before this.

Of course, I'm not going to close on that note. Any unit that can survive scrutiny in the company of components in this play-back chain has to rank in the same category. Instead of being revealed as full of shortcomings during this up-close and personal evaluation, this Sony unit more than held its own by revealing an exceptional level of playback capability. The DVP-S7000 to my mind belongs in the top echelon of exalted products. If you take into account the pricing situation, we are talking

deal! Where else can you find a top-of-the-line CD transport for under \$1,000?

To summarize, I would urge you to seriously consider this unit not only for its basic intended purpose as a DVD player, but as a CD transport. My experience with it as an audiophile product is extremely positive, and I would recommend that you give this unit a try. I am very happy that Ron Meyer chose to speak to Bill Brassington about the special capabilities of this product. Encore Performance Recordings proved to be onto something very important for all of us who care about maximizing the playback capabilities of our CDs and consequently making our listening experiences far more enjoyable.

The scrutiny was performed using a system consisting of a prestigious product lineup far exceeding the price point of the product being evaluated. Despite that, this "lowly" DVD player satisfied the very highest level of audiophile demands and it also lets you play back DVD video discs at a performance level beyond any experience you are likely to encounter outside a video editing studio. And with far more convenience.

I do urge you to consider this product in the most serious manner. Sony has created something very special in the CVP-S7000.



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Brass-Bound DVD

Bill Brassington

The Sony DVP-S7000 DVD player is a winner. Not only does it provide very fine video, but it is a stellar performer as an stand-alone audio-playback transport. Believe me, it's right up there with the best of the best.

This Sony transport lures you into the music like no other transport I've heard. Other transports may do things in a little different way, that at first make you feel that their way is the right way, but when you spend some time with the Sony DVP-S7000, you will come to see and understand its very special musical manner. That's the way it should be, with all the information there.

So, is this a fluke or does Sony have something here? At this point, I feel that dragging out all of the audiophile token words will do none of us any good. After almost a full month of listening in various homes with this Sony along side of many other top-of-the-line transports, several of us felt with 99 per cent certainty that the DVP-S7000 is the bargain of the year.

A friend of The Audiophile Society, Ron Meyer of Encore Performance Recordings, told me that when he used this transport, it was the first time he has heard sonics close to what he heard in the actual recording sessions. Meyer and his group of engineers have also done extensive A/B comparisons of the Sony against the best transports they know, and they come up with the same results.

At this point I have to let you in on a secret I've kept for about a year, by going back to a phone call I received from Meyer and Mike Tsecouras. They called and after swearing me to secrecy, said, "Bill, we were thinking of going to another high-end magazine with this, but we like your style and the honest, up-front manner of Gene Pitts from TAV and the rest of The Audiophile Voice group." I was very flattered, so I kept it quiet from my audiophile and reviewer friends, which wasn't easy. However, the results were in, so let's go ahead and print it.

In addition to running Encore, Meyer's day job is currently a Senior Member of the technical staff

in the systems group of Texas Instruments, where he helps develop phased-array antenna systems for wireless communications applications. He holds two electrical engineering degrees from Purdue University (BSEE, '73; MSEE, '75) with emphasis in communication theory. His previous assignments provided military global positioning systems (GPS) navigation systems where he specialized in signal recovery, tracking, and navigation algorithms. He founded Encore Performance Recordings in 1993 to provide quality chamber music recordings on gold CDs to the discriminating listener.

Mike Tsecouras, the other party in the Encore venture, is currently working for the semiconductor group of Texas Instruments where he has

been involved in the overall system design for audio data converters for the past four years. He received his BSEE degree from Southern Methodist Univ. in 1981. Previously, while in the systems group of TI, he designed precision servo-mechanisms utilizing optical motion-feedback sensors. He is a design consultant for the custom electronics components that are used to record and master the EPR CD releases.

With this kind of background, I feel that Ron and Mike ought to know what they are talking about when they theorize about why the Sony DVP-S7000 sounds so good when used as a CD transport. What follows is the Summary section from a White Paper they did:

"In spite of the original promise, and advances in digital audio technology (most notably, the recognition that the quality of the recovered data stream significantly affects the sound of the recovered audio during digital-to-analog conversion), there continues to be a troubling issue with sound quality associated with CD playback. The signals obtained from the microphone feed, the master digital audio tape (DAT) of a recording, and the manufactured CD of the same recording, that has encoded on it the identical musical data as the DAT, all sound different. It has also been recog-

**I've kept this a secret for
about a year but
the time has come.**

nized that a wide variation exists in the quality of sound reproduction from CDs made from the same master recording but manufactured at different pressing plants. There is now an explanation for why this is the case, and it relates to how the CD transport mechanism affects the recovery of the data from the disc and how this process affects the accuracy of the derived reclocking signal.

Research conducted by EPR, in cooperation with an international CD manufacturer, and independent research by Harmonic Hall Optical Disc Ltd., Tsuen Wan, Hong Kong, both show that the problem lies in the very physical manufacturing processes associated with the CD itself. An article by Franky K.L. Fan and Dr. Sam M.S. Yeung in the March 1997 issue of *One to One*, a CD manufacturing industry publication, provides an excellent and detailed description of the exact mechanisms involved. However, the article attributes the sonic differences to digital noise generated inside the CD player, as a byproduct of the disc-related manufacturing issues that affect tracking servo-mechanisms. EPR, based on several year's worth of research using comparisons of their recordings on master DATs against manufactured CDs and CD-Rs, believes the cause of the problem to be reconstructed clock inaccuracies related to both jitter and absolute timing errors in the data stream as a byproduct of the disc manufacturing processes. These errors are due to CD transport servo-mechanism design inadequacies with respect to the cur-

could be the answer. A method now exists to verify which mechanism is at work. The new Sony DVP-S7000 dual-lens and dual-laser DVD player, used as a CD transport, reveals itself as THE new performance benchmark for CD playback, with performance significantly better than any known current audio transport. The better tracking algorithms for DVD are working with a laser and optics optimized for CD! That is a magic combination! When coupled with a high-quality D/A converter (including quality cabling, amplification, and speakers), the full potential of today's

CD standard can now be recognized. Artifacts of "digital sound" are nearly completely removed, although limitations of the sampling rate and word length are still in place. The actual recording engineer's or producer's work can now be

We think that this transport is superior in its ability to reduce bitstream timing errors.

heard. As expected, different label's CDs are now easier to distinguish, since the recording techniques as well as inner detail of each recording now can be more easily recognized. Future potential DVD audio standards (and there are at least half a dozen on the table, (despite Joel Brinkley's inaccurate story in *The New York Times* of July 28, 1997) hold more promise for extending audio performance further, but only if implementation trade-offs (DVD disc quality, signal-to-noise ratio in the optical read channel, and the servo performance) are carefully balanced with observations made using only the very most revelatory CDs available."

N O T E S

Brassington's Associated Equipment

Audio Research Reference 1 preamp; Thor Audio Reference preamp; Museatex BiDAT D/A processor; Levinson No. 39 D/A processor; Levinson No. 31.5 CD transport; Sonic Frontiers SFT-1 CD transport; Altis Reference transport; Audio Research VT100 amplifier; Levinson No. 333 amplifier; Balanced Audio Technology VK1000 and VK60 amplifiers; Lamm Audio M.2 mono amplifiers; Verity Audio Parsifal speakers; Apogee Mini Monitor speakers, and interconnects and cables by Purist Audio and Discovery.

Sony XA7ES CD Player

John Gatski

As the consumer audio technology moves toward an eventual upgrade from the 16-bit, 44.1 kHz sampling rate standard, the current crop of CD players seemed to have evolved about as far as they can go. However, there are existing technology products introduced from time to time that go a notch or two beyond the others. That is the case with the Sony XA7-ES.

The XA7ES is Sony's current top of the line CD player coming in at a fairly high-end retail price of \$3,000. Those willing (and able) to spend that

FEATURES

If a customer is paying a few thousand bucks for a CD player, it ought to not only sound first rate, but shine in the quality and features department. The XA7ES sports Sony's best current pulse D/A converter, feed-forward digital filter, 45-bit internal processing, 20-bit output, time-base error correction, separate toroidal transformers for the analog and digital sections. The analog amplifier is FET based.



The user features include 172-disc Custom File Memory, 32-track programming, 15-track music calendar, eight repeat modes, three-mode music scan, and manual fader with just about all those functions remote controllable.

The Sony's transport mechanism is unique in that the laser is fixed in one position while a sophisticated digital servo motor system rotates the disc and moves the platter across the fixed laser beam. The advantage is said to be fewer jitter and timing errors. The transport also contains a .25-pound stabilizer weight that must be manually placed on the CD to further stabilize the disc's spinning action.

In the dimension department, the Sony is a typically sized CD player until you lift it; it weighs a hefty 33 pounds. Separate power transformers and a heavy-duty transport are main contributors to the massive feel. The front panel functions include the CD drawer, buttons for the various functions including headphone and variable output-volume control and selection of digital outputs. The music calendar and information display are located on the front of the drawer.

Round back, the XA7ES is so well adorned that it reminds me of a piece of pro gear. Not only are there gold-anodized analog output jacks for fixed and variable level use, but there are three-pin XLR-balanced analog outputs and separate Toslink and coaxial digital outputs for use with separate D/A converter (why anybody would bother?) or to record onto digital tape or optical disc (now that makes sense). A rear panel switch also enables output from the balanced XLRs.

Set Up and Listening

I auditioned the XA7ES through several components I had on hand: Legacy High Current amplifier (bipolar output), Hafler Trans-Nova 9505 amplifier (MOSFET output), retubed Dynaco ST-160 amplifier (triode/ultra linear), Bryston BP-20 preamp, Audio by Van Alstine EC tube/MOSFET hybrid preamplifier. Most of the listening was done through Legacy's Classic tower loudspeakers and a set of Apogee ribbon monitors. All interconnects were via Goertz silver Alpha Core flat cables.

As soon as I gave the Sony a suitable warm-up of an hour or so, I ran a whole bunch of CDs of various kinds of music through the player. I was impressed immediately. Using the Legacy amp/speaker combo with the Bryston preamp, I noticed through well-listened CDs that the XA7ES had the ability to etch a "presence" from the music that I have not heard from many CD transport and digital converter combos. Or even from separates CD components.

The first CD I tried, a country recording Wylie and the Wild West Show ("The Wild Side" sounded terrific (and I had tried out the CD on plenty of other players). The electric guitars, pedal steel and vocal on the first cut "Hey Maria" impressed me to the point that I played the song about six times before I let the CD play to the end.

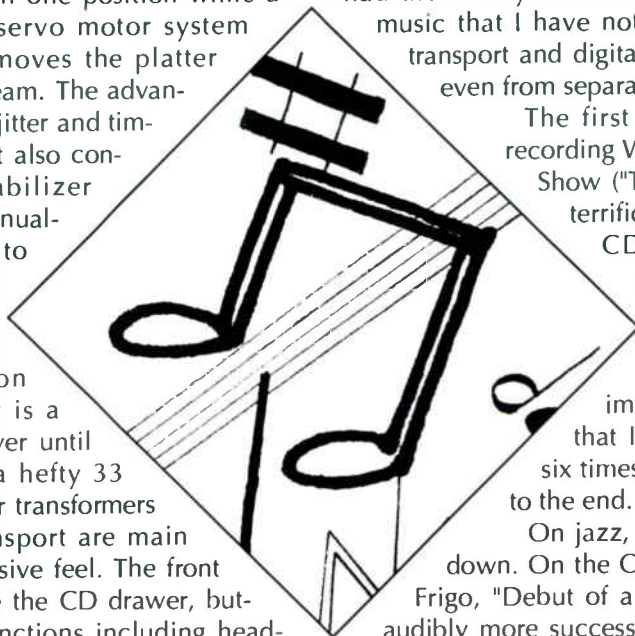
On jazz, the Sony did not let me down. On the Chesky release by Johnny Frigo, "Debut of a Legend," the Sony was audibly more successful than two other players I had on hand in relaying the live soundstage that engineer Bob Katz successfully embodies in his recordings. The smooth, yet dynamic jazz violin, the rhythm of the bass and cymbals and the guitar were far more convincing than the other CD players used for comparisons. These were CD players that, although not as costly, I always thought were exceptional money/performance values. There is no closed in sonic quality or narrow-

Sony's XA7ES is so well adorned that it reminds me of a piece of pro gear.

ing of the stereo image of this player. About the best I have ever heard.

On Chesky's Badi Assad "Solo," again the vocalist and guitarist performances were so real sounding that if you shut your eyes, it could just as well have been live. Now the other players relayed this characteristics with varying degrees of success, but not as well as the Sony.

In recording after recording, I kept noting that aforementioned exceptional smoothness that



allowed me to maintain a complete solid-state audio chain through most of the listening sessions. With other players, I often have substituted an tube amp or preamp to compensate for a "hard" sound. With the XA7ES, I could live with hours of

**Simply no ear fatigue!
It's one of the few variable
output designs I can listen
to over the long haul.**

fairly loud, dynamic music without ear fatigue. Maybe it's the FET in the preamp section? Or the combination of stable transport with ultra accurate converters and the preamp? In fact, I even did extensive listening with the Sony driving the amp directly through its variable outputs. I found this player to be one of the few built-in variable-output designs that I could listen to over the long haul.

The Sony also excelled in bass reproduction. The percussion on DMP's Carved in Stone big-band CD and the Robert Hohner Percussion Ensemble World Music Tour revealed tight, low bass. The quick kick drum wumps, through the Legacy's double woofer system, hit me right in the chest at times.

On DMP's Lynne Arriale Trio From Words Unspoken (also HDCD encoded), Ms. Arriale's piano comes through with all its percussive "tinkliness" intact and the detail of the drum cymbals and rim shots is amazing. Plenty of energy, but never sizzly or brittle.

On classical music, my favorite cello recording, the 1963-65 Janos Starker Mercury Living Presence Bach Suites for Solo Cello, Complete Sonatas in G and D Major for Cello and Piano, the performances were extremely detailed for such old recordings. They are exceptional recordings even by today's standards, and Mr. Stark's cello is alive and very full through the XA7ES. The resolution is so fine you can clearly hear bow noise and the artist breathing. The bass portions of the audio have impact, but they are not bloated.

Even on the rock and blues thickness of Led Zeppelin "II," the XA7ES actually cut through the haze somewhat to make the guitar, bass and drums stand out more as individual instruments.

Frankly, I did not come close to using all the features of Sony XA7ES. The fader function, the custom menu, the shuffle; I merely tried them once to see if they worked. The only feature I used extensively was the program feature to simplify playing favorite cuts. The full-featured remote contains just about every control needed to acti-

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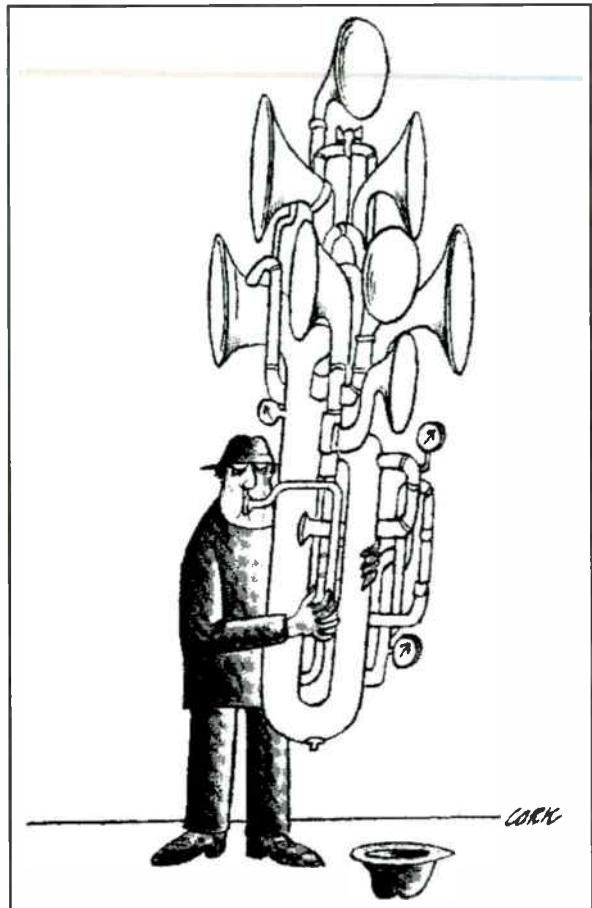
vates these functions. The display is typical of full-featured CD players with a variety of information types shown, depending on function. I have always liked the music calendar displays of Sony players.

The only negative in the entire evaluation was the stabilizer weight. It is kind of a nuisance to pick it up from atop a disc, set it down, pick another disc from its jewel box, put the disc over the spindle then pick up the stabilizer and place it back on top. By the way, be careful if your hand is a wee bit oily; the stabilizer can slide out of your hand. But I guess if you are used to clamping down those LPs

CONCLUSION

All in all, the Sony XA7ES is a magnificent CD player that, short of extremely expensive separates, cannot be topped in the sonics department. Although Sony is often considered a mass market consumer electronics giant, its considerable resources for R and D allows for such a high-end product to be developed at a reasonable price. Until DVD or another audio playback system takes us truly beyond 16-bit, this CD player is about as good as it gets.

John Gatski is editor of Pro Audio Review magazine and a free-lance contributor to The Audiophile Voice.



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BALANCED AUDIO TECHNOLOGY VK-500 SOLID-STATE STEREO AMPLIFIER

Bill Wells

or quite some time now, I have been on a continual journey seeking to find that so-called “best” amplifier that money can buy for my reference system. However, one small caveat goes with this on-going pursuit, the amplifier of choice must be reasonably affordable as well.

Also, throughout my many years as a hobbyist and reviewer, there have been times where I have clearly spent far more time chasing after the “proverbial” best audio gear than pursuing my real passion—that of listening to live music. Fortunately, over the past year or so, I have been

able to spend quite a bit more time at some of my favorite local music venues getting my much-needed and always appreciated live-music fix. In addition, I have had an opportunity to meet several top recording artists, which further enhanced those particular live events.

As much as I simply like music, even if it is via stereo FM radio, I have always found the live musical experience to be the most rewarding. However, to be quite honest, there have been any number of instances where the actual sound quality of my in-home reference system has, to my



ears, as well as to those of many others, been appreciably better than that of a given live event. Add to this, the fact that the recorded performance is repeatable, and now you have the potential for some really fun, good old get-down in-home entertainment. However, as the saying goes, "Ain't nothing like the real thing, baby," so live music remains my reference and ultimately what I will continue to pursue and use as a reference.

Now that I've gotten that out of my system, let me venture into the purpose of this particular review. When I was first introduced to the folks from Balanced Audio Technology (BAT), I became rather intrigued (and, indeed, thrilled) at the prospect of their taking on the challenge of becoming a premier manufacturer of audio electronics. Not only were they pursuing innovative design and development methodologies for their electronics, their stated strategy was to offer seri-

ous audiophiles high-quality gear at price points that would provide particularly good value.

With child-like enthusiasm, I couldn't help but think about the possibilities. Also, due to the quiet swell of excitement from any number of other audio reviewers regarding BAT's two premier tube products (i.e., VK-5i linestage and VK-60 stereo amplifier), my interest was further peaked. In fact, my initial contact with BAT personnel was to discuss my desire to get one (or both) of these products for formal review. Subsequently, I received (and reviewed) the totally outstanding VK-5 all-tube linestage (see my comments in Volume 2, Issue 5 of this publication).

Additionally, BAT's success with these products has been well documented in various other audio magazines. What BAT does with tube electronics is truly something special. However, during discussions with Steve Bednarski, BAT's chief marketing guru, I learned that the company was also inclined to advance the state-of-the-art in solid-state electronics design as well. In this regard, for some time, they have had a prototype high-powered, solid-state amplifier under wraps that was intended to be available in the not too distant future. By the time you read this review, BAT will have had the debut showing of new VK-500 at one of the high-end audio shows.

While I initially thought this was a significant departure from BAT's seeming "purist" approach

(i.e., primarily tube designs), after many discussions with both Bednarski and Victor Khomenko, BAT's chief designer, I was provided a clearer picture of what they were attempting to accomplish. In a telephone interview with Khomenko, I learned that one of the design goals for the VK-500 was essentially based on demands from the marketplace. Khomenko stated that a significant number of potential users had indicated their desire for a high-powered solid-state amplifier. Additionally, the prospective users had requested a unit with high current delivery capability.

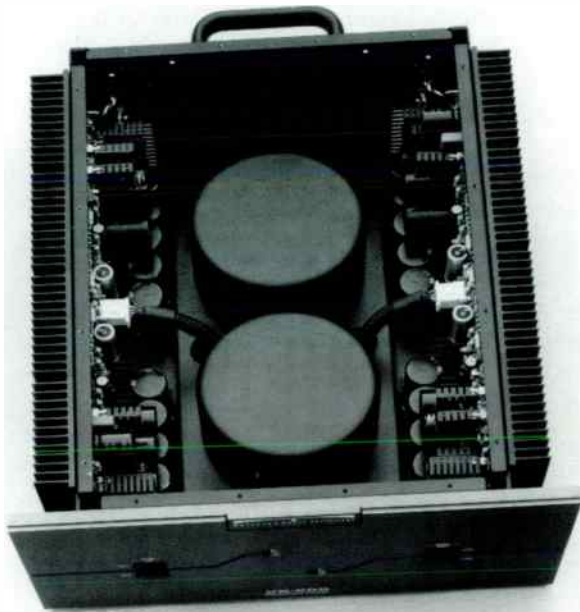
Effectively, this type of amplifier would provide greater flexibility for users by addressing a wider range of speaker loads than tube amplifiers typically do. Also, given the high praise of BAT's VK-60 tube amplifier (both the stereo and in the mono-block versions), Khomenko advised me that this new solid-state amplifier would necessari-

ly retain as much of the "magical" sound of his highly regarded tube amplifiers as possible. Furthermore, Khomenko stated that due to the market-place being already saturated with a number of very fine-sounding solid-state amplifiers, his new creation would have to be something special, something very out of the ordinary, not just another high-powered solid-state amp.

According to Khomenko, even though his flagship VK-60 stereo amp would drive approximately 80% of the speakers available, there was still a need for more power perceived by some users. As an option, if the user was so inclined, he or she could opt for a pair of the VK-60s to create a mono-block configuration. Effectively, this arrangement provides twice the power (i.e., 120 watts) for even greater drive capability. Khomenko states that this configuration addresses somewhere in the range of 90% of the speakers available today.

Beyond this, Khomenko stated that many audiophiles want the best of both worlds with a solution that bridges the gap between tubes and solid-state. During my telephone conversation with Victor, I became quite impressed with his continued insistence that any product developed at BAT had to meet the standard of reproducing recorded music as accurately as possible regardless of the type(s) of devices used in the components circuitry.

The BAT designer wanted both high current delivery and the magical sound of this previous tube designs.



Flat Out, Nuts For Tubes

During my conversations with B.A.T., they became increasingly aware of what the fact that I was a proud owner of the highly acclaimed ESP Concert Grand loudspeakers (latest version). BAT has often used these speakers at various high-end audio shows. So, as a result of BAT's familiarity with my reference speakers, as well as gaining a better understanding of my preferences for musical reproduction, they felt I would be a good candidate to evaluate their new VK-500 solid-state amplifier. Also, finally it occurred to me that Bednarski had focused on my descriptions of how the performance of these speakers had been literally transformed during my previous substitution of another manufacturer's high-powered solid-state amp in place of a pair of this same manufacturer's very fine tube mono-blocks. This was something that I had written about previously (see my comments in Volume 1, No. 3 of this publication regarding ESP Concert Grand speakers).

So, here's the scenario. Finally the day arrives and the VK-500 is soon at my doorstep. The UPS delivery person rings the doorbell; I answer the door and am asked to sign papers acknowledging receipt of a rather largish box. I sign them and somewhat naively ask, "Is it heavy?" Stupid question. He says, "Yeah, sort of . . . but it's manageable!" "Okay," I say and immediately attempt to maneuver the box into my house. I quickly realize that this is going to be a bit more of a chore than I

had anticipated. Fortunately, the same young bucks that helped me move my reference loudspeakers into the house were present. So, with their assistance, the 500 found its way to my reference system.

So, What Is It?

So, just what does the VK-500 offer the prospective user? For starters, it is indeed a high-powered solid-state amplifier, offering 250 watts into 8 ohms and approximately 450 into 4 ohms. The unit is also designed for fully balanced operation and utilizes a simple, direct signal path. According to BAT, this aspect is similar to their flagship tube amplifier designs.

Additionally, the VK-500 employs only two gain stages without global feedback. Another interesting feature of the VK-500 is that it is actually two individual amplifiers inside a single box. It is truly a dual mono configuration. (This speaks somewhat to its overall size and weight). Along with this, each channel of the VK-500 has a separate on/off switch on the front panel as well as a separate a.c. power cord. (Literally, you can turn off one channel and the other will operate totally independently). The VK-500 amplifier is also of considerable size and heft, coming in at an unpacking weight of approximately 105 pounds. You should have strong young man handy.

Peering inside the VK-500, I immediately observed the same kind of precision and cleanliness of overall construction and circuit topology as the company's flagship VK-5 linestage. Things are packed inside in a very impressive manner with all components and wiring being laid out quite orderly and tidy. Generally, the quality of design and construction is quite commendable.

But How Does It Sound?

Now for the really good part, in terms of overall musicality, I can state without hesitation that the VK-500 is a true champion. Despite its newness and lack of adequate break-in, right from the beginning, this amplifier offered a view of many very positive things to come. Immediately noticeable was the sensation of power and finesse that the VK-500 infused into my system. This was very exciting and enticing at the same time. With the VK-500 in place, reproduced music simply flowed from my speakers with total ease.

Also immediately noticeable was the naturalness of timbre and overall neutrality (throughout the entire frequency range). In fact, at the time, it reminded me of some of my more memorable

musical experiences with high-powered tube amplifiers. Until the arrival of the VK-500, I had not had nearly such a sensation in my home reference system since my earlier days with my beloved Audio Research Classic 150 mono-block amplifiers and renown Avalon Ascent speakers.

Listening during the break-in period was very easy to do; the music simply flowed with ease.

But that was then and this is now. From everything I could observe, the new VK-500 mated perfectly to my reference ESP loudspeakers. Right from jump-street, I could tell that the VK-500 was going to seriously challenge my sensibilities in terms of conventional thinking regarding the musical performance rendered by solid-state vs. tubes. Quite frankly, before receiving the BAT VK-500, I had assumed that this unit would likely be good, possibly even very good, but certainly not great. Perhaps another contributing factor was the early caution from Steve Bednarski, BAT's advising me not to judge the VK-500's sound too harshly until it had been given sufficient time to settle in.

On this, the outcome was true to his word, and Bednarski was certainly correct. Surely, there were a few sonic anomalies early on. However, what he hadn't told me was that these aberrations would likely be overshadowed by the VK-500's more positive attributes. Essentially, I was able to listen and enjoy this unit from the very beginning.

However, again Steve Bednarski was correct, in that after more extensive break-in (and listening), I truly started to understand the VK-500's overall musical strengths that were becoming even more evident. During these later listening sessions, I started to realize that the VK-500 was more than just a competent amplifier. Based on my long-term experiences in listening to and evaluating various types of audio gear, it was readily apparent to me that the VK-500 was a unit that could compare quite favorable to many other very fine sounding and typically far more expensive amplifiers (whether they be solid-state or tube).

What It Really Sounds Like!

Once this extended break-in period was over, I invited my 18-year-old son (and constant listening companion) to take his favorite listening spot in

front of my beloved ESP Concert Grand loudspeakers. What we experienced was nothing short of sensational. As much as my long-term reference amplifier had supplied me with many hours of listening pleasure, I was somewhat surprised by the degree of sonic improvement. Much to our surprise and delight, the sound of music reproduced with VK-500 was even more authentic and harmonically correct. In fact, an illusion of live music seemed to simply emerge from my system, during which my speakers simply disappeared. It was at this point that I knew we were in for some seriously long listening sessions.

Also, with the VK-500 in place, reproduced music emerged with the proverbial natural colors of music which are often times said to be missing with solid-state amplification. Along with this was a sense of fullness, warmth, and overall smoothness that made music sound seductive. Initially, I thought perhaps this very noticeable smoothness, along with the VK-500's striking sense of quietness, gave the amp a sound that was a bit on the darkish side. Upon further listening, I determined that this characteristic was simply the absence of noise. Wonderfully, subtle details emerged with such clarity and immediacy that I had to completely and totally rethink my initial reaction.

As time went by, I found my feelings regarding the unit's possible darkish sound diminished greatly. It was rather interesting how the early ear/brain reaction initially caused me to almost make a mis-

After break-in, the VK-500 was yet more authentic and harmonically correct. Its quiet manner allowed wonderful, subtle details to emerge.

take in identifying one thing for another. In fact, what I came to realize was that the VK-500 was anything but dark sounding.

Actually, the VK-500 has a sonic quality that renders reproduced music with presence and aliveness. Fortunately, this is accomplished without any of the accompanying noise artifacts that somehow but too often get into the amplification chain. (Actually, in my recent reviewing experiences, I also found the superb R.E. Designs LNPA 150 solid-state mono-block amplifiers capable of providing this very low noise portrayal of the

music as well). Fortunately, reproduction of music through either of these amplifiers is accomplished without it ever taking on forward or in-your-face perspective. What comes forth is a clear, clean presentation with a very quiet ambient field (lest otherwise filled with a musical perspective).

So far, what I've given you is more of a birds-eye view of the VK-500 in terms of its overall musicality. More specifically, what I find to be so arresting with the VK-500 is just how successful BAT has been in addressing the so-called challenge of "non-musicality" from a high-powered, solid-state amplifier. (This is not to say that no other manufacturers of solid-state amplifiers have not also succeeded in meeting this challenge). Even more interestingly, I have found that the VK-500 does, in fact, share a number of sonic similarities to this firm's flagship tube mono-blocks.

According to Victor Khomenko, the VK-500's development essentially followed the company's flagship VK-60 stereo amplifier in terms of overall design and circuit topology. He further stated that, as a result of this evolutionary approach, the gestation period and prototyping for the 500 went by fairly fast. Khomenko stated that effectively the VK-500 is a solid-state implementation of the VK-60 architecture. Most of the same elements exist in the overall design and development of both units.

Bass, Ah, Yes, The Bass

Generally speaking, the BAT VK-500 provided some of the best quality (and quantity) bass I had ever heard from my reference system. The 500 is easily one of the most neutral- and natural-sounding amplifiers that I have ever auditioned in my home. As with the Audio Research D-400 in my reference system, I have found that there is no substitute for power and real muscle when it comes to certain aspects like deep bass extension, power, control, and overall dynamics typically produced by with a well-designed solid-state amplifier. In this regard, both the Audio Research D-400 Mk-II and the R.E. Designs LNPA 150 mono-blocks offered superb performance in this area with my reference system. However, on direct comparison to either of these superb solid-state amps, particularly in the bass region, the 500 clearly offered the best overall performance in this area.

For instance, the VK-500's performance through the entire bass region is simply outstanding. With my reference loudspeakers and the BAT VK-500 installed, I heard an effortless, controlled but powerful presentation. In addition to the quantity of the bass, the overall sonic quality of the bass was enhanced with the VK-500 as well. Not only did the VK-500 allow me to hear and feel the bass; I was also able to easily distinguish subtle harmonic and textural shadings in the region.

Try listening to some really good acoustic upright bass with the VK-500 and you'll know instantly what I mean. For example, on Diana Krall's debut recording, *Only Trust Your Heart*, GRP CD-9810, fellow bassists Ray Brown and Christian McBride take turns demonstrating their prowess and expertise with this particular instrument. Whether during quiet solo passages or while blending into the full musical array, the VK-500 allows both instrumentalists' true sonic character to be revealed. Additionally, the tonal shading of each particular bass instrument is revealed with outstanding clarity and distinction.

On another fine recording, bassist Charlie Haden's performance on his LP *Quartet West*, Verve 0704, is exemplary

Diana Krall's *Only Trust Your Heart* was a delight, whether quiet or full tilt.

through the VK-500. Again, largely as a result of the VK-500, Haden's distinguishing characteristics of a big, full, warm sound with this instrument are readily apparent. Whether deep in the lower registers or higher in the upper bass region, through the VK-500 Haden's instrument sounds as authentic as one could imagine.

When it comes to percussive-type instruments, the VK-500 is equally at home. Try listening to the drums and congas from Steve Turre's *Rhythm Within*, Antilles CD314 527 159-2. Pay particular attention on the cut titled "African Shuffle," where the percussion gets very busy, complex, dense, and powerful. The VK-500 handles these passages quite comfortably so that the sound comes through effortlessly and quite naturally. With the VK-500, there is no sense of compression or strain. Instead, the dynamics simply flow and explode from your speakers the way you would expect to hear them live.

Lower bass, middle bass, and upper bass; it doesn't really matter. With the VK-500 it's almost irrelevant, it's all handled superbly. However, I should point out that the particular unit I used for

this review was equipped with the optional BAT-PAK. Effectively, this feature, an internally installed capacitor bank (joule multiplier if you will), increases the power supply's energy storage from approximately 350 joules to 1,100 joules. Just how much this has to do with the VK-500's overall performance in this area I am not really sure, but it can't hurt.

But Mama, The Midrange

The critical midrange is a true test for any electronic component. Not that my system is totally perfect but it is truly a high resolution and very accurate system, capable of providing some thoroughly enjoyable listening sessions. As a result, whenever I introduce a new component into my system, I am able to easily discern the sound quality differences it brings along when music is reproduced through it.

Where I thought I might find the so-called Achilles heel of the VK-500 was in the midrange. However, it was a very pleasant surprise to find that sound throughout the broad midrange spectrum was not only open, clear, and articulate, it was also about as close to natural as I had heard in my system, ever. Again, going back to Diana Krall's recording, because a woman vocalist's voice is in the midrange, her voice was revealed with all of the naturally warm and seductively husky manner that makes it the truly beautiful instrument it is.

As a basis of comparison, I am fortunate to have had the experience with personally meeting (and listening to) Ms. Krall during a recent three-night stint at one of my favorite music venues here in the Twin Cities (i.e. Dakota Bar & Grill). During her time at the Dakota, I was fortunately able to speak with her one-on-one, as well as listen to her performances (on all three nights, mind you) from various locations in the facility. Sure, there were differences between hearing her live and listening to her CD at my place. However, with the VK-500 in place, along with the other fine componentry assembled in my reference system, Krall's in-home performance was of a similarly high quality and emotionally pleasing level.

Another instrument that is thoroughly revealing of midrange truth is the saxophone. Listening to Ernie Watts on the Haden LP mentioned above, with the VK-500 in place, Watts' performance was also full of truth. In fact, one Saturday afternoon,

an audiophile buddy came by to get an earful of my system with the VK-500 installed.

As he approached the area in my home where my reference system was, he rather innocently asked whether my son was playing his sax. Truly, folks, my son is no where close to having the talent level of any of the artists I frequently listen to. However, what was so striking to my friend was just how real and in the room the sax sounded through my system. Provided the rest of your system is capable of rendering musical realism, the VK-500 will bring life to instruments (and voices), allowing the listener to easily slip into that dream-like condition of believing you are actually hearing the real thing. Quite frankly, my friend was not prepared for what he had just heard. Needless to say, he stayed for the remainder of that afternoon.

Switching over to some music by the vibraphone master Milt Jackson, the VK-500 was once again put to the test. Jackson's

style has always been melodic, swinging, and beautiful. On the Pablo recording *Mostly Duke*, Jackson is at his best in terms of swinging jazz. What I find most interesting about the sound of Jackson's vibes is how demonstrative his playing style is. His presentation offers a shimmering, pulsating sonic quality that can quickly reveal strengths or weaknesses in amplifiers.

Again, with the VK-500, I was able to clearly distinguish minor nuances and subtle shifts in either Jackson's intensity of striking the vibes, whether he had switched the type of mallet he was using or whether the pedal action on this instrument was fully engaged. Let me talk about overall musical accuracy, for I had the good fortune to hear Jackson live not to terribly long ago (yes, at the same wonderful venue where I heard Krall). This time, I sat directly in front of Jackson, not far distant from the stage where he was performing. This allowed me to capture and enjoy the sound of his instrument largely direct with minimal interference by the house PA system. Although not quite the same, later listening to Jackson through my reference system made me realize again just how capable the VK-500 is in its ability to render music accurately.

The Tricky Treble

This same kind of musical purity existed as I listened to various instruments higher up the fre-

With the VK-500, I was able to clearly distinguish subtle shifts in Milt Jackson's vibes.

quency scale. Whether it was the sound of a cymbal, the tinkling of little percussive bells and chimes, sweetly singing violins, high-pitched trumpets blasting away, hard-struck upper register piano notes or whatever, the VK-500 stayed true to the music. Along with the proper tonal balance for these instruments, transient clues through the VK-500 were most evident. Leading edge transients had the proper sharpness without sounding unnaturally hard. Trailing edges had the proper degree of delicacy, decay and shimmer.

Furthermore, listening deeply into the soundstage produced by the VK-500 is relatively easy and a truly captivating experience. In addition, due to its very low signal-to-noise floor, this amplifier seems to impose very little character on the music or the ambient sound field it reproduces. Whatever is on the recording is accurately portrayed.

Based on my experiences with this unit, the VK-500 does an excellent job of not mucking up the sound field with spurious noise or other little sonic artifacts that lessen overall clarity or inner resolution. Provided the electronics up-front are sufficiently revealing in this area, the VK-500 will offer

a superbly open, clear, and quite transparent view of the entire sonic picture.

Lastly, the overall dimensionality of instruments, voice or the recording venue are all portrayed with a high degree of realism through the VK-500. With the VK-500 in place, the listener will be treated with an aural sense of musical majesty, finesse, power, and delicacy. This amp speaks to sonic neutrality and musical truth.

Valves or Silicon?

In addressing the issue of whether to pursue tubes or transistors I will merely say that to a large degree, the VK-500 has made this somewhat of a non-issue for me. Overall, the 500 does so many things right that the listener will likely just simply use it and enjoy the music, ignoring the tubes vs. transistors question. One thing is for sure, the VK-500 will not call attention to itself. It merely does what it is supposed to do to make beautiful music.

On both a personal and musical level, I feel the BAT VK-500 amplifier is a truly outstanding product. Given a similar level of quality for the ancillary equipment used with it, the overall results of reproduced music through a given system can be

most rewarding. So far,, my experiences in listening to either the little silver discs or the bigger blackones with the VK-500 have been nothing short of revelatory and totally satisfying.

At the current retail price of \$5,000.00 for the standard unit or \$5,800.00 for the BAT-PAK equipped version, the BAT VK-500 represents a true value to serious audiophiles and music-lovers alike. Bottom line, the strongest recommendation I can give to anyone is the fact that after living with this product for awhile, it was a non-issue. I simply put my money where my mouth, heart, and ears were and purchased the review unit for myself. Truly, the 500 has upstaged other sine solid-state amplifiers that I have used previously and is now my reference amplifier. As an aside, I believe one other TAV reviewer has had a similar experience with auditioning the VK-500 and now owns one for himself as well.

NOTES

Balanced Audio Technology VK-500 amplifier, price: \$5,000.00. Basic stereo amplifier, 250 watts per channel into 8-ohm loads; two-stage circuit; zero feedback. Manufacturer: Balanced Audio Technology, 800 1st State St., Wilmington, DE 19804; phone 610/388-1869, FAX 610/388-6172.

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

ARC LS5 MK II lineage, BAT VK5i lineage, BAT VKP 10 phono stage, Well Tempered Reference turntable and arm, Blue Oasis moving-coil cartridge, Audio Research CDT1 CD transport, Audio Research DAC3 D/A converter, Sonic Frontiers SFCD1 CD player, Audio Research D-400 MKII amplifier, R.E. Designs LNPA 150 mono-block amplifiers, ESP Concert Grands loudspeakers, Paragon Jubilees loudspeakers, A.R.T. a.c. power cable, NBS Statement interconnects and speaker cables (bi-wired), NBS Statement AES/EBU digital interconnect, NBS Statement and Master a.c. power cables, Transparent Ultra phono cable, A.R.T. Q dampers, ASC Tube Traps, Audio Physic phono demagnetizer, Bedini CD Ultra Clarifier, Electra Clear a.c. line conditioner, Goldmund cones, Shakti Stones, Solid Steel equipment stand, Ultra Resolution Technologies Cornerstone isolation platform, and VPI record cleaner.

POISE PURITY & POWER

The New Tubed Melos HAT440 Monoblock Amplifiers

Ross Wagner

"Tubes...I'm going back to tubes," I overheard my friend saying at a recent cocktail party. Obviously a sudden and remarkable enlightenment had overtaken Jerry, owner of KLH-6 speakers driven by a 10-year-old Kenwood receiver, and I wanted to hear about it. I sidled over to his conversation clique to get details, arriving just in time to hear, "Yeah, I've had it with the stand-up toothpaste dispensers . . . they're always falling over. I'm going back to tubes."

Why wasn't I surprised? I know that no one talks about high-end audio at a social occasion unless they want to clear a large space around them.

Yet here, on the pages of TAV, we can and do talk about such arcane matters . . . to wit, the all-new version of the much-respected Melos 402 High-Current Monoblock Amplifiers. Yes, they're tubed, and each monoblock kicks out what might be 400 of the cleanest watts you've heard since Thomas Alva wound up his first phonograph.

To dispense with cosmetics: The new amps can't be differentiated from their forebears by looking at the face plate. The same handsome, beefy silver or black versions are available. Changes are confined to the innards and they are extensive. So extensive, in fact, that, as things now stand, updates to existing 402s is all but impossible.



So, if we're not going to gussy up faceplates, add mag wheels, or make Corinthian leather seating standard, why tinker with a very capable and musical push/pull triode amplifier?

Well, it seems that under certain conditions (i.e., operating with speak-

what would be possible with conventional 300B tubes. Additionally, high current would dramatically improve linearity and greatly reduce second harmonic distortion.

The new Melos HAT (High-Amperage Triode) 440 monoblocks have been playing in my listening room cheerfully and obediently for several weeks. But then the older 402s served faithfully for three years with only two incidents of tube failure during that time (an enviable record by any standard). Other than the failed tubes, no tube replacement was necessary. So, my Infinity IRS V speakers apparently do not fit the profile of finicky speakers, or perhaps I was just lucky.

The new transformers are heavier. Bad news for your UPS carrier, who will need to get in shape to handle the substantial extra *avoir-du-pois*.

Enough of the technical issues; on to sonics.

The new Melos HAT440s are more dynamic throughout the spectrum, more detailed, more spacious, faster; I could go on with the list of benefits. But doesn't every upgrade of every amp produce those improvements? Well, most do to a degree.

Yet there is a quality about the new Melos amps which is even more precious than the foregoing: their purity. Perhaps as a by-product of the new transformers and the reduction of second harmonic distortion, the substantial improvement in purity is what distinguishes these amps from most amps, tubed or otherwise, that have preceded it.

What is "Purity?" It's more than sweetness. More than high-end extension. More than airiness or transparency. Without purity, one can-

not reproduce a harpsichord or a human voice, especially a soprano, convincingly. With purity, the voice has integrity. Remember Star Trek? Captain Kirk beaming down? His physical reconstruction starting as a shimmer, gradually taking

ers that present weird or widely varying impedances), the tubes of the former 402 monoblock amps were stressed. Reason enough to refine the design, to increase reliability. Whatever sonic benefits accrued as a by-product of the redesign would be a bonus. As it turns out, sonic benefits are substantial. More about this later (under the "best for last" principle).

Mark Porzilli, the talented lead designer at Melos, reasoned that a very high-current amp would reduce the stresses of low and changing impedances. Furthermore, he would search out new transformers which would maintain constant impedance from 10 Hz to 50 kHz. This double-barrelled approach would bring the reliability problem under control. By employing a G-2 triode drive, current would be increased to 15 times

Without purity, the reassembly of the musical form on your soundstage simply cannot be complete or accurate.



on more form and body as the process progressed. Moments later, his entire being was reassembled. Without purity, the reassembly of the musical form on the sound stage of your system cannot be complete or accurate. That goes for sopranos, all voices, all instruments, whether they be in a symphony orchestra or a rock band. Without purity, Captain Kirk is not quite reassembled on the surface of the planet. He is C&p-t*in K^#rk. Some stuff missing, and a lot of stuff added.

It is well-known that the second harmonic distortions of tube amps are euphonic. Older tube amps, especially single-ended triodes, are mellow, rich, and easy to listen to. But mellowness is not accuracy. It is as though Captain Kirk, when reconstituted, is wearing a feather boa, and an angora knit tunic. Nice, but more like Dennis Rodman in drag than our virile Captain Kirk. To extend this analogy, many solid-state amps reassemble the Enterprise captain with a bit too much starch in his uniform. Stiffness rather than suppleness.

That old cliché about the virtue of tube amps being an emphasis on warmth, rather than a striving for clinical improvement in detail and gut-shaking impact (the bailiwick of good solid-state designs), may need to be reconsidered.

Modern tube designs, with the exception of the recent regression to anemic single-ended triodes, have been moving away from the "Mr. Warmth" concept for years. Gone are the SP-3 pre-amps of William Zane Johnson, the very model of tubey sweetness (and sogginess). The Dynaco 60s are gone (or are they?). The audiophile market became mesmerized by the snap of transistor designs. Tube designers felt the need to provide the "virtues" of solid-state designs. Many tube amps and pre-amps began to sound more and more like transistor gear, but failed to achieve the benefits of either. At one point, some Audio Research pre-amps had but one tube left, and some wags contended that it was not really part of the circuit, and tube glow was there simply

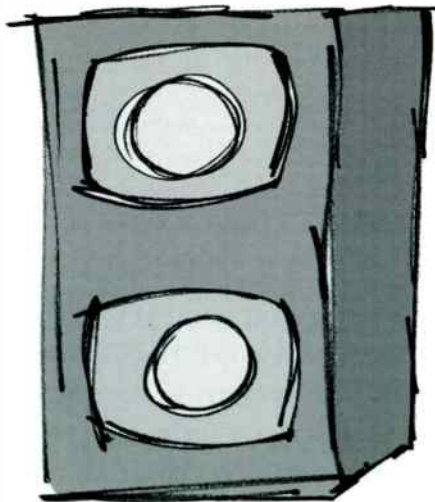
to reassure old-fashioned audiophiles. Frankly, I felt these designs were taking audio further toward sterility, and away from musicality.

Meanwhile solid-state designers reached futilely for the warmth of old tube designs. "It almost sounds like tubes," exclaimed audiophiles about their solid-state gear featuring bloated mid-bass contours and high ends rolled off to obscure the tizziness inherent in the early designs. The audiophile ostriches, who succumbed to the advertising hype of these transistor designs, insisted they had made no sacrifice in abandoning their old Marantz tube gear.

I suggest that both camps had neglected one essential to a "musical" sound, purity. Now, listening to the new Melos HAT440s, with a Melos MA-333 up front, I'm satisfied that a mid-course shift in design priorities is well underway. Purity is once again a priority.

It is OK for tubes to do all the things well that solid-state does, if the purity that defines good live music is not lost in the process. Likewise, it is OK for solid-state designers to continue to enhance the virtues of those designs, but minus the shortcomings of old tube designs. They, too, must open the top in a convincing musical way and introduce purity across the spectrum. Quite a challenge for either camp.

For many years, a tube design meant "warmth." With the Melos HAT440s, I'm happy to say, "purity is the priority."



Listening Tests

Now for some specific recordings and how they fare with the higher current Melos HAT 440s.

Have you bought the Mercury CD (434 360-2) of the legendary recording of Tchaikowsky's 1812 Overture? Get it. Lots of fun. Includes an account of the recording of the cannons at West Point that punctuate the finale of the overture. The velvet-voiced narrator, Deems Taylor, takes us to West Point where the cannons were recorded. Each cannon shot is reproduced, and Mr. Taylor carefully explains the deficiencies (or attributes) of each "take." At one point he describes a tinny echo following a cannon shot as reason to reject the take. With the earlier 402s, I could hear the

echo, but it didn't seem like such a big deal. With the "purity" of the new HAT440s, the tonal texture of the echo is precisely defined and its tinny character is unmistakable. If you can reproduce a flaw convincingly, it follows that you can reproduce the unflawed version as convincingly. And so the cannon shot, finally selected by Bob Fine and the rest of the Mercury recording team, is easily identified as the best of the lot, when played through the new HAT440s.

Listen to Harmonia Mundi's (HMC 901498/9) 1993 recording of Handel's *Messiah*, especially the recitatives of cut 12 on the first disc, featuring the voice of a boy soprano (the Brits call them "trebles"). Many listeners are put off by the sound of boy sopranos. At their best, these singers produce an exquisitely delicate sound, suggesting innocence and purity (that word again). Now, if the voice is colored in any way when reproduced, the purity and innocence is lost and so is the charm. I am happy to say that the Harmonia Mundi engineers have done their part of the job, and the new Melos HAT440s have followed the lead. The boy soprano's voice is riveted behind the speakers, center stage, uncolored and utterly compelling.

In *The Mikado*, (Telarc CD 80284), the purity issue is sensed immediately as one listens to the words. In Gilbert and Sullivan, words are essential. One wants no artifacts clouding the clever lyrics or the biting wit. Here, too, the new Melos HAT440s shine.

And on this disc, we sense another vital quality of these new amps, their ability to define a space. We're now past the old business of depth, width, height, and sound bouncing off walls. Soloists on stage are no longer merely sonic holograms. String sections and choristers now sweep across our consciousness. Pizzicato sections dance like fireflies. In so many ways we are close to a concert experience. Turn out the lights, close your eyes. It's almost . . . well, you know.

Spin Dorian's sampler CD (DOR90002), cut 16, the Bach Chorale; talk about space; the

chorus will make you shiver with appreciation.

The clincher, for me, is the ability to tune the tonal character of the Melos HAT440s by swapping a single tube. Yes, one \$20.00 tube will do it. Sure, we all know a tube change can affect the sound of any amp, but some other tube amps require us to experiment with regiments of expensive output tubes to get to where we want to be. How nice to achieve a desired sonic swing for a double sawbuck. Like metamorphosing your street Corvette into a race-ready contender by changing a spark plug. After several days of

If you can reproduce a recording flaw convincingly, it follows that you can reproduce the unflawed version as convincingly.

listening,

I found my Goldilocks (just right) tube, a generic 12AU7. The 12AT7 was a bit too bright; the industrial 12AU7 (5814) seemed too reticent.

My one nit to pick is the power switch. With an amp this substantial, I wish the switch were beefier. You know, like you were throwing a switch to let power flow from Hoover Dam. I am advised that the switch merely energizes a timing circuit, and the power turn-on occurs inside the amp, yet something big and clunky would be more satisfying than the slender stalk that now does the job. But kudos for the beefed-up speaker posts at the rear of the amp; they are most welcome.

In sum, the new HAT440 monoblocks have planted Melos even more solidly among the leaders of the pack. No serious amplifier purchase can now be made without listening to the new Melos HAT440s. Compare them to amplifiers costing 2 to 10 (yes, 10) times as much. Consider the practicality of the HAT440s.

May the best amps win.

NOTES

Melos HAT440 (High-Amperage Triode) Monoblock Amplifier:

\$4,500.00 each. Melos Audio Corp., 452 Lincoln Blvd., Middlesex, NJ 08846; phone 908/302-2552, fax 908/302-0507.

Associated Equipment: Versa Dynamics 2.3 turntable, Lyra Parnassus cartridge (fully clothed), Wadia WT2000 transport, Wadia 2000 Digimaster D/A converter, Melos MA-333R Gold Reference preamp with remote and Pho-tentiometer, Melos 402 monoblock amps, Infinity IRS V speaker system (Serial No. 002), Discovery shielded interconnects, Discovery 1-2-3 speaker wires



Paradigm Reference Series Studio 100 Loudspeakers: Of Alewives, Mad Editors and R.A.F.

Gerald J. Walsh

RUNUTS?! Although I was actually a tad more polite to our editor when he phoned proposing that review these 87-pound each monoliths that were to tower menacingly almost halfway to my ceiling, still, I know I generated most of the enthusiasm of the alewife clean-up patrol along the shores of Lake Michigan during a pungent July.

If there's such an animal as Reviewer Acceptance Factor (RAP) the prospect of entertaining these beefeaters from the Great White North didn't exactly "peg my meter."

MOUNTAIN COMES TO MOHAMMED ON A TRUCK

The arrival of these Paradigm puppies on a rumbling freight truck did little to dissuade my trepidation, although the sunny white and red shipping cartons did more to generate that "it's a wonderful day in the neighborhood" feeling than the typical "box brown" of most.

Those cartons were certainly sturdy and heavy enough, but a lack of more protective packing inside resulted in a minor gouge to the side of one cabinet, when the carton wall evidently received a puncture somewhere in transit. OK for me as a reviewer investing only my time, but not great news if it happened to a new owner.

Given speakers of such significant size and price, it might be an innovative touch for Paradigm to wrap each one in a sheet of acoustical foam, which the audiophile could then straighten out and use as a practical room treatment. If Paradigm doesn't cotton up to the free foam scheme, I'm sure some esoteric speaker company will....

Set-up was no snap, but then anyone well-to-do enough to lay down around two grand on sheer entertainment ought to have some aggravation in his or her life!

Handling and positioning these transducers should be viewed as either a buddy project or a body project. That is, either give a beer and get help or be philosophical about it all, and figure that some of what you spent on the purchase will be saved by skipping athletic club

membership if you take care of these Studios "solo."

The otherwise quite thorough tri-fold bilingual instruction sheet gives nary a clue what to do with the gold-colored brass discs and spikes provided.

After a little sweating and a little more swearing, I decided that the best approach for rigging the disc foot and spike combo was with the bottom of the speaker up, and a pair of pliers handy.

The spikes were threaded into the machined sockets with their sharply pointed ends exposed. Then, if you elect to choose the disc foot option only, you thread the spikes far enough into the cabinet that the brass disc foot

**No, the Editor wasn't mad,
I was. These speakers are
too @\$%^&* heavy!**

will engage to the threaded spike firmly, but without the sharp, potentially carpet-tearing point exposed beyond the bottom of the foot.

Striking that balance of threading the spike into the cabinet receptacle in such a way that there's enough spike left to hold the heavy brass foot, but not too much so as to extend past the foot, is something of an art which you will appreciate once you give it a whirl yourself.

Before leaving the subject of the owner's manual, I'd like to interject a couple of observations:

First, if you get in trouble by mis-wiring the speakers or underpowering or overpowering same, then hold Paradigm blameless! Probably on the control panels at NASA in Houston there are more warnings, and also at the nerve centers of nuclear power stations, but oth-

erwise yours truly would be hard-pressed to tell you where you'd find more cautions than in the text of this manual.

And now, from the "'tis a puzzlement'" department, odd that the instructions make reference to receivers and tone controls. This is an advanced "reference" lineup from these folks, and one would imagine the great majority of users will thus partner with separates, and, separates usually don't have tone controls!

Then there's the print size used in their manual. Granted, I applaud thrift, as Editor Gene will attest, but the effort to maximize information resulted in micro print for these instructions, and since many of us investing at this level will be "old geezers" in our thirties and forties, doesn't Paradigm realize our eyes might not be up to the task anymore?

If you decide on these speakers and want to consult the owner 5 sheet, either buy a magnifier or start wolfing down carrots!

Nuts & Bolts

The Paradigm Reference Series Studio 100s are the crowning jewel of this series, itself the king of Paradigm's "speaker hill." Your \$1800 buys a pair in your choice of three shades of vinyl; \$450 more doesn't change the sound a whit but gives you the dubious pleasure of plundering forests and making furniture polish companies happy. It's known as real wood veneer. The flavors are light cherry, black ash and rosenut, with my review product supplied as the latter.

In average to bright room light, this rosenut is almost cher-



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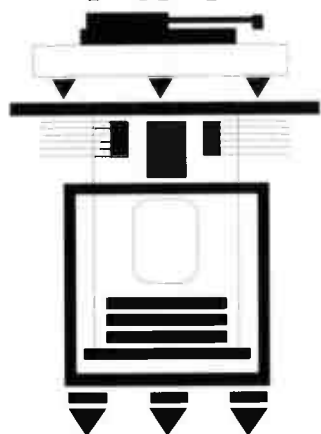
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ry red, which at first grated on me a bit, but the graining was handsome (although not perfectly matched from speaker to speaker) and a little time and room dust seemed to tame down the hue anyway.

A rather average black-cloth grille extends four-fifths of the way down, with a small oval name badge at its rounded bottom. The cabinet is plain in exterior appearance save for the nice finish on all sides and a slight lip around the edges of the cabinet, front and back, presumably to slightly enhance cabinet strength.

The quite stark Amish-or Shaker-like minimalism of external appearance extends to the finished speaker back, with no features other than a simple recessed plastic plate housing two pair of gold-plated binding posts (for bi-amp or bi-wire) of workmanlike quality. Immediately under the posts is the tag with serial number.

Outside each shipping carton appears a label indicating not only the serial number of the speaker it contains but also a specified serial number of the intended mate, which points to above average care in quality control and acoustic pair plotting and matching. Paradigm designs and manufactures all drivers in-house.

The Studio 100 boasts four drivers, these being a pair of 8-inch polypropylene woofers, plumbing the depths to 25 Hz (DIN), a 6.5-inch mica-polymer cone midrange unit, and a one inch pure aluminum dome tweeter, with typical extension on-axis to 22 kHz, +/- 2 dB.

The flared acoustic port is located below the center-aligned drivers. The speakers are not mirror-imaged.

The 87-pound heft cited early on in my review suggests robust

cabinet construction, including thick MDF walls and full-perimeter horizontal and vertical bracing, for a comprehensive physical integrity they call "Cascade Enclosures."

Rapping on the sides of these SOLID cabinets only wasted my time; they were as "dead" as the literature would have you believe.

Rated power handling is a span almost as wide as the Golden Gate Bridge, 15-350 watts.



The Studios were received brand-new from factory stock. As such, many reviewers prefer a "break-in" technique of "ears off," using white noise or the repeated play of a CD to do the job.

However, if time allows, I think that listening through the "break in" period can be fascinating, much like a father or mother might proudly watch a gawky adolescent evolve through trial, error and the clock on the wall into poised adulthood.

After only a few songs, the illusion was that these Paradigms "sped up" amazingly, accelerating and excelling with an engaging well-paced musicality, and the first hint of the authoritative bass reach to blossom later.

My real hesitation beyond hermia in trying these was an unfounded concern that, at 45 x 10.25 x 16.5 inches, they would simply overpower, overwhelm my room, of approximately 12 x 15 feet with an eight-foot ceiling.

Yet the reality was surprising and delightful, as the Studio 100s were possessed of the sonic versatility to integrate into the surroundings without overwhelming them. If I dreaded a "huff, puff, blow the walls down acoustic tornado" it just didn't materialize.

With the brawn of a bouncer and the nimbleness of a ballerina, integration of drivers and adaptability various musical expressions was excellent, with no one portion of frequency calling attention to itself.

Side-to-side soundstaging was first rate, wide but with no centerfill "holes." Perhaps owing partly to the 15-plus inch depth of the enclosures, these things seemed to have an outrageous image depth, halfway back into the next county.

But sonic "bells and whistles" will only lead the parade for so long, unless the nature of the sound is as close as possible to natural.

Many stereo scribes have written of the indispensable need to "tune one's ears" via attending live musical performances, and I won't argue with that.

Nevertheless, orchestras won't fit into most living rooms, and a "command performance" by your favorite band would likely be a prohibitively expensive proposition.

Therefore, wouldn't it be wonderful if we could strip at least one layer away from the artificial artifacts of electronic sound reproduction, to have in our immediate listening environment as a calibration tool an "instrument" of challenge for our stereo systems.

Now, we could strum a guitar or play a piano, but such active participation in creating live music would distract us from concentrating on the comparative process.

My own home-brewed answer is to have one or two good quality mechanical clocks (not quartz ones) in the listening area, at about the same distance from the listening position as the speakers. These clocks should chime on a bell or chime rods, ideally Westminster or other repeatable



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NOTES

Paradigm Reference Studio 100 Loudspeakers in Genuine Rosenut Veneer: \$2,250 per pair, serial numbers 12214, 12215. Manufacturer, Paradigm Bavan Corp., 101 Hanlan Road; Woodbridge, Ontario, Canada L4L 3P5; M.P.O. Box 2410, Niagara Falls, NY 14302; phone 905/632-0180, fax 905/632-0183.

Associated Equipment

Bryston 2-B Amplifier, Audio Research SP-5 preamplifier, California Audio Labs Ox-i CD Player, VPI "Magic Brick," van den Hul The Clearwater Speaker Cable, and interconnects by Prisma and Wire World.

quarter-hour melodies, so their sound is long and frequent enough to allow comparison.

Further, the audio program source, logically, must contain musical information of a natural, acoustic, non-synthesized type and be adjusted to a competitive volume for the clocks.

The simple theory here is that a mechanical, tuneful chiming clock has no electric or electronic processing, thus being one crucial step closer to the characteristics of a musical instrument, yet at home.

Switch enough clocks with enough speakers and you will soon realize the results can vary markedly.

I dub the phenomenon of a speaker having the ability to emulate more intrinsic sounds of nature "electronic self-transcendence" and in most instances the Paradigms aced this exercise!

I suppose everything has to have some downside, and if I were forced to "pick a nit" with these loudspeakers, it would center on their sound being somewhat more diffused or "ethereal" than any other pair to pass through my listening room.

This impression may be attributable to the supreme soundstage and image they "float," and I'm not entirely sure it should be labeled a fault, so much as an acquired taste.

MAYBE THE BOOGIE MAN'S A REGULAR DUDE AFTER ALL!

Paradigm has been on a fast track since its 1982 co-founding by Jerry VanderMarel and Scott Bagby, in Toronto. Then, speaker boxes were used as office dividers.

Today, the same company boasts a 33,000 cubic-foot in-house anechoic chamber and

exports a varied line of loudspeakers to some 35 countries. These speakers under test justify that growth.

I tamed my demons and had some great fun listening in the bargain. However, my R.A.F. having been overcome, for many Wife Acceptance Factor (W.A.F.) still be an issue.

As much and as admirably as these Studio 100s can become "phantoms" with the "opera" or anything else you throw at them, and "disappear" in the all-important aural dimension, they won't elude the vacuum cleaner, and moreover, your Chihuahua, your ten-year-old kid (maybe even that oak tree in the front yard) might look smaller than ever before.

So, unless you're on the way to divorce court anyway, I'd suggest taking a gander at the junior models in this series starting with the bookshelf-style Studio 20, from \$650 per pair, particularly if your intended listening room is any smaller than mine.

That said, I'll hate to see this duo "pack their bags" for the trip back to Canada. These King Kongs can sure sing songs, and in the best sense of the word, they're "MONSTER!"

Music Used: Citing the CDs

Charles Fambrough, Keeper of the Spirit,
AudioQuest Music AQ 1033

Emmylou Harris, Duets, Reprise 9 25791-2

Kristy Hendley, Kristy Hendley, Ransom CD60000

Jean Hewson, Early Spring,
Pigeon Inlet PIPCD 7328

Kathy Mattea, A Collection of Hits,
Mercury 842 330 2

Scorecard

**Wrap-Up By the Numbers: "1" is pretty lame
& "10" is top of the game!)**

Bass Performance:	9
Imaging:	9
Cosmetics & Construction:	8
Value At Price:	9
Treble Performance:	9
Electronic Self-Transcendence (See Text):	9
"Forest Effect" (Getting Lost In The Music):	8

Acoustic Technology International Hi-Vi Research Dul'cet 2.1C Speaker

Frank J. Alles

Acoustic Technology International, Inc. is owned by an international company, Hi -Vi Research, and occupies a 17,000-sq. ft. r&d facility in Markham, Ontario, Canada. Their staff of acoustical engineers and technicians employ finite-element analysis programs, 3-D CAD-CAM technique, LEAP-LMS system, and some of the best acoustical measurement equipment, including the Bruel & Kjaer analyzer. Components are sourced from North America, Europe and East Asia, and are carefully chosen, specified, and

checked before they are put into production. Its high-end premium drivers and speaker systems are manufactured under the Dul'cet trademark.

The Dul'cet lineage is fairly extensive, with various models ranging from small two-way systems to complete home theater set-ups. At the high end of the line, the Dul'cet 1.0 is a four-piece state-of-the-art assault, featuring eight 7-inch bass drivers, two 76-inch dipolar ribbons, a dipolar line-source array made up of 24 tweeters, and a dedicated subwoofer system, incorporating four 12-inch



woofers in a push-pull arrangement, driven by a 600-watt, servo-drive amplifier. Serious Stuff!

The subject of this review is the Dul'cet 2.1C, a two-way monitor with average bookshelf dimensions (16 by 10.5 by 10.5 inches). It boasts a regal, high-luster rosewood finish, with black vinyl front baffle and removable black cloth grille. One pair of heavy-duty, gold-plated binding posts are inset near the bottom of the rear panel. The system's two drivers, a 6-inch, polypropylene cone woofer, and soft-dome tweeter, occupy an oval, vinyl-clad, raised front baffle, flanked at its bottom by two small-diameter bass ports. The tweeter incorporates a large, shielded Neodymium magnet, which results in high sensitivity and electromagnetic damping, to help insure excellent reproduction of transients, negligible compression, and very low harmonic distortions.

Acoustic Technology rates system frequency response as within 2.5 dB from 49 Hz to 18 kHz, sensitivity at 86 dB SPL (1 watt, 1 meter), and nominal impedance at 5 ohms. A second-order crossover is implemented at 2.5 kHz nominal, and power handling is stated to be 100 watts nominal and 250 watts music (whatever that's worth). Since the nominal impedance is only 5 ohms, connecting two pairs in parallel may result in a dip to below 2 ohms at certain frequencies, which some amplifiers may not tolerate gracefully. If you're contemplating such a hook up, be advised to consult the manufacturer of your amplifier or its owner's manual. If setting up a home theater is your goal, there are other more-appropriate models in the Dul'cet line using the same technology and designed specifically for that application.

Actually, being a veteran audiophile, as well as being admittedly somewhat jaded, I didn't believe these small speakers, under my intense audiophile scrutiny, would measure up to my lofty standards. In a few ways my assumption proved correct, however, in most ways, I couldn't have been more wrong!

To start my listening, I checked out my reference system which incorporates a Parasound D/AC-2000 processor and C/BD-2000 transport feeding a passive preamp, from which the signal goes directly into a Sonogy Black Knight amplifier. I use

this same set-up to drive a pair of Paradigm Studio 100 reference speakers, and I'm quite satisfied with the results. As for the basis of comparison it provides, one should bear in mind that the Paradigms are more than double the price of the 2.1Cs.

I situated the Dul'cet speakers about six feet apart (center to center), four feet from the side walls, and seven feet from the rear wall. My listening seat was set back 10 feet from the front of the grilles and about seven feet in from

the rear wall behind me. The speakers were used on 13-inch stands, on three-point suspension, with a modicum of toe-in and tilted back slightly. While this height was good for maintaining bass reinforcement from the floor boundary, I feel that to get the tweeter aligned closer to ear level for a seated listener, these speakers should ideally be used on 18- to 20-inch stands.

Hearing Is Believing!

Out of the gate, it quickly became clear that the Dul'cets had no glaring faults and no painfully obvious shortcomings. Not only were these little darlings fairly linear throughout their audible bandwidth, but they were highly resolving and focused as well. On "Kiko," from the Los Lobos album of the same title (Slash Warner Bros. 9 26786-2), I could clearly hear the second voice singing along in harmony with the lead vocal. While it was lower in both amplitude and tone and was also located in the center of the soundstage, with the 2.1Cs it remained a distinct and separate entity, never smearing or becoming fused with the other voice.

The more I listened, the more obvious it became that each instrument and voice was reproduced clearly in its own particular segment of the soundstage. As this would imply, the 2.1Cs were extremely adept at generating and maintaining a credible, rock-stable venue for the stage and for every performer in the band. Listening to

something scary, like Madonna's "Rescue Me," from *The Immaculate Collection* (Sire/Warner Bros. 9 26440-2), which contains a lot of out-of-phase information to simulate a multi-channel pre-

Right out of the box, these little beauties impressed me with their linear response and their ability to resolve voices.

This punchy little nipper is very tight, quick, and dynamic in the mid to upper bass region.

sensation, not only located sounds to the far-left and far-right of the room periphery, but managed to locate the thunder storm behind the listener, just as it does on my reference system. This, I thought, was cool, chilling even!

The only real limitations of the 2.1Cs soundstaging performance were manifested in the system's recreation of the illusion of height (most systems fail in this aspect) and in the ultimate size of the instruments and vocalists, which can appear more "true to life" on some larger and typically more expensive reproducers. Don't infer from this, that the images were tiny, as they can sometimes be with small-ish speakers; I'm merely saying they weren't "HUGE!"

Moving to the topic of bass, I found the overall quality of the Dul'cet's low frequency performance to be very satisfying. It extended fairly low for a system with only a 6-inch woofer, close to 45 Hz, I'd estimate, with rapid roll off below that frequency. But it's a punchy little nipper, nonetheless. Because it is very tight, quick, and dynamic in the mid- to upper-bass, drums (even bass or kick drums) possessed a rhythmic agility that is rarely heard from speakers as inexpensive as these. In fact, I've heard some very expensive high-end systems that would be shamed by the 2.1Cs in this regard. Although there was a small amount of weight missing in its rendering of bass drum, this was partially compensated for with transient slam and dynamic contrast. There may be a minor bump in the response between 70 and 80 Hz, however, I believe this serves to enhance the speaker's intrinsic sense of balance.

Since the term "balance" implies a corresponding blip or dip on the other side of the fulcrum, I'd say that in the case of the Dul'cets, there appears to be a very mild

emphasis in the lower treble. This blip does work "in concert" with the aforementioned bass blip to provide the listener with a audibly balanced, clean, and very detailed musical portrait. The effect seems to be something like a mild form of "loudness compensation," which works to augment human hearing at the frequency extremes when the volume is lowered. Perhaps not coincidentally, these speakers have excellent resolution at low and moderate volume levels. Both of these colorations (if that's what they are) are small, benign, and non-intrusive, yet they do influence

NOTES

Acoustic Technology International, Inc. Dul'cet 2.1C Speakers, Price: \$850/pair. Manufacturer: Acoustic Technology International Inc., Hi-Vi Research, 100 Spy Court, Markham, Ontario L3R 5H6, Canada; phone 905/475-3100; FAX 905/ 475-8226.

Associated Equipment

Analog Source: Townshend Audio Rock MK III, modified Rega RB300 tonearm, Sumiko Transfiguration moving-coil and Monster Alpha-II high-output phono cartridges, American Hybrid Technology phono stage (custom).

Digital Source: Parasound D/AC-2000 Ultra converter, Parasound C/BD-2000 belt-drive transport with D.H. Labs D 110 Silver Sonic AES/EBU digital cable or Full Spectrum Esoteric RCA coaxial.

Preamp: Custom tube high level using single 6FQ7 dual triode by American Hybrid Technology, and home-brew passive.

Amps: AHT high voltage servocharge tube monoblocks with dual triode input drivers, Sonogy Black Knight, AHT modified Dyna Stereo 70.

Speakers: Acoustat Monitor III with five-wire panels (operating full range), Audio Pro B-250 subwoofer, Paradigm Reference Studio 100, Landes Audio Bookshelf EX with custom George Mueller "add-on" tweeters (based on Walsh type).

Cables: Full Spectrum Audio Exotic power cords (on AHT monoblocks), Full Spectrum Audio Signature power cord on DAC; Full Spectrum Audio Signature interconnects, Luminous Audio Monarch interconnects, Sonoran Cactus interconnects, Full Spectrum Audio Signature speaker cables, D.H. Labs Silver Sonic T 14 speaker wire, Luminous Audio Prestige speaker cables.

Tweaks And Accessories: Sonex panels, Room Tunes, Shakti Stones, Andy Bartha Audio resonance control devices, Sims Navcom pucks, Mod Squad Tip Toes, AudioQuest Sorbothane feet, Superballs, home-made isolation bases and cable bridges, and other home-brew items.

one's perceptions and, in that context, are worth noting.

The lower treble rise serves to highlight detail and increase the intelligibility of lyrics, and it does this without added sibilance, hardness, or edginess. In point of fact, the tweeter is so smooth and grainless, it is almost shocking! It's really a sweet transducer. It does seem to roll off slightly somewhere above 15 kHz, subtly decreasing the sense of air and spaciousness at the highest audible frequencies. Cymbals, for example, lose a trace of their natural shimmer, which was audible only on music with true upper treble content, such as "The Real Blues," from The Ray Brown Trio's *Summer Wind* (Concord Jazz CCD-4426).

At this point, I think I've hit upon everything save for the midrange, which to my ears seems very linear, uncolored, detailed, and natural. I'm not implying that it's perfect, mind you, but its flaws are few and of minimal magnitude. Even when compared to the very best systems I've auditioned regardless of price, the midrange performance of the Dul'cet 2.1C is not easily embarrassed. It's very transparent and focused, and in terms of nuance and low-level detailing, it may just beat your current reference loudspeaker.

As a testament to the speaker's midrange dexterity, try slick pickin' Stevie Ray Vaughan's acoustic version of "Pride And Joy," from *The Unplugged Collection, Vol. One* (Warner Bros. 9 45774-2). This proved to be a true treat on the 2.1Cs. Stevie's lightning licks were so deftly and artfully dealt, that I don't believe any true aficionado or music lover could fail to be overcome with joy at hearing this level of reproduction.

Whatever the genre of music I played, from rock to jazz to classical, the 2.1Cs consistently surprised me. With classical, for example, horns of all types, both brasses and woodwinds, were very convincing. With horns playing in groups, row after row, each section of the orchestra was presented clearly in its own space, without any one instrument or group of instruments losing its respective particular character.

Playing Stravinsky's "Le Sacre Du Printemps," (Detroit Symphony Orchestra, London 400 084-2), I was shocked at how well these small wonders reproduced the high-level bass drum thwacks and

the pounding on the tympani (at reasonable volume settings). The initial transients were clean, crisp, and startling, and possessed considerable weight, though the very lowest frequencies were truncated.

Conclusion

By now it's no secret that I was very impressed with Acoustic Technology's Dul'cet 2.1C speaker system. At its price point, it provides a level of performance and finesse that in many ways is just about as good as it gets. More and more companies of late, using computer-assisted design and measurement techniques, are setting new standards of performance within pricing constraints. Acoustic Technology is certainly pushing the boundary with the 2.1C speaker.

With the exception of the height dimension of staging, the Dul'cets conjured up a rock-

solid, expansive, multi-layered soundstage, with every instrument and performer locked firmly into their proper location. Vocalists, particularly female vocalists, sounded very natural and convincing, and the same was particularly true for the all-important midrange with practically any instrument you'd care to name.

Another thing that struck me was that the 2.1Cs were quite adept at deciphering minute, low-level detail, and doing so with an uncommon nonchalance. Background conversations, pages turning, voices quavering, and all manner of subtle instrumental shadings, were much more distinct and obvious with these speakers than with many others I could name (but won't!).

On some recordings, I found myself wishing for a little more extension in the bass and perhaps just a smidgen of lower midrange bloom. It is fair to say that the 2.1Cs are not intended to fill a very large room at high sound pressure levels, nor are they capable of shifting one's internal organs with gut-quaking bass. As one might naturally expect, the 2.1C speakers are at their best when played at moderate levels in small- and average-size rooms. In that application, I can think of very few speakers that do as many things right, for the low low price.

According to Mr. Webster, the word "dul'cet," is defined as "sweet to the ear." Who am I to argue?

**At its modest price point,
the ATI Dul'cet provides
a level of performance
and finesse that
in many ways is about
as good as it gets.**

Cardas Heart Moving-Coil Phono Cartridge

Bill Wells

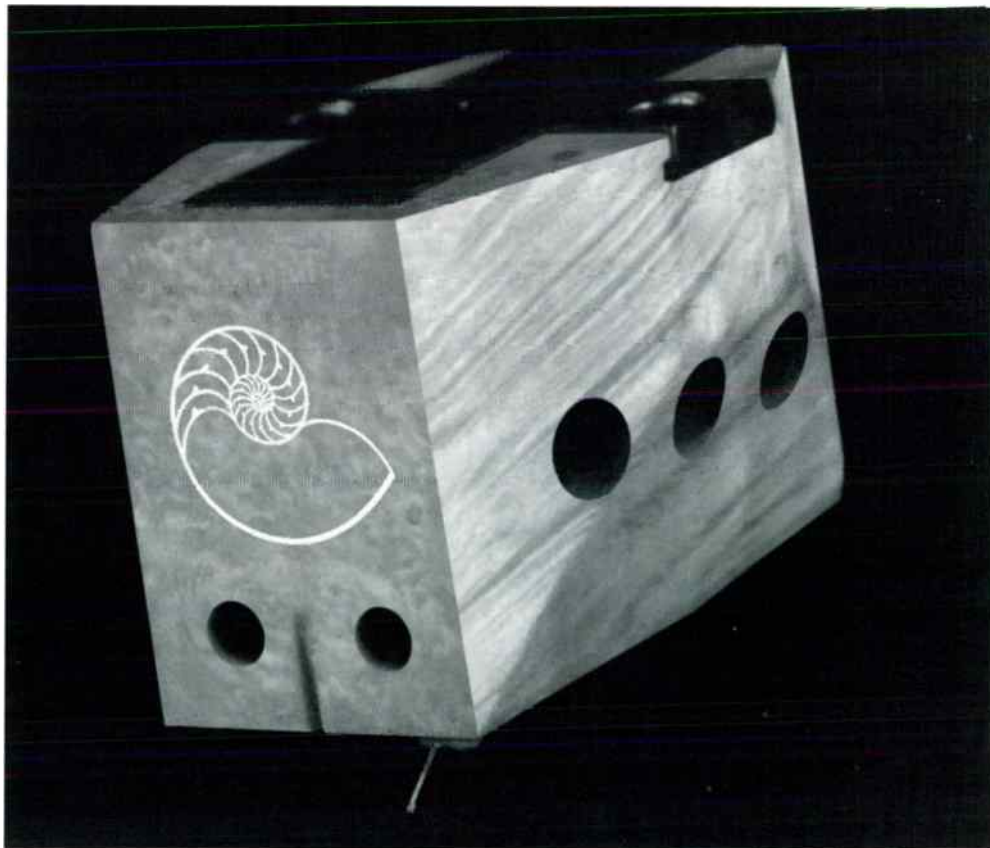
What do you suppose you would expect from a cartridge made available by one of the more noted high-end audio cable manufacturers? Well, that's exactly the question I asked myself when I learned of a particular moving-coil cartridge handled by none other than the inimitable George Cardas of Cardas Cable fame.

The particular cartridge I am referring to is the Cardas Heart. The Heart actually derives from notable heritage essentially being a tweaked version of the highly acclaimed Benz Ruby from the Benz Micro line of cartridges. My earlier experi-

ences with cartridges from the Benz family had been quite favorable. As a result, I was most anxious to find out more about Cardas' attempt to make a good thing even better.

Interestingly, I've noticed that several reviewers from other high-end audio magazines have listed this cartridge in their reference analog play-back systems. In addition, the Heart has been much in evidence at several high-end exhibits during various Consumer Electronic Shows.

After several telephone discussions with George and various personnel from the Cardas

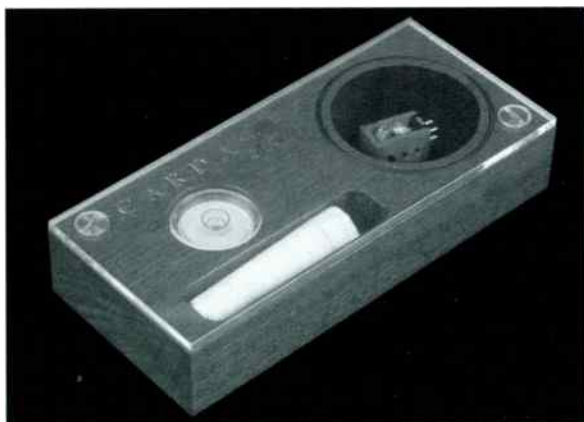


factory, I was assured that the proof of the pudding would be in the listening. Few, if any, significant details were provided as to just how Cardas had made this unit perform better than the original Ruby. But, for starters, the Heart has a somewhat higher output than the Ruby. Indeed, the Heart is available in two different output versions (either 0.3 or 0.48 mV). In my case, I opted for the higher output version which proved to work extremely well with my CAT Signature, my reference preamp at the time.

The body of the Heart is made of precision-machined briar wood. This material is claimed to offer low resonance. Again, with a physical design very similar to the Benz Ruby, the body employed on the Heart is left completely open on the underneath side. The actual cartridge motor is affixed inside the wood body through a bonding procedure. The low-mass cantilever is made of boron, while the stylus is a micro-edge design with a fine-line contact tip.

As an aside, some time ago, several more daring Benz users started stripping the wood body from their cartridges and running them nude. All sorts of claims were made as to the resultant sonic benefits. However, yours truly was never quite willing to engage in that level of risk. Leaving the cartridge so openly exposed concerned me greatly.

Fortunately, this manufacturer made an attempt to address the situation (at least partially), since in subsequent production, Benz started venting the cartridge body. This provided some, but not quite



all, of the claimed benefits of the stripped versions. Moreover, the Benz modification not only improved the sound, it also eliminated the potential for damage with the more-radical hot-rodged nudie approach.

The Cardas Heart cartridge sounds simply wonderful. Noticeably better than other Benz cartridges

After the Heart arrived at my home, installation into my Well Tempered Reference Turntable (WTT) was swift and pretty straight forward. Admittedly, I had an expert turntable set-up person on hand for this activity, and this resulted in a outstanding WTT/Heart setup. Getting the proper overhang, correct VTA and tracking force dialed-in, as well as the correct azimuth was all rather uneventful, so "Thanks a bunch, Mike!"

After this initial setup, the moment of truth had arrived. It was time to

take a listen and find out just what the Cardas Heart was all about (particularly in my system). Without hesitation or reservation, I can say that, right out of the box, this unit was very, very impressive. In fact, the Heart sounded noticeably better than what I could recall of either the Benz Ruby or Reference moving coils that I had heard in other very fine high-end audio systems. Immediately, the Heart was making music like no other Benz cartridge I had ever heard or owned, period!

In fact, I was so pleased at this point that I just got totally into the music. Due to the Heart's highly musical presentation, I began retrieving many of my favorite LPs and just got silly-stupid having a good time listening to music through my newly revived analog set-up. Cardas prefers a break-in period for the Heart somewhere the range of 30 to 50 hours of actual running time. What with my early enthusiasm and relentless playing of LPs, it did not take long for me to reach this prescribed break-in point.

Soon after completing this important break-in phase, I did have things thoroughly checked over to optimize the performance of the Heart. Interestingly, only some fairly minor adjustments to the VTA and the azimuth were required, and this brought the Heart's performance to the next higher level. Once these final adjustments were done, I could instantly sense that the Heart was now truly dialed-in with the resultant sound better than ever.

At this point, there was one final thing left to do. George had provided me with a tiny vial of a special oil treatment that was to be rubbed into the cartridge's wood body for additional refinement of the Heart's overall sound. With this final tweak performed, I was off and running. The Cardas Heart/WTT/CAT combination simply sounded wonderful.

The Sound

For openers, the Heart provided a very clean, detailed, full, warm, and robust sound. Transients were handled in a very natural manner with a smoothness that allowed the leading and trailing edges of notes to be clearly distinct but not irritating in the least. Additionally, the cartridge's overall tracking performance was excellent. The Heart's outstanding tracking ability enhanced its overall performance by somewhat diminishing the negative sonic effects of various blemishes in the record surfaces.

As I mentioned earlier, I opted for the higher output version of the Heart mc (i.e. 0.48 mV). This allowed me to run it straight into the CAT pre-amp's phono section without any additional gain provided (i.e. no active step-up devices or transformers). I also ran the Heart into the CAT without loading it down. With this approach, the overall noise level was very low.

Additionally, the higher output Heart quickly revealed much improved dynamics than I had experienced with other lower output m-c cartridges. Later in the reviewing process, I had the opportunity to use the Audio Research LS5 MKII linestage and its companion PH2 phono stage. This resulted in even higher levels of performance with the Heart. With the ARC electronics, the noise floor was even lower than before, as well as the overall dynamics being noticeably improved.

Truly, the Heart was performing in a most impressive manner. Its level of musical performance literally kept me listening intently for hours. One of the Heart's immediately recognizable attributes was its nice sense of bloom. The Heart's bass performance was top-notch and provided very good definition and air. The overall tonal balance, especially through the upper bass and lower midrange made the musical stage more palpable and seemingly come to life.

The Heart's upper frequencies were nicely extended with a good sense of openness and air. Additionally, the sounds through this region had

ample body, giving them a consistent sonic character to the entire reproduced frequency spectrum. Over time, it was largely this consistent, cohesive sound that so attracted me to the Cardas Heart.

Particularly with acoustic jazz, the Heart reproduced the performers very realistically, with really good presence. At times, the performers seemed to be in the room just in front of me. This effect was quite natural and at no time did I feel the sound to be aggressive or particularly forward. Instead, the sound through the Heart was simply immediate, yet intimate, and delivered in a manner very much like the real thing.

For example, when listening to McCoy Tyner's *New York Reunion* LP on the Chesky label, both the piano and acoustic bass sounded very natural and quite authentic. For the most part, both instruments were delivered in a manner very much like

N O T E S

Cardas Heart moving-coil phono cartridge, \$2,375.00; replacement stylus, \$1,200.00. Cardas Audio, 480 11th Street SE, Bandon, OR 97411; phone 541/347-2484, fax 541/347-2301.

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Preamps, linestages, and phono stages: CAT Signature, Audio Research LS-5 Mk II, Audio Research PH-2 phono stage, Sonic Frontiers Line-2, and Sonic Frontiers SFP-1 Signature phono stage.

Amplifiers: Audio Research D-400 MK II, R.E. Designs LNPA-150, and Sonic Frontiers SLM 160.

Turntable: Well Tempered Reference with arm.

Speakers: ESP Concert Grands, and Paragon Regents and Jubilees.

Cables: NBS Pro speaker cables and aes/ebu digital and RCA interconnects;

Transparent Ultra interconnects and speaker cables, and Micro Omega speaker cables.

Accessories: Ultra Resolutions Isolation Platform, Asc Tube Traps, VPI record cleaner, VPI Bricks, and Audio Physics phono demagnetizer.

what you would expect to hear in a live acoustical environment. The ability to present acoustic instruments in a very natural manner became one of the key strengths I observed in the Heart.

During my early days of auditioning the Heart, I felt that the cartridge's presentation of bloom

tended to impart a slight additional weightiness to the sound. Upon closer examination, what I found as the culprit had far more to do with my room acoustics than the Heart. The slight upper bass prominence that I had been observing was substantially ameliorated with the installation of strategically placed ASC Tube Traps in my reference system listening area.

With my room acoustics somewhat tamed, the tonal balance of the Heart appeared even more neutral (i.e. linear). Also, the Heart's lack of forwardness throughout the midrange and lower high frequencies was further noted. Vocals sounded very realistic, with a convincing sense of naturalness and proper harmonic structure.

In addition, the Heart delivered vocals with clearly distinguished tonal characteristics. Through the Heart, each individual singer sounded uniquely different. For example, listening to the eloquent Sarah Vaughn, on her album titled *Crazy and Mixed Up* (Pablo label LP 2312-137-2), the Heart provided moments of utter exhilaration.

Sarah's voice was delivered so masterfully that at times I thought, "It can't get any better than this!"

Sassy Sarah's delivery, through the Heart, was often very strong and powerfully dynamic. However, the Heart was also able to deliver her voice with great finesse and delicacy. This result was mightily impressive and often quite seductive. The Heart clearly revealed Vaughn's delicate, warm, and superbly rich tonal quality. In particular, on the selection, "You Are Too Beautiful," Vaughn's voice rises and falls, swells and collapses. Throughout these widely varying dynamic passages, the Heart simply sailed merrily along without any hint or trace of difficulty. Everything just hung together superbly in a very cohesive manner.

Another good example of the Heart's accurate rendering of female vocals was found on Mary Stallings *Fine and Mellow* LP on the Clarity Recording label. With the Heart in place, Stallings' voice is rendered with her distinctive nasally character much in evidence. The sound of the total performance was cohesive and alive with the Heart allowing each performer to come through clearly, separate, distinct, and rich in character.

Switching to yet another fine vocal recording, with a wonderful acoustic jazz setting, Johnny Adams, the jazz and rhythm & blues singer, was

commissioned into action. On the Alvin "Red" Tyler *Heritage* LP, Adams' wonderful, rich baritone was superbly rendered. This, along with the fine accompaniment by the other artists (an all acoustic setting), revealed just how musically natural the Heart's overall sonic reproduction truly was. Here was a cartridge that simply put things together in one of the finest musical packages I have ever heard from analog playback.

By now, I guess you realize that the Heart's midrange is clearly one of its greatest strengths. It is loaded with detail, yet the sound through this region is sweet, lush, smooth and very natural. Timbrel accuracy is also top notch. And, as I have stated, the Heart's overall perspective was at all times very realistic. It had a sense of presence that was neither recessed nor forward. Overall, in my system, the Heart portrayed a wide range of performers in very musically authentic, natural manner.

Interestingly, I did not feel the Heart to be quite the equal, in terms of transparency, as some of the other highly regarded moving coil cartridges that

I had observed. Nor did I find its speed to be quite of the ultra-lightning-fast caliber found in some of the others. However, the Heart's real strength was its ability to reproduce music in a manner that was very satisfying and ultimately rewarding. To its credit, the Heart put me at musical ease!

After having observed the Heart's rendering of more straight-ahead acoustic jazz, I decided to move on to some music that was more bombastic and complex in nature. Here again, I found the Heart to be equally at home. Listening to the very interesting, indeed unique, fusion-oriented LP by Miles Davis, from the movie *Fiesta* (Warner Brothers LP 1-25855), I was very impressed with the Heart's overall performance. The robust, powerful capability of the Heart can be really appreciated when listening to this type of music.

The same goes for the Heart's performance on the Yellow Jackets *The Spin* LP (MCA 6304) and the Weather Report's *Sweetnighter* album (Columbia LP 32210). On each of these recordings, the Heart simply grabbed a hold of the various instrumentalists and delivered their performance(s) in the powerfully dynamic manner in which their group performs. During the complex passages, the Heart kept things sorted out superbly and allowed me to easily hear the individual performers doing their thing.

**The Cardas Heart's
midrange is one of its
greatest strengths.**

Switching to a more traditional acoustic approach, I used a couple very high-quality LPs that allowed me to get a sense of the Heart's true musical essence. In particular, extensive listening to the Mobile Fidelity (Mo-Fi) remake of the renowned Modern Jazz Quartet's (MJQ) album *Blues At Carnegie Hall*, provided a degree of realism that was rather captivating. Previously, I had the pleasure of hearing the MJQ live at the sonically exquisite Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis. The performance that evening was classic MJQ with their trademark cerebral and highly musical approach to various jazz takes. Overall, their musical presentation had something for the head, the heart and the soul of those listeners present.

On the day after this particular evening of musical bliss, I retreated to my private little inner sanctum where my reference audio system resides. I wasn't there to test my system's capability for transporting me back to the night before. However, I was curious as to how things would stack up at my place vs. this very pleasing, recent live experience.

To quickly cut to the chase, the live concert won, hands down! (Yeah, I know, big surprise!) However, listening through my system, with the Heart in place (and using the previously mentioned Mo-Fi LP of this same group), I was able to recapture a significant degree of the group's musical magic.

Whereas this Mo-Fi LP is a live recording, I was also able to reconnect and discern the image placement of the performers relative to the previous night's performance. Essentially, the Heart provided an accurate rendering of the real thing. Yes, there was tape hiss evident from the LP, letting me know that I was listening to recorded music. But wow, the staging and image placement was dead on. Bottom line: I could easily live with this in-home recreation of the live event. Much of the effect (and the emotion) was there. The Heart was truly doing its job and I was a very happy camper.

LP versus CD

Although I did not conduct extensive A/B comparisons with the digital versions of some of the LPs I used for evaluating the Heart, I did enough to make me want to listen more often to the Heart.

In particular, what I typically experienced was a more natural reproduction of instrumental or vocal harmonic structures with the Heart. This was often accompanied by a more realistic portrayal of the soundstage as my perception of depth seemingly became much more realistic.

A good example of this was found while comparing the LP version of Charlie Haden's Quartet West. During the opening passage of the first track, titled "Hermitage," the sound quietly emerges from deep within the soundstage. The Heart handled this passage with very pleasing results. There was a spaciousness and delicacy that were very nice to observe.

On the CD version of this same recording, the stage perspective was less dimensional. Simply put, the Heart provided a bet-

ter rendering of the soundstage and accompanying ambient soundfield. In other LP-to-CD comparisons, similar results were obtained. Typically the Heart sounded more naturally musical overall.

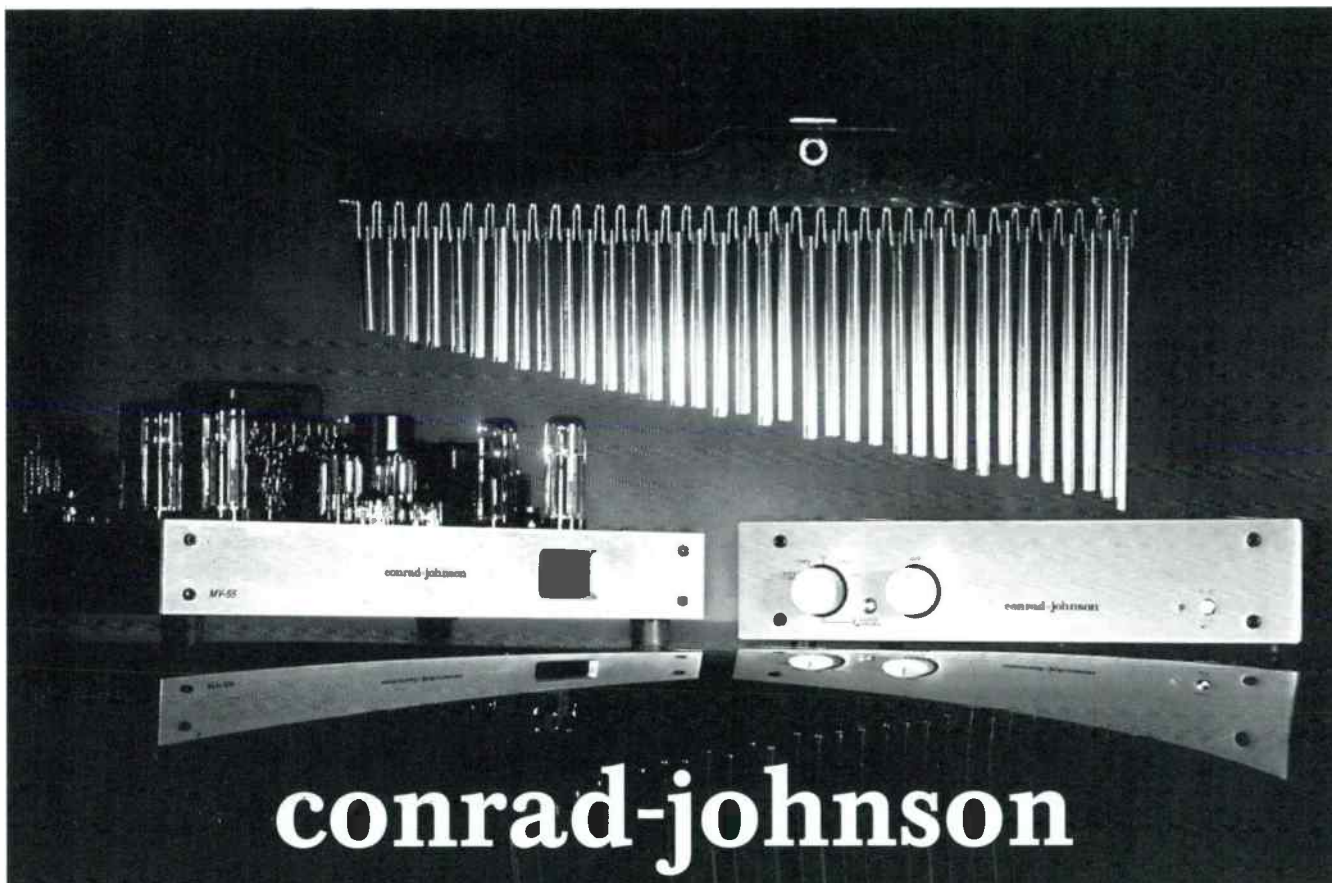
My experiences with orchestral music through the Heart were somewhat limited. However, I did engage the superb Clarity Recordings LP of Igor Stravinsky's *Petruska* performed by the Redwood Symphony. The Heart gave me everything I could ask for from this recording. I received a wealth of detail with each individual performer being clear and distinct. I was also treated to a wonderful sense of dynamics with the music ebbing and flowing, from soft and delicate to very loud and full. Overall, a very solid musical presentation with much credit going to the Heart for providing this level of performance.

Conclusion

As I have tried to describe, in my long-term listening experience with this wonderful moving-coil cartridge, I have been most favorably impressed. It does so many things right musically that I recommend it without hesitation. Whatever Cardas has done to this baby, the results are truly something special.

Properly set up and cared for, the Cardas Heart moving coil should give you many hours of pure analog delight. In my system, it worked extremely well for me and I bet it will work for you. You ought to check it out. Just call George and tell him, "Bill sent you!"

**Whatever George Cardas
has done with
this phono cartridge,
it is something special.
Special enough that
you'd better check it out!**



conrad-johnson PV10A Preamplifier

John Gatski

Bang for your buck. That certainly describes conrad-johnson's PV10A all-tube preamplifier. This \$1,195.00 made-in-Fairfax, Va. gem is a high-quality, basic tube preamp that has been around for a couple of years. It is, I believe, a perfect mate for various modern amplifiers, but I think it also is ideal for those classic McIntoshes, Marantz, Fishers, Williamson, Dynaco Mark "whatever" series, etc.

This ice-looking, gold-colored preamp is conventionally sized, and sports enough functions and

connections for most component audiophiles. The PV10A that I auditioned was equipped with a phono preamp stage. There also is a \$995.00 version PV10AL without phono stage.

Features

The PV10A includes connections for four line level sources (tuner, CD, video, tape in), a turntable, and a tape loop. The tape source is activated by a front panel button. On the PV10AL, the phono inputs and selector are relabeled "AUX 1."

In keeping with minimalist, no fuss simplicity, the front panel contains only a volume control, source selector control, and the tape loop button. Rear connectors include the unbalanced RCA outputs, tape-out, and the source-input RCA jacks.

The conrad-johnson engineers designed the PV10A with 12AU7s in the line stage and two 12AX7As and a 12AT7 in the phono section. Most of the tubes which came standard with the review unit were made East Germany prior to unification, while two were made in China. Both sections feature zero feedback, and this technique is said to provide "maximum temporal accuracy." Another circuit feature is the inclusion of cathode followers for low output impedance (allowing for long cable runs if desired). The power supply system features a low a.c.-impedance, discrete regulator for the plate voltage supply, as well as a regulated filament supply.

The circuit design employed in the PV10A does invert polarity, thus perfect polarity (not always easily confirmed) must be enabled elsewhere in the audio chain, such as switching speaker cable leads or using a CD player that inverts polarity, which was my solution with this review.

Set Up/In Use

I used the PV10A with several components, both solid state and tube, but my favorite combination was with my vintage McIntosh MC275, recapped and tubed with Svetlana 6550C output tubes; Westlake Lc-8.1 speakers, and a Denon DCD-S10 Alpha Processor CD player. Monster Cable interconnects and speaker cables linked the components. For LP listening, I fired up my Luxman PD-264, equipped with an Audio-Technica ML-150 cartridge.

On turn on, I noticed the PV10A's tubes light very brightly for a second or two and then fade down as the circuits come to life. The company recommends a minimum of 15 minutes for warm-up. I obliged and made a cup of coffee.

Since polarity is inverted through the c-j, I inverted first

out of the Denon CD player. However, when I made A-B comparisons with the CD player's front panel polarity switch, it was hard to tell the difference between inverted and non-inverted polarity all the time. This appeared to depend on the music.

Using the CD player source, my impression of the PV10A was, to use a well-used phrase, musical. I thoroughly enjoyed whatever music I played through the system. Steve Earle's country come back, "I Feel All Right," definitely sounded all right, with just the right tones on acoustic and electric guitars. Good tube sound is often hard to describe; there is a certain warm "filtering," but in a good way. The PV-10A just plain had it. I cranked up the rockabilly on the Essential Johnny Cash boxed set and thoroughly enjoyed the "Man in Black," simple, yet catchy tunes punctuated with the Tennessee Two's signature sound from the Sun recordings.

On Lynn Arriale Trio's "With Words Unspoken," a DMP jazz recording, I just kicked back with a glass of wine and dimmed the lights so I could see the orange glow of the Russian valves in the Mac and enjoyed the piano/bass/drum trio playing all the way through. Piano is so seductive with tubes. Jazz guitar recordings, as I expected, were mellow and intimate through the PV10A.

Classical music sounded real nice, too, as long as it did not get too demanding. Violin concertos, solo cello, piano sonatas meshed well with the c-j.

Now, the PV10A is not perfect, dense rock 'n' roll bass (especially through the Mac) sounded

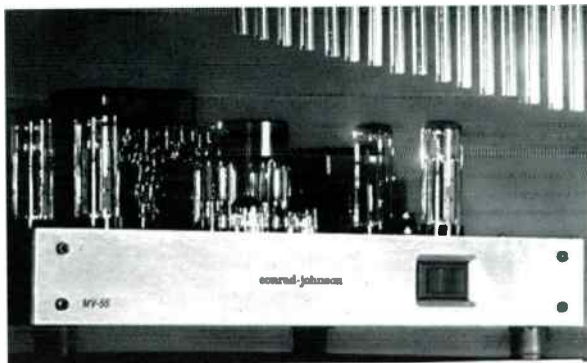
**This minimalist
tube amplifier
from conrad-johnson
will give you
maximum performance
with a minimum of fuss.**

NOTES

conrad-johnson PV-10A: \$1,195.00; Model PV10AL, less phono stage, \$950.00. conrad-johnson design, 2733 Merrilee Dr., Fairfax, VA 22031; phone 703/698-8581, FAX 703/560-5360.V

Associated Equipment: McIntosh MC275 amplifier, Westlake Lc-8.1 speakers, Denon DCD-S10 Alpha Processor CD player, Luxman PD-264 turntable, Audio-Technica ML-150 cartridge, and Monster Cable interconnects and speaker cables.

much fuller and slower than through comparison MOS FET or bipolar preamps. (If you want dead-on bass accuracy at a great price, try out the c-j PF2L MOS FET preamp, a real bargain when it comes to accuracy vs. dollars spent). But the PV-10A is very listenable in its element. Find the



music that suits it and you, and then play to your heart's content.

On the turntable, my direct-to-disc LPs and some newer Mobile Fidelity pressings sounded as natural as they had on my reference MOS FET preamp, but the bass was a bit plumper. (By the way, records can still sound real good, but as CD players have gotten better and recording and mastering engineers have figured out the the in's and

out's of the digital biz, an LP cannot match the dynamic range of a CD.)

One last lavish for my gold friend, conrad-johnson's attention to quality. I have toured the facto-

**My experience
with the PV10A
was typical of all
my c-j tests:
No problems,
just fine sound.**


ry, and have seen the workers in action. No assembly line here. Every product is hand assembled and then checked and rechecked. The experience I had with the c-j PV10A is typical. Not one quirk or problem. No microphonic or noisy tubes, no noisy controls, no stray hums or buzzes. Just music.

Now, pardon me while I take off my reviewer's hat and go listen to some tunes. As the front of the c-j manual states: "It just sounds right." Honey, warm up the stereo....

John Gatski is Editor of Pro Audio Review.

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C lassifieds

Wish to buy, prefer virtually unmarked, especially front panels. Boxes, packing materials, manuals a plus: ADC 404 bookshelf speaker; Advent original Large Advent in walnut only, improved Large Advent in walnut only, Small Advent, 200 & 201 cassette decks, 100 & 101 Dolby NR units, Frequency Balance Control, FM radio's wood veneer enclosure only, Model 300 receiver, Videobeam TV; Altec Lansing Voice of the Theater home version; AR 1, 3a, 5, LST speakers, tuner, receiver, 1965-72 XA, speaker bases; Audio Research SP-1, SP-2C, SP-3, SP-3A; Crown DC-300; Decca Int'l U.S. import version tone-arm circa 1970-71, 4RC cartridge; Empire Troubador turntable silver or gold; Garrard 301, Zero 100; Infinity Servo Statik-1; Janszen Z-600; JBL 100, 4312CBK; Klipsch Klipschorn, La Scala, Belle Klipsch, Cornwall with hardwood veneers; KLH 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 5 (most-Model 6 Model 5, circa 1971), 9, 12, 17, 33 speakers, Eleven & Eleven FM compact hi-fi, 8 & 21 table radios, 40 tape deck, 16 integrated amp, 27 & 52 receivers; Linn LP12 from '70s-'80s; Magnepan Tympani 1A, 4D; Marantz "Consolette," Models 18, 19, 22 & 27 receivers, 7, 7C & 7T preamps, Models 15, 250 & 400 power amps, 20B & 120 tuners; Rabco SL-8, SL-8E tonearms, ST-4 turntable; Revox A77, A77 Mark II, A700; Phase Linear 700 (original, not Series II); Philips 212 turntable; SAE Mark 1 preamp, Mark III amplifier, Mark IIIA amplifier, 5000 "pop & click" machine; Sony CDP-101CD

player; Thorens TD124, 124 Mark II, 125 Mark II, 125 A/B Mark II, 150. Dennis Anastos: Eves, 203/762-1089; weekdays, 212/265-7474; weekday FAX, 212/581-1461.

Audiophile Thins Collection: B&W DM-330 floor-standing loudspeakers, \$150; Mordaunt-Short Pageant 2 bookshelf speakers, \$150; Synthesis (conrad-johnson) LM-200 floor-standing loudspeakers, \$325; Acoustic Research M-5 floor-standing loudspeakers, \$550; McIntosh MA-6200 solid-state integrated amplifier, \$825; McIntosh MR-74 analog solid-state AM/FM stereo tuner, \$425; Sony CDP X-222ES single-play CD player with remote, \$225; 14-foot pair banana-terminated Audioquest BC-4 LiveWire speaker cable, \$12; 1-meter RCA-terminated pair Apature HF interconnects, \$12. Most items one owner and excellent condition. Shipping extra. No CODs! 501/846-2706.

Collector's Items: Two Nakamichi 680 ZX two-speed cassette decks, excellent condition, make offer. Larry 904/678-1903

ATTENTION

We are starting up a classified section. The groundrules are still fluid. Ordinary readers can have reasonable amounts of space free; dealers and companies rates to be determined. **NEGOTIATE!** I also want to run a free regular listing of hi-fi clubs, their secretary's address and phone number, meeting schedule, etc. Write the Editor.

B

ACK PAGE



“A

lles Gut in Deutschland, Ja!!!” reads the caption on this photo from the cover of March 1997 issue *The Source*, the newsletter of the New Jersey Audio Society. Society President Frank J. Alles, Jr. just can't stop his audiophilia, even on this trip to Germany, where he hunted through dozens of bins of old 78s and LPs for potentially interesting purchases.

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SUB REVIEWS



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Home Theater, Feb, 97



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—Joseph M. Cierniak
The Sensible Sound, Issue # 60



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—Julian Hirsh
Stereo Review, Dec. 96

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