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Volume 5, Issue 3

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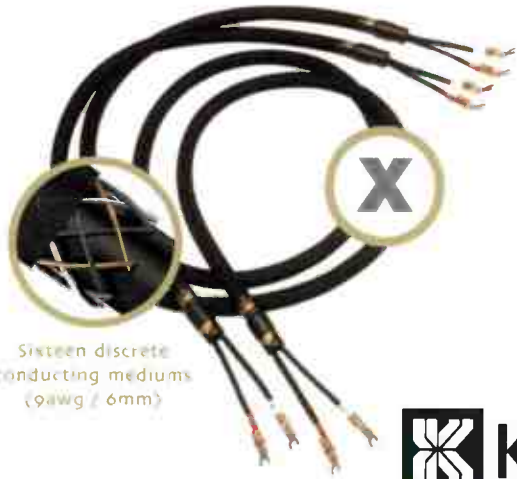


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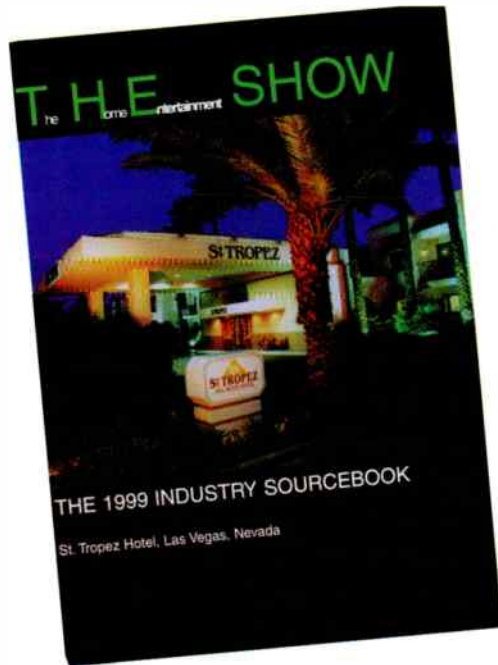
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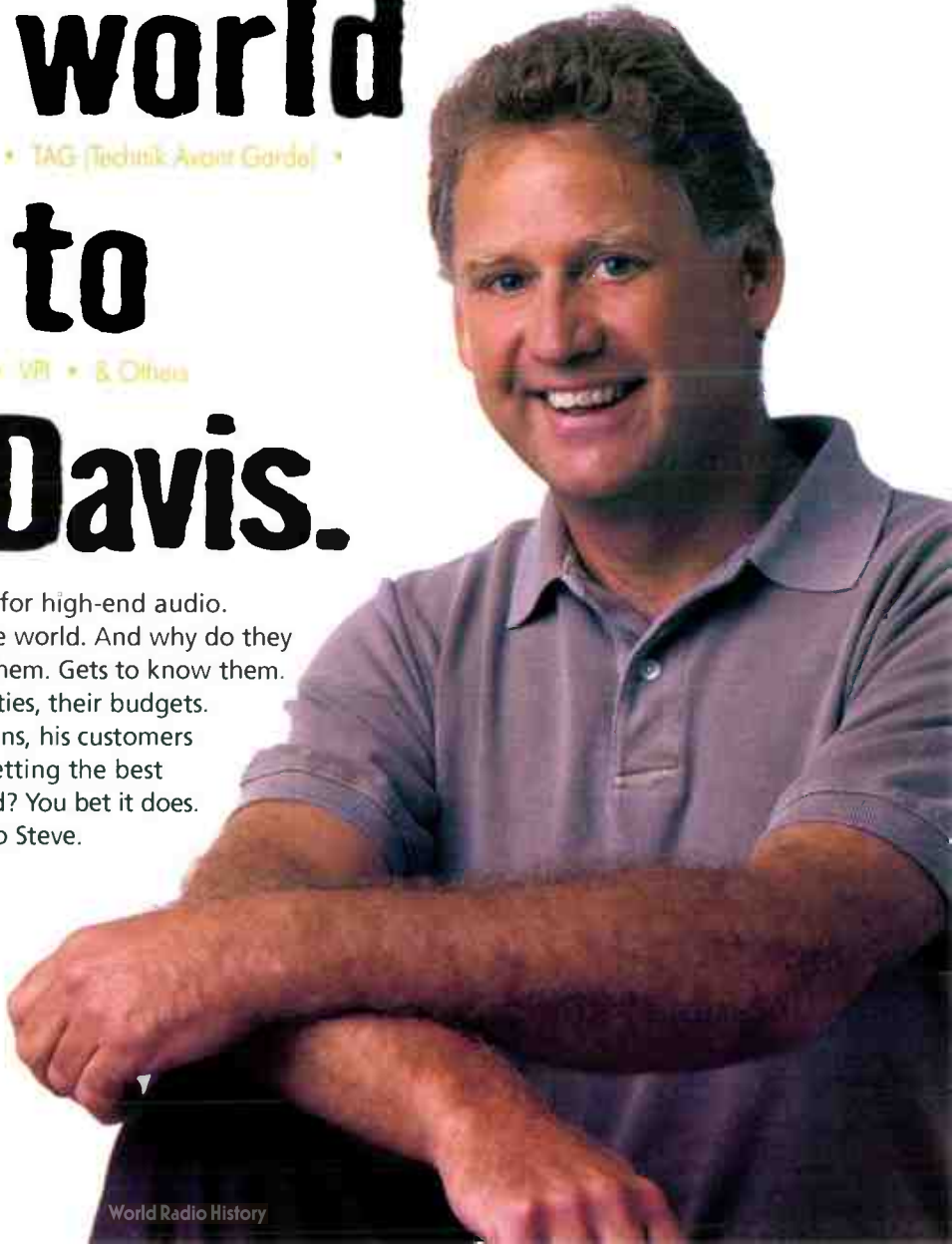
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New Products

The Quicksilver Audio Silver Sixty Mono Amp

offers many of the features of the firm's extremely popular V4 model in a simpler and more cost effective 60-watt design. The Silver Sixty has all tube circuitry and all point-to-point circuitry is hand-wired for maximum reliability and musicality. The output transformer is designed to deliver full power bandwidth down to 10 Hz, well below any fundamental found in music, for full bass response even into difficult speaker loads. EL34 tubes are standard, but KT88s, 6550s or 5881s may be used without modifications to the amp. Output tubes are self-biasing, and no adjustments are needed. \$2350 per pair.

Data: 702/825-1514.



The NAD L40 CD Receiver

is an integrated CD player, FM tuner, and amplifier directed toward the knowledgeable audiophile who requires high performance, simplicity and value in an ultimately practical package. The first in a series of NAD LifeDesign products, this receiver includes a CD section based on the NAD 522, which was widely recognized as one of the best-sounding "budget" CD players. The FM tuner section has been designed for the difficult world of urban reception, which excellent reception of weak signals and first-rate rejection of secondary signals. NAD has advanced the ability of its amplifiers to deliver much higher power on peaks (80 watts) than might be expected from its steady-state rating (20 watts). \$599.00.

Data: 781/784-8586



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Data: 310/538-8150.



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LETTERS

"Angels" Errata

Dear Editor:

I want to thank you for the opportunity to rectify errors in the article entitled: "Angels of Transfer" that appeared in Vol. 5, No. 1 of *The Audiophile Voice*. I am a bit annoyed with the way that Mr. Benjamin Ivry just mentions my participation inaccurately concerning the Toscanini/BMG, Sony and N.Y. Philharmonic projects, and then immediately goes into detail concerning Mr. Marston's and Obert-Thorn's contributions to the historic record business in detail, with photos of each, as well as reproducing various record label covers of their work.

Where do I begin? Perhaps readers should get a copy of *EQ Magazine* for February 1999 where Mr. Bill Townley's article and interview appeared after he made a trip to my studio. He was nothing less than enthusiastic with the set-up and the way I go about doing a restoration. (By the way, for you audiophile purists, in the photo that accompanies this article, there is a pair of restored Marantz Consolette Model Ones that can be seen in the first rack of equipment.)

Now let me set the record straight, for the moment, concerning what was printed in *TAV* article: I was one of several engineers that used for the Toscanini/BMG project. Mr. Marston and Mr. Samuels were the other two. I worked very closely with Arthur M. Fierro, who was the supervising producer for most of the set. My responsibility was to transfer lacquers of broadcasts/rehearsals that were housed in the

Toscanini Legacy which is part of the Rodgers and Hammerstein Archives of Recorded Sound Collection at the New York Public Library as well as dubbing metal parts of issued recordings in my own studio. Since Mr. Fierro was Walter Toscanini's personal assistant until the day he died in 1971, his knowledge and expertise of the Toscanini discography is unmatched.

Concerning the Sony Masterworks Heritage project, I was responsible for dubbing original session lacquers and metal parts for, once again, Mr. Fierro and Dennis D. Rooney. Mr. Rooney's knowledge and expertise concerning the process of how the manufacture and playback of pre-tape material was done contributed greatly to the success of this series. In fact, I have to say that both Mr. Fierro and Mr. Rooney are among the two best reissue producers that I have ever worked with, and I am proud to say that this association has led to friendships without which I would definitely be the poorer.

And finally, Mr. Samuels was not hired by me to work on the N.Y. Philharmonic fund-raising sets; Sedgwick Clark, the producer of this series, hired him. As before, my responsibilities were to restore the pre-tape and pre-stereo material for this series, as well as assembling the final CD masters.

As I write this note, I am checking for Crystal Records the nearly finished masters of a three-CD set comprising every Sousa march recorded by the Original Sousa Band, as well as dubbing source material for the N.Y. Philharmonic's next fund-

raising set. Thank you for your attention; I am always available for interviews in order to make sure that the facts are presented accurately.

Seth B. Winner, President
Winner Sound Studios Inc.
Merrick, NY

"Angels" Blessing

Dear Editor:

I would like to thank you and especially Benjamin Ivry for the "Angels of Transfer" article in *The Audiophile Voice* Vol. 5, No. 1. Because of this article, I went searching and found all three of the newly re-released Toscanini Beethoven CDs. They are great! The sound is great, except on a very few cases that sound like tape saturation, but this is easily ignored when compared to the rest of the music.

I hope that BMG recognizes that sound is important and begins to re-release some of the great music that has to be in their library. That it is possible has been demonstrated by them. Keep it up.

Mike Klein
New Orleans, LA

E-Mailed to the Wall

Dear Editor:

I have every issue of your magazine both before and after you acquired it. I always read it carefully because I like the tone that you take with it. I sometimes get tired of the self-important types at *Stereophile* and *TAS*. I read nearly everything including *IAR* and all the home theater mags. Keeps me busy as hell but I keep up with what is going on anyway. I have learned to take a lot of this with a large dose of salt.

Got any recommendations for cartridges? I am chasing a 10-hour-old Clearaudio Insider, two used Grasshoppers and a Van Den Hul Frog. Love that analogue. Do you think standard 16-bit, 44.1 sampling CD technology can equal it?

I think I get the idea behind your philosophy of magazine editing and publishing and it works for me. There are a lot of folks who don't have an axe to grind, who are basically decent people at heart, who like to read and listen to similar people. Sure, it's fun to hear the prima donnas rant and rave (and dictate) sometimes, but eventually their agenda begins to show at the edges and they become less independent than they claim they are. My daddy always told me that "if you sell your soul, it will sooner or later be recognizable to others."

We may very well have met at one of the shows. I went to

five *Stereophile* shows in a row, from Miami to San Francisco. I got burned out after that. I honestly liked the original setup better. It was a manufacturer and consumer show. Now it is a dealer and consumer show and it is all about pushing product which is not necessarily why I go to a show like this.

Did you notice this as well? All the rooms are dealer rooms, not product rooms, the makers are often not even there at all. Instead some salesman geek is hyping the stuff and I already know more the product and the technology behind it than he does. I wanna see the creators of this stuff in the flesh.

Try to review some Von Schweikert Speakers. I think Albert would let you have some to listen to. I would like to hear some other opinions on these beside Harry Pearson's.

John S. Roberge
Out here in audio hell

Transferred

Dear Editor:

Thanks for the generously filled box of copies of the "Audiophile Voice." Mr. Ivry's article turned out very well, and covered a lot of ground on the transfer scene.

Mark Obert-Thorn
North Wales, PA

Fi Magazine Remembered

Dear Editor:

Just had the "Pitts Report: Bye, Fi!" forwarded to us by Steve Kregling of Flat Earth Audio, our American distributor. We would like to compliment you on your piece which reflects our views. We, too, wish the staff and publishers of *Fi Magazine*, especially Larry Kay whom we knew and partied with personally, all the best for the future.

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WHEN I FOUND OUT that I was going to American Samoa to work with the Nuū'uli village, I immediately made up my mind that I would attend a church service. I'm a music lover and I've seen enough versions of *Mutiny on the Bounty* to know that the Polynesians have a wonderful, natural singing style. I figured that with my work schedule, the best chance I had of hearing that singing was to go to church.

I was in American Samoa to design a new Fautasi or 92-foot long racing canoe for the Nuū'uli village. This initial trip was to measure the village's existing boat that had won the last nine out of ten races. Yes, this is a little out of the norm for me but I couldn't resist the challenge. Besides, it's not every day you get invited to Samoa by the family of a high chief.

There's only one hotel, the Rainmaker. The travel agent referred to it as the "Painmaker." It was aptly named, as I arrived around 11:00 p.m. in a torren-

tial, tropical downpour. The hotel was 35 years old and run down but I loved it. My room was perfect. As my client Ben walked me to my room I heard live music. "That's the bar. Do you want to go in for a beer?" "Sure." Well, "a beer" was not to be. On an island of 55,000 people, it was not a surprise that my client Ben knew just about everybody in the little bar. There were about 12 tables, six stools and a three-piece combo blasting out through a phalanx of Peavy gear. Guitar, bass and keyboards with electric drummer pounded out Samoan island rock and roll. The lyrics were all in the Samoan but many of the songs sounded remotely familiar.

As we sat and enjoyed the energetic music, beers began materializing at our table compliments of Ben's friends. Our table was soon covered with Vai'ilima beers, and they were arriving faster than we could drink them.

As the night wore on and more and more Vai'ilimas were drunk, the men began to get a little rowdy. In Samoa this means that the men would take turns standing up and dancing by themselves at their table. The dancing is a series of formalized hand and arm motions with very little foot action. It was accompanied by a lot of laughing by the "audience" as if they actually were seeing signaled "jokes." It was clear that the audience was not laughing "at" the dancer. At the table next to ours the leading dancer had once been a member of the Seattle Seahawks professional football team. This was not the kind of guy you would laugh at. It seemed strange and at the same time very comfortable to be in an environment where the men got up and danced.

Sunday morning arrived and with it a call from Ben telling me his father, the high chief, had been taken to the hospital the night before and was still there.

Ben would not be going to church so I was on my own until lunchtime. I was still determined to go to church so I grabbed a cab. "Take me to a church." "Which church?" "The church with the best singing." We arrived at a small church that was about 70-feet away from a larger church. The cab driver asked a woman something in Samoan and said that this service was about to start.

I'm not totally comfortable in any church. My own "religion" is loosely based upon my individual experiences in the 60s while in college. So I was more than a little nervous as I entered the church. I had been warned to dress conservatively so I had on my only pair of long pants and my most-subdued colorful shirt. I eagerly looked for a spot on a pew as far back in the church as I could

get, but those spots were already occupied. I sat in a section all by myself, about half way in between the back seats and the filling front seats.

The women were dressed all in sparkling white with stiff, straw-like, broad-brimmed white hats. The men were dressed in white shirts, most with ties and their "dress" lavalavas.

**On my own in Samoa,
I told the cabdriver
to take me to "the church
with the best singing."**

(Lavalavas are skirts.) In many cases they had on jackets that matched the lavalava. Everyone wore sandals or flip flops. The men and women sat in different sections, women to the left of the aisle and men to the right. I anxiously waited for the choir to

come in but it didn't happen.

"No choir! Damn!"

The church filled to about half full, leaving a nice insulated halo around where I was sitting. The organ player came in and began some nondescript intro "mood" music. The minister arrived and sat down. The organ player signaled hymn numbers with his fingers and began an intro in earnest. The congregation all at once sat up straight, took deep breaths and commenced singing.

I fought to hold back tears and was glad to be off by myself so no one could see my eyes. It was so beautiful. The high voices of the women balanced by the huge and resonant voices of the usually huge Samoan men. There was no "imaging." There was no "soundstage." There was just a big room full of music. Paul

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Scott, a client of mine, tells me I might have been hearing what is called "shape singing." There was no hymnal at my pew so I could not read along with the singing. It was far more than simple counterpoint harmonies. These were highly arranged hymns where the men and women sang different parts. There was a layering and offsetting of lines. This was very serious hymn singing. "No choir!" The whole church was a choir!

I got up and moved up front more so I could get closer to the

singers. Looking back it only occurs to me now that I was sitting in the "ladies section." "God, please don't let me be an ugly American."

An hour and a half went by. About 10 hymns were sung. The long service was all in Samoan, so I understood nothing but I think I caught the general drift of it. I spent most of the time in deep reflection and meditation. I looked at my fingernails a lot. As we filed out of the church, I got a lot of big smiles and I was approached by an alderman

who spoke to me in English to introduce himself. He said he was very glad to see me there. I was really in some kind of shock, so I can't remember what I said. I'm certain my words were not particularly relevant.

I decided I'd walk the mile or so back to my hotel. The rain was raining down and the weather was nice and warm. The Samoans call the rain "showers of blessing." It was a good morning for a walk. About a half dozen cars stopped alongside me to ask if I needed a ride. I said no thanks, but in retrospect I should have been more friendly and accepted. I felt very satisfied. My soul had been revitalized.

It was quite a trip, a truly unique experience, but clearly for me the high point was the church service and the singing. The memory of those voices will not go away. I can't wait to go back.

Bob Perry is generally credited with starting the "performance cruising" movement that introduced the concept of sailing speed to offshore cruising yachts. In 1974 after spending several years in apprenticeship and design positions in other design offices, Robert Perry opened his own yacht design office on Shilshole Bay in Seattle. For the past 22 years Bob has been the Technical Editor of the *Sailing* magazine, which is published in Port Washington, Wisconsin. Perry designs account for approximately 5,000 boats on the water and are recognized as the epitome of offshore cruising yachts. There are more Tayana 37s cruising offshore than any other single design according to George Day, the Editor of *Blue Water Cruising*. I believe Perry knows about as much about good sound and good sound equipment as he does about sailing. — Gene Pitts

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The Inner Ear Report - Vol. 10, #1

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P-5 / W-5 - *Les Turoczi - Audiophile Voice* vol.4 no.6 1998.

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Victor Chavira - AudioMusings - no.5

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I-5 - *The Inner Ear Report Volume 10, issue #4*

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I-5 - *Robert Harley - Fi Magazine - February 1999*

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At The Show, Briefly ...

OKAY, OKAY, I DID GO to Chicago to attend Hi-Fi '99 at the Palmer House. I was in that hotel from the opening to the trade Wednesday noon through the close of business on Thursday. And I was running as hard as I could under the circumstances. But I got to so few exhibits and talked to so few people, that I can offer only a single item of show coverage. We'll have a better report from someone else next issue.

Probably the "Biggest Deal" of Hi-Fi '99 was the Super Audio CD (SACD) which uses Sony's Direct Stream Digital (DSD) technology to record 1-bit data to the disc. The sampling frequency is 2.8224 MHz or 64 times higher than the 44.1-kHz sampling frequency used by conventional CDs. The resulting data capacity of DSD is four times greater than the CD.

Such a high sampling frequency is rather amazing to me. I well remember that when the CD was first introduced even one of the most experienced chip makers was having to "kluge up" a non-standard sampling system because they couldn't make on a production-line basis chips that would do 16 bits accurately. It's like being able to fold a piece of paper 16 times and have the edges come out exactly even. Not easy.

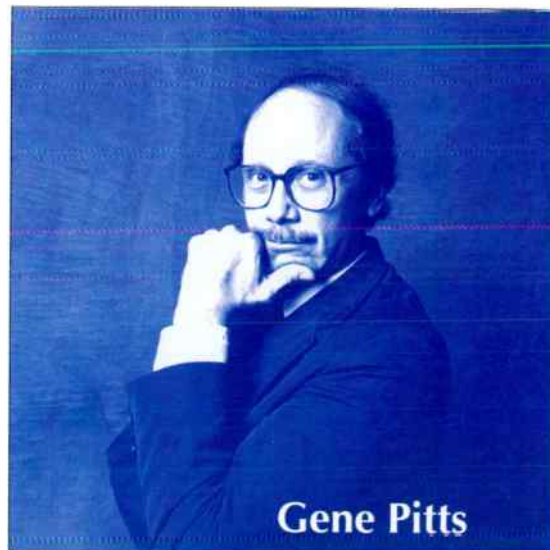
There are many interesting sidelights to SACD. One is that both Sony and Philips support the format, while a different form of "high quality audio," DVD 24/96 Audio, is being put forward mainly by Toshiba. From a lawyerly point of view, this is mainly about patent rights, while from an audiophile's point of view, it's about the quality of the resulting sonics. A second interesting sidelight is that DSD "folds down" in even numbers to the sampling frequency used in DATs and also the 16-kHz sampling frequency used in European digital broadcast. I understand, too, that Sony has already committed to using the system internally for stor-

age and handling of the many, many analog master recordings they own; we audiophiles sometimes forget that Sony is a very big deal in the record business, both in the U.S. and Japan.

Third sidelight: I was privileged to be at a demonstration by The Philadelphia Orchestra, Water Lily Acoustics, E.A.R. U.S.A., and Impact Technology of the same pieces of music in all three formats, 16/44.1 CD, 24/96 DVD, and SACD. The music was Liszt's *Les Preludes* and three overtures by Dvorak, recorded by Water Lily's Kavi Alexander with Blumlein's crossed-figure-eight technique and using de Paravicini-designed E.A.R. electronics. Replays were via Impact's Charisma speaker system with La Bomba subwoofers.

In previous demos of standard CD versus 24/96 DVD, I haven't heard enough to warrant much arm-waving. I did here, as the 24/96 DVD was clearly better, particularly around a short but very revealing cymbal section. However, when the SACD was played, it was yet better, and by an increased margin. Now, there are so many variables in this demo that I refuse to make a final judgment, but I am impressed enough to want to upgrade my system this fall when Sony introduces their SCD-1 super audio CD player. I have put in for a review sample of this player and also intend to have an article doing a tech comparison of the SACD and 24/96 DVD.

I will save other comments to use in the full write-up of the Show. However, it was nice to see Mark Schifter and Paul McGowan, who had previously teamed up with Arnie Nudell at Genesis, there at the Show and heading their own firms, Perpetual Technologies and a reborn PS Audio, respectively. Mark had been a principal of Audio Alchemy; Paul started PS Audio. We are promised samples for review; soon, I hope.



Gene Pitts

Grace Notes Robert Shaw 1916 - 1999



Nick Jones

ROBERT SHAW, Music Director Emeritus and Conductor Laureate of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, died January 25, 1999 at the age of 82. He was at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut, on Saturday to see the play *Endgame*, which was his son Thomas's senior directing and acting project, when he suffered a massive stroke.

Renowned as America's greatest conductor of choral music, Mr. Shaw came to Atlanta in 1967 to become Music Director and Conductor of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra. During his 21 years in that capacity, the ASO grew from a part-time, part-year regional ensemble to a full-time, year-round orchestra, recognized internationally for its excellence. He led the ASO on tours across the United States, including a 1971 Carnegie Hall debut that became the first of many ASO appearances there. He took the ASO and its Chorus to Washington in 1977 to perform at the Inauguration Concert for President-elect Jimmy Carter,

**A long-time singer in Mr. Shaw's Atlanta Symphony Orchestra Choruses, Nick Jones is the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra's Program Annotator.*

and he led both ensembles on an acclaimed concert tour of Europe in 1988.

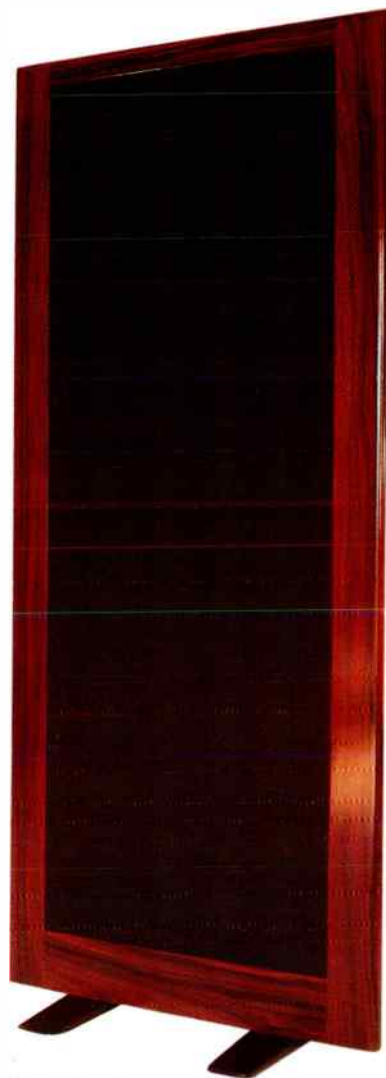
The 200-voice Atlanta Symphony Orchestra Chorus and the smaller ASO Chamber Chorus were his creations. Both were trained to the level of perfection he demanded and continue to be an important part of the ASO's musical programs—at home in Atlanta on a regular basis and occasionally on tour as well. The excellence of the ASO Chorus under Mr. Shaw's direction has been recognized by six Grammy awards for Best Choral Performance and by the Georgia Governor's Award in the Arts.

In September of last year, more than 10 years after retiring from his duties as the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra's Music Director, Robert Shaw served as Guest Artistic Director for the National Symphony Orchestra's two-week Beethoven Festival. Working with two different choruses, he produced outstanding concerts featuring the major pillars of Beethoven's choral output: the *Choral Fantasy*, the *Missa solemnis* and the Ninth Symphony. Reviewing the concerts in *The Washington Post*, Tim Page wrote, "By now, Shaw, 82, is a certified Grand Old Man. Increasingly, his appearances have become events to be anticipated eagerly, savored fiercely, and reflected upon with serenity and gratitude." Mr. Page pronounced the Beethoven performances "simply exhilarating."

No sooner had Mr. Shaw returned to Atlanta than he received a call to come to Boston and conduct the Beethoven Ninth, replacing the ailing Seiji Ozawa at the last minute for the Boston Symphony's gala season-open-

ing concert. He arrived in Boston only two and a half hours before the performance, with no time for rehearsal other than a quick piano run-through with the soloists. The screaming, standing ovation that greeted him before the concert almost matched the tumultuous one that followed the performance,

which was hailed for its Beethovenian dynamism and choral splendor. In *The Boston Globe* Richard Dyer wrote, "Shaw's . . . view is spacious, lucid, humane, and surpassingly humble." He praised "the triumphant sense of belief that suffuses everything and crowns every endeavor with joy."



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Five Great Musicians Without The Hype!

Benjamin Ivry



FAMILIARITY MAY BREED contempt, but not when it comes to shopping for CDs. In stores, unfamiliar performers often lose out to much-hyped stars from big record companies. Listeners tend to stick to familiar performers, even less-than-perfect ones, with the doggedness of those who fear that the unknown may be even more unsatisfying than the famous, yet mediocre artists they were disappointed by—the paradoxes of fame! As major record companies sign fewer artists nowadays, more excellent musicians will inevitably be left off the publicity bandwagon. Increasingly, great musicians both of the present day and the past will be people “no one has heard of.” The media sadly does not help, as editors nowadays mostly require that in order to speak of any artist, he or she must already be famous, on the grounds that readers might feel intimidated if they are confronted with a subject they don’t already know about. Serendipity, which is basic to delight in any domain, can easily get lost in music. So why not look—for a change—at a few artists, the mighty handful presented here, for example, most of whom have been around for a good while, who, despite real achievements, have not yet become household names.

Joseph Ladone

The first is a lutenist whom Paul Hindemith called “the greatest natural musical talent” he had ever seen. It must be remembered that Hindemith played in a trio with the miraculous virtuosos Szymon Goldberg on violin and Emmanuel Feuermann on cello. Hindemith made his remark about Joseph Ladone, a rangy young Connecticut son of Sicilian emigres, who was playing

Benjamin Ivry is author of the standard life in English of the composer Francis Poulenc (Phaidon Press) as well as a life of Arthur Rimbaud (Absolute Press/Stewart Tabori and Chang) and a poetry collection, *Paradise for the Portuguese Queen* (Orchises Press). Ivry also translates from the French (*Albert Camus: a Life* for Knopf Publishers) His new life of Maurice Ravel should be out next year.

jazz bass in a downtown New Haven dive. Hindemith at the time was a professor at the Yale School of Music, founding that institution's pioneering early music group, the Collegium Musicum. He was so impressed with ladone's nightclub playing that he arranged for the young man, who had never graduated high school, to be admitted on scholarship to Yale. However, ladone, an unconventional hell-raiser, got into a car accident shortly afterwards and was unable to lift his left arm high enough to play bass any more. He took up guitar and then lute, and the rest is musical history.

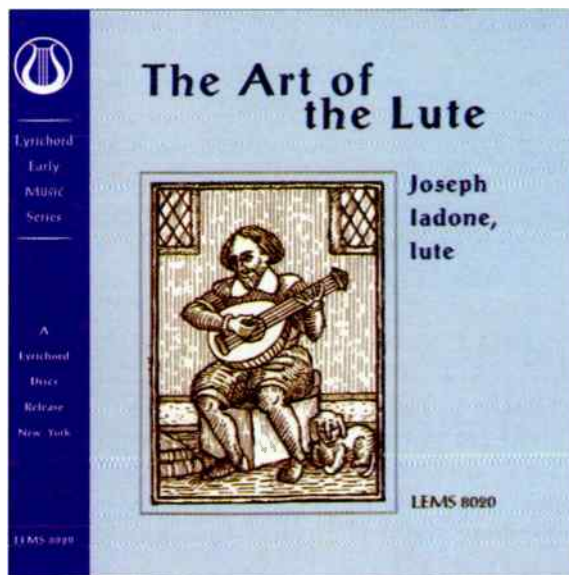
ladone plays lute with passion, fire, drama, and a fluidity and looseness that permits great expression on an instrument that, in the hands of even fine virtuosos, tends to have expressive limits. With ladone, there are none. He made unforgettable recordings of Monteverdi with the tenor Hugues Cuenod (see below) in the 1960s, long out of print, despite being some of the finest early music records ever made by anyone. One immortal outing, sponsored by the pop orchestra leader Enoch Light, to celebrate Monteverdi's 300th anniversary, is justly a legend in terms of excellence of performance. But ladone insisted on having things his way, not making compromises that a major recording career would require. He toured with soloists he admired, such as counter-tenor Russell Oberlin, and their recitals of Dowland songs and 13th century Spanish music, "Las Cantigas de Santa Maria," have recently been reprinted on a small New York label, Lyrichord, along with a great solo recital of private recordings, *The Art of the Lute*. In the latter, ladone performs works by com-



posers like Guillaume Dufay and Heinrich Isaac intended for three or four lutenists—ladone plays all the parts, thanks to the miracle of overdubbing, and not since Heifetz recording both parts in the Bach "Concerto for Two Violins" has a virtuoso been so triumphantly alone. Russell Oberlin confided in a phone chat his continuing admiration for ladone: "He had a very unique way of playing compared with Julian Bream, a softer touch. He only used the cushions of his fingers, never his nails, in the spirit of Dowland himself, to draw the music from his instrument." In their recordings of the medieval "Cantigas," since no accompaniment was written down, both musicians decided, Oberlin recalls, "that less was better. Today the work has been recorded repeatedly, and it sometimes sounds like they're playing the Brahms Second Symphony, so many things are going on." It was not only ladone's restraint in such questions that appealed; at a time when he was just about the only musician able to master the lute,

ladone was such a virtuoso that he could transpose some of the Dowland songs up a step or so when Oberlin found them too low for his highly-placed voice. Transposing on the lute is extremely difficult, but for ladone, it posed no problem. Small wonder Oberlin felt himself in such communion with the instrumentalist that he innovated a concert positioning: "I decided it was better for me to sit down next to the instrument. You can hear better and that makes it a better ensemble. Standing up, the lute seemed so far away." With the kind of musical intensity that literally drew collaborators to him onstage, ladone's art of the consort was his favorite onstage activity.

I well recall a concert at New Haven's Sprague Hall some 20 years ago of ladone and his consort, in which the intense dynamism and energy of his playing radiated unforgettably. Now 85 and as independent as ever, Joseph ladone is long overdue for the kind of recognition



he deserves as one of America's most remarkable musicians of this century. Perhaps if the Monteverdi and other recitals with Cuenod and company are reprinted, more listeners will become familiar with the majesty of this performer. For the time being, the Lyrichord re-releases are a must for anyone who cares about the lute, string instruments, vocal accompaniment, or indeed early music in general.

Ian Partridge

The British tenor Ian Partridge has been so prolific in recording that if you collect CDs, it is possible you may have one of his efforts without even knowing it. He ranges from choral singing in groups like Pro Cantione Antiqua to solo lieder recitals to small roles in operas like Colin Davis' version of Berlioz' "Les Troyens," Adrian Boult's recording of Vaughan Williams' "The



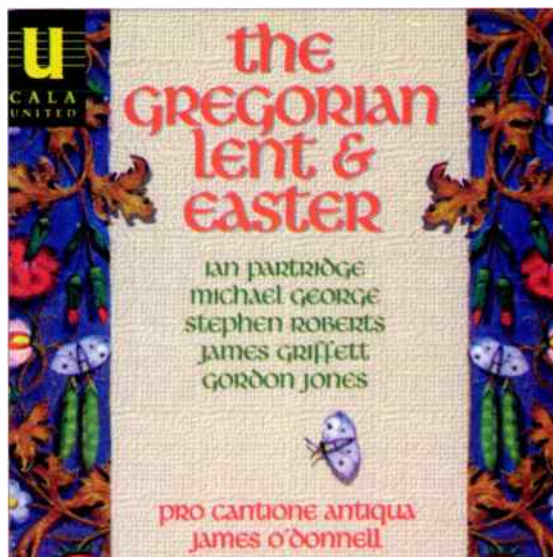
Pilgrim's Progress," and even a small role in a 1972 Montserrat Caballe "Manon Lescaut." Whatever Partridge sings, he does so with a vocal pliancy and musicality, a sense of musical line, flow, and gentle grace that

wins the heart of anyone who prizes tenors for more than just bellowed high notes. Perhaps because his voice is of modest dimensions, or because of a relatively shy and retiring temperament, Partridge has not had a major career in opera houses; this may explain his continuing vocal freshness, by sticking to song recitals and oratorios which he does sublimely. The success rate of his recordings in these fields is prodigious—he has never made a bad recording, of the 150-odd he has been involved with. No wonder composers such as Benjamin Britten have prized his participation in their works. Or astute musical intelligences like the late British conductor and harpsichordist George Malcolm, whose own recordings currently gather dust in Decca's archives and are long overdue for reprint, have so

admired him. Partridge recalls his beginnings as a professional musician this way: "I went to Westminster Cathedral at the beginning of 1958, at the age of 19. I had to leave the Royal College of Music in the middle of a year as family money ran out. Within a very short time of arriving, we were recording the Victoria Responseries, which was a wonderful experience. George (Malcolm), not an easy man to get to know, was extremely supportive and encouraging, and taught me the plainsong within a matter of weeks."

In his sixtieth year, Partridge has recorded vast amounts of musically demanding works.

Highlights in anyone's catalog would be his extraordinary Monteverdi duets—with Nigel Rogers, his lieder recordings with his accompanist sister Jennifer Partridge, his Bach Cantatas under the direction of Ernest Ansermet, his leading role in Vaughan Williams' opera "The Pilgrim's Progress," under the direction of Adrian Boult, his singing of Palestrina and Gregorian Chant, and the list goes on and on. His complete



discography may be admired on Partridge's website at <http://wkweb5.cableinet.co.uk/ian.partridge/>. Yet this great Handelian has never yet made a studio recording of that great superhit and over-recorded masterpiece, Handel's "Messiah." Partridge confesses, "Handel's 'Messiah' is sadly just something that I've not been asked to record. Apparently, Harry Christophers would have used me on his recording with The Sixteen, but didn't because he thought I'd already recorded it." Indeed, the only document of Partridge's interpretation of this essential baroque part remains a live recording from Iceland (on POL 0089). But not one to dwell

on opportunities missed, Partridge maintains a busy schedule: In May he will perform in Norway a new "St Matthew Passion" oratorio by a modern Norwegian composer, Trond Kverno which has already been recorded (on Aurora ACD4994). He continues to tour with the actress Prunella Scales (famous from the "Fawlty Towers" TV show) in "An Evening with Queen Victoria," combining music (including songs by Prince Albert) and drama. They have performed it over 300 times from Taipei to Brunei, with stopovers in Auckland, Oslo, Belfast, and Washington, DC. He also tours with an ensemble, including his sister Jennifer, that pays tribute to the composer and poet Ivor Gurney, whose mental and physical health were crushed after fighting in World War I. Anyone planning to be in London on October 31 would do well to catch this Gurney program with the Partridges and company, scheduled to be performed in The Purcell Room. The CBE that Partridge received in 1992 is minor and overdue acknowledgment for his services to British music: They include teaching at the Royal Academy of Music, judging song contests and holding master-classes throughout Europe, including a forthcoming one this June-July in Vendyssel, Denmark.

Arthur Loesser

One of America's greatest pianists is also one of its least known, due to lagging CD reprints of his rare recordings: Arthur Loesser (1894-1969). His brother was Frank Loesser, composer of "Guys and Dolls" and other musicals, and both men put up with punning jokes from friends about which one of them



was "the evil of two Loessers." Early on, his gifts for accompaniment became clear: He was Isadora Duncan's pianist when that legendary dancer toured Japan and he also toured with the American violinists Maud Powell and Mischa Elman, as well as the contralto Ernestine Schumann-Heink. His career was interrupted by service in the Second World War in the Intelligence Department, his Japanese experience putting him in good stead as one of the few Americans fluent in the Japanese language at the time of the Pearl Harbor attack. Some readers recall fondly his amusing book, "Men, Women, and Pianos: A Social History," which established him as a Braudel of the ivories. He played often in piano duets with colleagues at the Cleveland Institute of Music, Beryl Rubinstein and Ward Davenny, a former pupil. Among his other students who went on to major careers is Anton Kuerti.

In Cleveland an early family friend was the noted American poet Richard Howard, a playmate since age three of Loesser's daughter Anne, who grew up to be the distinguished writer and president of PEN, Anne

Hollander. Howard recalls Loesser with great admiration and affection: "He was brilliant and learned and sometimes exasperating and silly. He could be a showoff and very opinionated, saying things like 'No modern composer can write a slow movement,' which are just not true!" Howard recalls Loesser's dizzying ability to sit down at the piano and play from memory not just a vast classical repertoire but even old popular songs like "Every Little Movement Has a Meaning All Its Own."

In the 1960s the elfin, impish, elderly Loesser who had concentrated on teaching piano at the Cleveland Institute of Music astonished a new generation of music lovers by playing a recital of musical rarities entitled "Sic Transit Gloria Mundi" at New York's Town Hall. The theme was composers like MacDowell and Moszkowski, renowned in their day, whose renown had faded. Implicit also in the concert was Loesser's challenge to hugely famous players of the day like Vladimir Horowitz, who himself enjoyed including works by Moszkowski on his concert programs as encores. Even the many listeners who

decried Horowitz's lack of musical acumen at the expense of his digital dexterity, admitted that he was a great Moszkowski player. But Arthur Loesser's performance added a new insight: Loesser had amazing technique, of a Horowitzian level, but he also had an intensely humane and musical approach to what he played, and his Moszkowski was a document of far greater delight than the flashy Horowitz encore material.



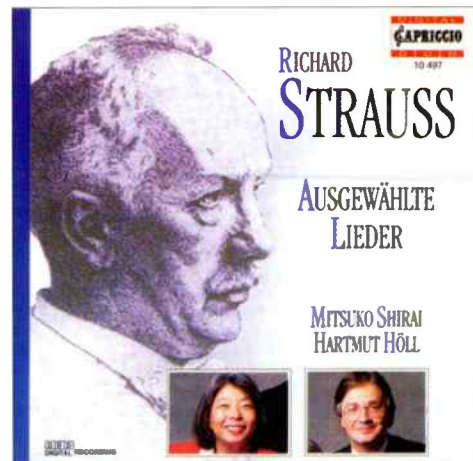
The lesson proved true for greater composers as well. In his last years, Loesser recorded in his Cleveland Institute office a series of Bach works, including the "Well-Tempered Clavier," "French Suites," and "Italian Concerto.": These are surely among the greatest recordings of Bach ever committed to record, but were only circulated to a small group of libraries and collectors, and never reprinted on CD. The recordings are now housed at the International Piano Archive at the University of Maryland, where it is fervently hoped that they may be the basis for a reprint sometime soon. Why is Loesser's "Well Tempered Clavier" ultimately more satisfying than those of

famous keyboard stars like Sviatoslav Richter, Glenn Gould, or Andras Schiff? For Loesser, the work seems to be first and foremost a human document, and he relates it at a human level. Digital dexterity is so well absorbed and mastered that it no longer even seems to be a primary problem, a little like the dancing of Fred Astaire. This pianist of utmost elegance was unafraid of communicating tenderness and vulnerability in this music. In short, a Bach player for the ages, along with Pablo Casals and Arthur Grumiaux, and it is only cruel destiny that has kept these magical recordings out of print for so long. "Sic transit gloria mundi," indeed, but it is high time that some glory transited over to Loesser!

Mitsuko Shirai and Hartmut Höll

The duo of mezzo-soprano Mitsuko Shirai and pianist Hartmut Höll count here as one musician, as they have made most of their recordings and performances in each others' company. Following a meeting during their student years in Stuttgart in the 1970s, the pair has worked intensively on lieder in a way few current exponents of that art can rival. Höll began by playing accompaniment at the master classes of the legendary soprano Elisabeth Schwarzkopf and wound up being the titular accompanist of baritone Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau for the last 14 years of that fabled singer's career.

Shirai and Höll have always found it essential to be left alone to create recordings at their own pace, and under the best conditions. For many years they have worked with the small German label Capriccio, a subsidiary of Delta Music, whose president



Dr. Winifred Ammel has the wisdom to accord them a great producer and sound engineer, Teije van Geest, and time to get things right to their own satisfaction. The couple might produce a recording or two each year, instead of the slapdash habit with major recording companies of releasing "live" lieder recitals where inevitably fineness of detail is lost in the drama of the moment. Shirai and Höll can be plenty spontaneous and lively in the studio—indeed, she sounds, throughout their stellar recordings of Schubert, Schumann, Brahms, Wolf, Liszt, Berg, Webern, and so many others, like the Callas of the lieder. Höll is unafraid of spiky emotionality and adventurous, risk-taking pianism, unlike the often cool or plodding professional accompanists who usually record with star singers who attempt a lieder program. Others seem to want to get into the act, in homage to what the couple has achieved. Graham Johnson invited Shirai to be part of his award-winning Schubert series on Hyperion, but as she was unhappy about the idea of singing with another accompanist, the possibility fell through. Höll, in turn, has made records with other performers, but very few and only those the couple has rehearsed and performed with extensively, like the brilliant young German viola player, Tabea Zimmermann,

whose creamy rich tone and upbeat energy make her the Kathleen Ferrier of her chosen instrument.

By consciously choosing the "small is beautiful" esthetic, the Shirai-Höll duo declares their priorities clearly. They also devote much time and energy to teaching, most recently in Karlsruhe, Germany; they genuinely find it satisfying to teach, and the large number of excellent singers, such as baritones Stephan Genz and Locky Chung, are testaments to their pedagogic talents as well. Although some connoisseurs of lieder may wax nostalgic about the 1920s or '30s, it must be said that any time in which Mitsuko Shirai and Hartmut Höll are performing must be termed a golden age of lieder. Part of their secret may be their intense involvement with the texts of the songs they perform, investigating the cultural milieus which produced them. Höll has long directed an institute for lieder study and performance, the Hugo-Wolf Akademie in Stuttgart, where noted writers like Peter Hartling are regularly invited. During the Akademie's annual performances, the intellectually and artistically flaccid area of Baden-Württemberg suddenly becomes an artistically adventurous and lively place. So, the dynamic gifts of this couple have done far more for German culture than merely producing some splendid CDs. They have encouraged the next artistic generation, they have educated a public to expect the cutting edge of new ideas and programs. Indeed, America needs such a couple of performers desperately, but because of various obstacles and difficulties, the Shirai-Höll duo are rarely on our shores. Perhaps the

naming of a longtime colleague, Frans-Xavier Ohnesorg, to the directorship of Carnegie Hall, and the opening of a new hall ideal for lieder in around 2001, will change all that. It is to be fervently hoped by all American lovers of classical song: Mitsuko Shirai and Hartmut Höll are what we need more of!

Hugues Cuenod

When an 85-year-old Swiss tenor made his Metropolitan Opera debut in 1987 in the role of the Emperor in "Turandot," many opera-goers did not know what to expect. But those who had followed the amazing career of Hugues Cuenod, who has been singing professionally since the 1920s were unfazed when the octogenarian proceeded to sing colleagues like Placido Domingo and Eva Marton off the stage with his strong dramatic intensity and vocal emotional expression. Fortunately, a video and laserdisc of the performance exists to proof for future generations. "Turandot" was by no means Cuenod's swan song. Indeed, he was invited back the following year for more performances at the Met, and continued to sing small opera roles onstage in Richard Strauss' "Capriccio" and Tchaikovsky's "Eugene Onegin." In the latter he made his definitive farewell to the stage at Lausanne in 1994, at age 92. But even then he continued to perform as reciter of works like Poulenc's "Babar" for piano and narrator. I well recall an intensely vivid rendition he gave in Paris in 1995 at age 93, and when he recorded the work in 1997, at age 95, his version had further matured. At age 97, Cuenod has today finally retired from singing, but continues to teach.

As he told me recently, "I am aging rapidly but I still have plans."

To most of us, age as expressed in mere numbers has no meaning. Thus, Cuenod being 97 is not significant when in his nineties he was still more alert and energetic, more smart and musical, more vivid and charming than most people of half that age. I recall on a day that featured master classes, performances, a celebratory lunch, dinner, and cocktails, Cuenod was still full of beans, recounting anecdotes on the spur of the moment, and he has plenty to tell. Few people around nowadays recall as he does a 1913 recital in his hometown of Vevey, Switzerland, when Saint-Saëns played piano duets with Paderewski. His important contacts with composers like Stravinsky, Igor Markevitch, and Frank Martin, conductors like Hermann Scherchen and Nadia Boulanger, have made up what is certainly one of the most fascinating careers in modern singing. And yet, Cuenod was always eternally modest about



his voice per se, saying he never lost it because he never had one to begin with. Or joshing with people who commented on his age at the time of his Met debut, "The character I am portraying, the Emperor of China, is supposed to be ten thousand years old, so I may still be a little young for the part."

Cuenod was the first to record many works of early music, like those of Charpentier and Lully, and his recordings have not been surpassed for their acute sensitivity, the impression that real emotion, yearning or joy, is conveyed by the music, and that the texts really count. Decca had the good idea to reprint Cuenod's unforgettable turns in a drag role as a comic ancient lusty nymph in Cavalli's "La Calisto" and as a tree frog in Ravel's magical "L'Enfant et les Sortilèges." Would that Decca had also reprinted his other great performances, in Cavalli's "L'Ormindo" and two Stravinsky works, "Oedipus Rex" and "Renard." Just recently Lys CDs (distributed by JEM) had the excellent idea to release a new version of Poulenc's "Babar" by Cuenod with historic 1953 recordings of Poulenc made by the tenor accompanied by the composer himself. They are incomparable, but what is noteworthy is that even in his seventies and later, Cuenod was able to record brilliantly moving performances of French song for Nimbus and other labels. This is truly a rare example, to paraphrase Shakespeare, in which "age could not wither him nor custom stale his infinite variety."

Recommended Listening Joseph Iadone

The Art of the Lute (Lyricord LEMS 8020) is an essential starting point. Two recitals with

counter-tenor Russell Oberlin reveal more of the accompanist's art: *John Dowland Lute Songs* (on Lyricord LEMS 8011) and *Las Cantigas de Santa Maria* (on LEMS 8003).

Mitsuko Shirai and Hartmut Höll

An extraordinarily high level of quality has made for unforgettable CDs of songs by Mozart (Capriccio 27117), Schumann (Capriccio 27118 and 10 445), Brahms (Capriccio 27204), Schubert (Capriccio 10171 and 10 382/83) Liszt (Capriccio 10 294), Wolf (Capriccio 10 362 and 10830), Berg (Capriccio 10 419), Strauss (Capriccio 10 497), Franz (Capriccio 10515). All are indispensable.

Ian Partridge

Again, an embarrassment of riches for the listener: A 1998 song recital accompanied by his pianist sister Jennifer Partridge, with the title *Richard Baker's Favorite Songs and Encores* (a Brit media personality—on Upbeat Classics URCD143, available at HMV stores). Other must-hears include *Handel, The Triumph of Time and Truth* (on Hyperion CDA 66071/2 distributed by Harmonia Mundi); *The Sacred Music of Claudio Monteverdi* (on Hyperion CDA66021, distributed by Harmonia Mundi); *Songs by Finzi and Friends* (on Hyperion CDA66015, distributed by Harmonia Mundi), *The Gregorian Lent and Easter* (on Cala-United CACD880022). Kverno's sober *St Matthew Passion* in which Partridge sings Evangelist is available on Aurora ACD 4994 (distributed by Qualiton) and *Home Sweet Home: The 19th Century Music Party* is a bit of the Victoriana the tenor loves, on *Sound Alive*

CD SAMHS/CD/205, distributed by Qualiton.

Hugues Cuenod

Three excellent Nimbus CDs (NIM 5027, NIM 5231, and NIM 5337) of French songs make one wonder why the same record company refuses to release extensive other recordings that Cuenod made for Nimbus some years ago, including Schubert and Haydn. EMI has reissued Cuenod's 1930s recordings of Monteverdi in an ensemble conducted by Nadia Boulanger (on EMI CDM 761025), and Decca-London has also reprinted his delightful comic turn in Cavalli's opera "La Calisto" (on Decca 436216) and Ravel's "L'Enfant et les Sortilèges" (on Decca 433 400). His latest recording is on Lys records LYSD254 (distributed by JEM), a Poulenc program that is a must-hear.

Arthur Loesser

Biddulph's reissues of CDs of violinists Toscha Seidel and Mischa Elman contain some accompaniment by Arthur Loesser, but to date his real achievements on record, a Brahms "First Piano Concerto" with Erich Leinsdorf, a delightful recital of rarities called "Sic Transit Gloria Mundi" and above all, late Bach recordings, have yet to be transferred onto CD. For those who care about great music, this is as intolerable as if, let's say, all museums holding paintings by Manet or another great modern master suddenly withdrew all of them from public view. What would be unacceptable in any other art form is quietly tolerated in music, and even Philips' so-called "Great Pianists series" did not think to include Loesser, which would have been an excellent opportunity.

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Bulletproof Your System From Interference

I PRESENTLY HAVE my listening space in the attic of my house and less than 100 yards from a rather large and reasonably powerful ham radio antenna that points in my direction. I don't enjoy listening to my neighbor's ham radio transmissions through my stereo system, so I decided

to take whatever measures necessary to get rid of the problem.

Attacking and controlling this situation, however, was not a one-step operation. In fact, I found I had to take several steps to control both the radio frequency and electromagnetic interference (r.f.i. and e.m.i.)

that was conducted through the a.c. lines in my house and radiated through the air.

Rx for Line Noise

I'll start with conducted interference first. The most important part of getting rid of conducted interference is to establish that

you have a good, solid earth ground. Earth ground is usually tied to a large water pipe in the basement of your house or apartment building. Having a local electrician check this should be the first item on your list.

If you happen to own a volt-meter, checking the a.c. lines with your meter could well be the next step. To do this, simply connect the "ground" lead of the meter to the earth "ground" pin of your a.c. socket, then connect the other meter lead to the "hot" pin of your a.c. line. You should read between 115 to 125 volts a.c.

Next, move your "hot" meter lead to the "neutral" pin of the a.c. line. You should read between 0 and 5 volts a.c., depending on how much your line is being loaded. If you aren't getting any readings at all, recheck your connections, and if you don't have a three-prong a.c. socket, you may not get any readings at all. Establishing that you have a earth "ground" connection available at your wall socket is critical, because all reputable a.c. line filters require the earth "ground" connection in order to work at their maximum effectiveness. If you don't have a three-prong a.c. socket, **GET ONE INSTALLED!**

The best overall surge-suppressor and r.f.i.-e.m.i. filter I have used so far is the TrippLite Isobar unit. Eight outlets of heavy-duty protection can be had for less than \$75.00 from Computer Discount Warehouse. Will this affect the sound of your stereo? You bet! Most people have said that the noise floor dropped like a stone, and the "sound" of a large voltage spike on the a.c. lines is definitely not

conductive to good sound and can be very damaging to your wallet for the repair bills from damaged equipment.

Radiated interference can prove to be a much tougher problem to cope with, but with a little work you can overcome this difficulty too. I have found that using three-conductor microphone cable for my analog interconnects has been very effective. They are typically con-

A good earth ground is the best thing to kill conducted interference, while shielding works well on radiated junk.

structed with two leads in a twisted pair with an additional ground shield covering the twisted pair. To use this type of cable for "unbalanced" interconnects, simply do the following. Connect one of the leads of the twisted pair to the ground shield at both ends of the of the cable at the RCA connector, and then connect the other or "hot" side of the twisted pair to the appropriate connection of the RCA connector. This gives you the shielding and r.f.i. rejection of both the twisted pair and the ground shield. Think of this as a double ground if you like. A number of manufacturers make microphone cable, below are some examples.

1. Mogami 2534 Neglex
2. Canare Star Quad.
3. Belden, my personal favorite is Belden #8422. This has a heavy copper-braid ground shield which I do prefer to other types. Typical prices range from 65 to 75cents per foot in 50-foot rolls. If you need help assembling these cables, feel free to contact me at banquer@erols.com.

Shielded speaker cable? Definitely! Belden #8718 is a 12-AWG twisted pair with a foil shield and drain wire for an easy connection to earth ground. Connect the 12-AWG twisted pair to the appropriate amp and loudspeakers terminals. The drain wire should be connected to earth ground at one point only. I have it easy here in my listening room because my power amp chassis is connected to earth ground. Do not connect the drain wire to the speaker. If you don't have a readily available earth ground on your equipment, I suggest running the drain wire

to the earth ground of your a.c. line. There are special a.c. socket plugs that have an earth ground connection only.

If you are connecting the drain wire to earth ground, do not connect that drain wire to either wire of the twisted pair. Also, don't leave the drain wire unconnected as it can act as a very good receiving antennae.

Shielding your speaker cables will greatly reduce static electricity that can form on cables when they rest on a carpeted floor, especially on cold, dry days. Shielded a.c. line cords can also help under strong interference conditions.

Belden #17660 a.c. line cord has a foil and braid shield. This is an I.E.C. style power cord, 18 AWG and is typically priced from \$12 to \$16 per line cord.

Ferrite Beads

Some people have recommended that ferrite beads or filters be used to reduce the influence of r.f.i. or e.m.i., particularly where small signal levels (such as from a phono cartridge) or wide-band inputs (such as

with some preamps or amps) are concerned. The editor of this rag even told me of a case of r.f. interference when he was trying out a particular maker's tube amp and preamp. The amp was turned on, the preamp off, and both were connected by a 30-foot run of ungrounded, unshielded, RCA-terminated interconnects. The signal from a radio station located about two miles from his house was clearly audible, though not loudly, but was reduced to a very low level with a pair of ferrite clip-ons placed on the interconnects near the amp. He tells me further that he knows of other cases where these clip-ons have been used with positive results on speaker cables. It seems obvious that both those interconnects and the speaker cables were acting like antennas. The editor also had a sort of "break-in" interference from a linear amp applied to a CB radio that busted into his FM

listening due to a diode antenna effect with dirty nickel-plated RCA interconnects. Twisting them in the socket cured the problem, but a good gold-plated plug and jack system is obviously a better solution.

Ferrite beads have also been recommended at the input of both amplifiers (particularly

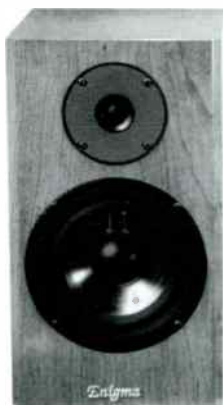


wide-band ones) and preamp phono inputs, where the bead is strung around the signal wire just as it comes out of the RCA input jack or the clip-on type put around the interconnect. This bead can be put on by an advanced do-it-yourselfer who is

handy with a soldering iron, but some current RCA jacks are soldered straight to the PC board so such an addition can't be made. The idea here is that the bead forms a filter that effectively blocks both r.f.i. and e.m.i. from entering the following circuitry. I am not so certain that this is a good idea in every case, as it seems to me that the filter might not block super high r.f. or e.m. interferences, which seem to be so much more common these days, or frequencies below 1 MHz such as AM radio.

So you're probably asking yourself, did all of these fixes work? I haven't heard breakthrough from my ham radio neighbor in years. My telephone line is still susceptible; I'll have to work on that.

Note: If you're having trouble locating Belden wire, try QPL Electronics Distributors at 978/671-9473, ask for Dave Dragon.



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Photo: Britain Hill



Stevie Ray Vaughan The Legacy Reissues
Texas Flood, Couldn't Stand the Weather, Soul to Soul, In Step and Greatest Hits

I TOOK THE NEWLY remastered Stevie Ray Vaughan CDs with me on vacation in Paris. They were stolen from my hotel room—the only items taken (my PowerBook G3 and Palm IIIx were untouched). When I got back to the States, I headed straight to a music store to replace them. A sales clerk came up to me and asked if I needed help. “Yeah,” I said, “I need to replace my Stevie Ray Vaughan albums.” “Hey, this is the perfect time to do it,” he offered, leading me back through the aisles of CDs. “The record company just re-released

them with extra tracks!” At the checkout counter a different clerk picked up the CDs, held them out to the store manager next to him and said, “*This*, my man, was the greatest guitarist of all time.” One of his last recorded songs, “Tick Tock” from the Vaughan Brothers’ *Family Style*, has Stevie Ray singing “Remember / tick tock, tick tock, tick tock, people / time’s tickin’ away;” Stevie Ray Vaughan died nine years ago, but he’s in no danger of being forgotten.

Personally, I would put Jimi Hendrix and Duane Allman ahead of Vaughan in my

Pantheon: Allman for his mastery of so many different styles, the beauty of his melodic line and his improvisational brilliance; Hendrix for his . . . well, do I really need to justify *Hendrix*, one of rock’s supreme innovators? The older I get, the fresher Hendrix’s music seems. Indeed, some of Stevie Ray Vaughan’s best material comes from Hendrix. But in fairness, SRV is one of the only guitarists whose interpretations of (and allusions to) Hendrix can compare favorably to the master himself. And as a pure blues guitarist, SRV probably has no

equal (although Johnny Winter's fans might debate me on that).

One thing you won't get a debate about: They died too soon.

After performing together with Eric Clapton, Robert Cray, Buddy Guy and brother Jimmy, Stevie Ray got on a helicopter with members of Clapton's road crew. He took the last seat. Shortly after takeoff, it slammed into a hill. Pilot error. His life shouldn't have ended that way, but that's what real tragedies (as opposed to theatrical ones) are all about. His death wasn't the result of a character flaw, and there was no deeper meaning. It was just a waste, made all the more galling by the fact that Stevie Ray had nearly died on tour in Europe four years earlier from drug and alcohol abuse, but had come through it and was now helping others get clean and sober. And he was making the best music of his life.

By all accounts Stevie Ray Vaughan was both a nice man and an imposing talent. Other musicians listened in awe, but without jealousy; when he died the tributes pored in. John Lee Hooker cried like a baby. Cray said it was an inspiration to have his ass kicked by SRV. Buddy Guy thought it was an honor to have SRV play his tunes. Clapton claimed to have been so unnerved by SRV's musicianship that he had to stop listening for fear he wouldn't be able to go on stage afterwards. "One of the purest channels I've ever seen," said Clapton of Vaughan, "where everything he sang and played flowed straight down from heaven."

Vaughan was a fan of the blues and something of a fanatic scholar, although not in any

academic way. Tutored by brother Jimmy's record collection, he soaked up every drop of blues he heard and never let it evaporate. He did what good artists do, borrowing and synthesizing, always humbly giving credit where credit was due. If his work can be criticized at all, it must be criticized for being a little too pure, a little too respectful. There are precious

**If you like electric guitar,
you need these albums;
the sound is up to this
decade's state of the art.**

few shocks of discovery in his recordings, the songs being almost tame and pedestrian at times. Texas blues shuffles are well and good, and nobody does them better than SRV, but they recede into the background too quickly. Then along comes a Hendrix cover like "Voodoo Chile (Slight Return)" or "Little Wing/Third Stone From the Sun" (a bonus medley added on *Soul to Soul*) and you sit up and go "Whoa!" (after you remember to start breathing again).

In Step, the only SRV with Double Trouble album recorded between his near-death in 1986 and the final, senseless helicopter crash in August of 1990, shows signs of a newly clarified brilliance. The autobiographical "Wall of Denial," written with friend Doyle Bramhall, reveals a songwriter capable of insight, poignancy and depth, qualities mostly missing from his first three albums. "We've all had our demons / from the garden of white lies / Dressed them, amused them / Pullin' wool over our eyes / Go so far as to love them / to keep from letting them

go / All the while they were killin' us / but we couldn't let it show." The last cut, "Riviera Paradise," is a beautiful, melancholy jazz number unlike anything else in the SRV catalog. Inventive yet mature, it's a jewel that glows without a trace of phony glitz.

The last bonus track, "Life Without You," from a Denver concert in late 1989, will surely give fans goose bumps, and probably bring many to tears. The unintentionally tragic irony of the lyrics is agonizing enough: "Life without you / All the love you passed my way / The angels have waited for so long / Now they have their way / Take your place."

In the middle of his guitar break, Stevie Ray begins a seemingly impromptu monologue, which I'll quote in its entirety: "I'm gonna stop right now and thank God I'm alive and well enough to be with y'all today. And that all is as well as it is with everybody here. 'Cause I am glad to be here with you today. Y'see, it does me good to stop and think about this stuff because sometimes it's too easy to forget for a lot of us, y'know, what we've been through, where we come from, where we're trying to get. Where we're trying to get is back home, inside, y'know, and back in touch with what really means something, which is love and caring and what we got between us. See, it took me a long time to find out that pretty much everything else is a bunch of . . . somethin' else, y'know. 'Cause for a long time all I could remember to do was run away from myself and everybody that cared. And usually that meant run to the party, and stay there

for as long as possible. And then one day I nearly *died* and it kind of dawned on me that was, heh, not the right thing to do, y'know. 'Cause you know it is time to come home every once in a while. What this is all about is just I'm asking y'all to take care of yourselves so you can be there for the ones that need you and love you the most, and that need you all the time. I know I do. Are you with me? All right!"

As he takes off again into a soaring, majestic guitar solo, the passing not only of his talent but of his generous spirit becomes simply too painful to contemplate.

The Legacy reissues include the four studio recordings (*Texas Flood*, *Couldn't Stand the Weather*, *Soul to Soul* and *In Step*), along with a new greatest hits package. The studio albums are short by today's standards, so Epic has thoughtfully included a few unreleased takes and live versions to fill out the CDs. *Couldn't Stand the Weather* now includes four juicy new cuts: The Freddie King classic "Hide Away," "Little Sister" and "Come On (Pt. III)" (the latter two were eventually rerecorded for *Soul to Soul*, "Little Sister" being taken here at a faster, full-tilt boogie pace), and "Give Me Back My Wig (I Bought You Babe, and Let Your Doggone Head Go Bald)." *Texas Flood* has live versions of "Testify," "Mary Had a Little Lamb" and Lonnie Mack's "Wham!" (which was, according to SRV, the first record he ever bought), along with an early attempt at putting "Tin Pan Alley" ferociously down on tape.

If you like electric guitar, you *need* these albums. If you're new to SRV, start with *The Real Deal: Greatest Hits Volume 2* (and check out the goofy duet

with Dick Dale on "Pipeline," from a movie called *Back to the Beach*). For most fans, the extra tracks should provide the motivation for adding the Legacy albums to their collections, but the question audiophiles inevitably want to know is: Do they sound better? I did a careful comparison of the original and reissued versions of *In Step* and *Couldn't Stand the Weather*. The verdict: They certainly sound different, and in a way that might prove instructive to the tweaks among us. After several A/B listens to *In Step*, I made a few notes: "The reissue has much bigger bass, the vocal is clearer, and the reverb stands out as less smeared. Dynamics are improved, and the recording feels emotionally more intense." Then it dawned on me that the new version might simply be *louder*, mastered to the max, with no wiggle room for momentary digital overload. I went back and turned the older CD up by 3 dB, and the differences faded dramatically.

The original *In Step* digital recording was mastered by an audiophile master, Bernie Grundman, with the credits also stating that it was "Prepared for compact disc by Joe Gastwirt and David Mitson at CBS Records Studio." Vic Anesini at Sony Music Studios mastered the Legacy reissues.

I'm guessing that digital mastering equipment has improved in the last 10 years, and that there is no reason any longer to master a few dB low for safety's sake. However, on *Couldn't Stand the Weather*, which was originally an analog recording, a huge improvement in the bass favors the reissue album even when the older CD has been cranked up to compensate for a potential shift in levels.

Ask the Mastering . . .

Dear Mr. Block:

Thanks for your e-mail tech queries (and the forthcoming review of the SRV reissues). Here's the lowdown on your tech questions.

The new issues that Vic and I worked on are "louder" ONLY because the first issues of the discs were printed at a "comparatively" lower level. I DO NOT believe in abusing compression, limiting, etc. in order to gain level on a CD. The original CD issues of the SRV catalog were actually much more compressed than these new editions, as they were mastered from production copies. The new issues were mastered directly from the original two-track mix-down masters—tapes that are naturally more open, spacious, and realistic sounding than the second-generation copies that were previously used.

The only tracks that were mixed from multi's were the previously unissued bonus tracks, and were marked as such within the booklet credits. Lastly, "In Step" was not transferred from a digital master. It, like "Soul To Soul," was originally recorded to digital multi-track (48 track), but was subsequently mixed down to two-track analog, 1/2-inch, 30 ips. Having the albums available in their original two-track analog format allows us to take advantage of more current digital technology, such as great sounding high-resolution A/D converters, etc..

Again, thanks for your both your review and your interest; don't hesitate to contact me if you need any additional info!

Bob Irwin
Sundazed Music
Coxsackie, NY



Rock

The Black Crowes *By Your Side*
Columbia/American CK7464-69361-2

Jon and Sally Tiven

WHEN LAST heard from, The Black Crowes were in the midst of a writer's slump, producing a string of records that simply did not live up to the promise of their debut album. As Chris Robinson has one of the most listenable voices in rock, it's hard to make a bad album with him fronting, but to the fans dismay, they managed to do so for two albums running. *With By Your Side*, they have finally broken their losing streak and come up with an unqualified stunner of an album, easily the best of their career. Replacing their original bassist and firing yet another guitarist, the Robinson Brothers have placed the weight squarely upon their own shoulders and come across with 11 terrific songs. The album is thickly produced by Kevin Shirley without sounding too cluttered, and the singular guitar textures by Rich Robinson serve the material well.

Of course, it's difficult to review a Black Crowes album and not mention the Faces, as the Robinsons do a very credible

approximation of the Stewart / Wood axis circa *Long Player*. And there is a fair amount of musical borrowing from the Stones / Faces / Humble Pie repertoire, particularly "Kickin' My Heart Around" which leans heavily on the lick from Mick Jagger's first solo single "Memo From Turner." But all of that is accepted and agreed to when you buy into this package in the first place, and at least the Black Crowes show fine taste in who they discreetly rip-off. This is infinitely more enjoyable than their excursions into Traffic, Southern Rock, and would-be psychedelia.

The album kicks off with a couple of furiously-paced rockers, "Go Faster" and "Kickin' My Heart Around," demonstrating that there's plenty of adrenaline running through their veins. Drummer Steve Gorman sounds like he's improved immensely from previous albums, which may mean that they're using today's technology (Protools) to tighten up his inconsistencies or that he's actually playing better.

However this is being achieved, the backbone of the band is far stronger and more muscular than in the past. Rich Robinson is playing all of the guitars on this album, which makes for slightly less proficient solos but licks which serve the songs better than in the past—and his rhythm and slide guitars are, as always, strong. Parallels are always drawn to The Rolling Stones, and that being the case, this is their *Beggar's Banquet / Let It Bleed* period—strip it down, retrench, and come up with the great songs.

But the Black Crowes are not simply looking to be Gen X's Rolling Stones. They're after the Led Zeppelin fans ("Heavy"), the Aerosmith devotees ("Horse Head"), the Beatle-maniacs ("Welcome To The Good Times"), and even Sly & the Family Stone's audience ("Diamond Ring"). They have got the goods on this album, and one would expect Chris Robinson's arrogance to grow proportionally. They have delivered. You should go buy.

R RECORDINGS



BLUES

Marcia Ball, Irma Thomas
& Tracy Nelson
Sing It!

Rounder
2132

BASED, AS IT IS, upon mutual respect and admiration, *Sing It!* by Marcia Ball, Irma Thomas, and Tracy Nelson is both an event and a natural ball. Clearly, making the album was a gas for everyone involved. The warmth of the performances is totally contagious.

It was laid down in New Orleans with crack players from Memphis (guitarist Michael Toles) and the Crescent City (keyboardist Davis Torkanowsky, bassist Lee Allen Zeno from Buckwheat Zydeco's band, and drummer Raymond Weber from Harry Connick, Jr.'s band). The great Wardell Quezergue contributes a pair of typically excellent horn charts.

What has to exist for this type of album to be worth the trouble is real palpable chemistry between the singers. But, believe it, there is plenty on this disc. Marcia Ball is the lightest, most playful of the three, Irma Thomas probably the best R&B stylist, and Tracy Nelson is nothing less than a force of nature. Together, they are a party happening.

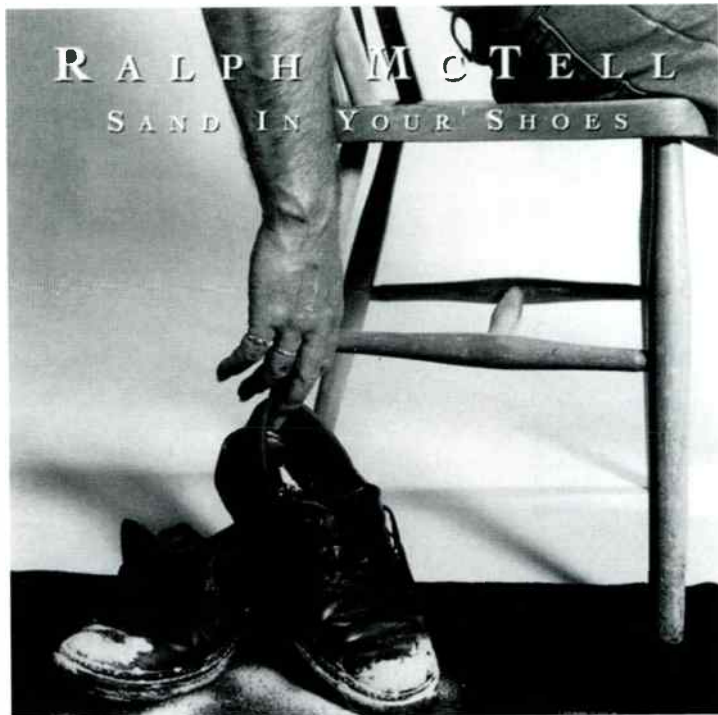
Each singer gets some solo time out front, and the ladies pair up for duets in various combinations. But I suspect that they had the most fun laying down the unified backup vocals all through the album.

The album mixes well-selected new songs with some old

ones they obviously love, such as Joe Tex's "I Want To Do Everything For You," Deidric Malone's "Yield Not to Temptation," "Shouldn't I Love Him" from the Homer Banks/Steve Cropper team and Jerry Ragavoy's "You Don't Know Nothin' About Love."

Obviously, with three busy schedules to juggle, *Sing It!* had to be recorded on the fly and in bursts. But that doesn't show in the full-blooded performances throughout the album. Scott Billington's greatest achievement in producing the album is just letting the ladies sing and the players play while he stays out of the way. *Sing It!* is nothing but pure, huge fun.

RECORDINGS



FOLK

Ralph McTell
Sand in Your Shoes

Red House
RHR CD 107

THERE IS tremendous grace and dignity in the songs and performance of Ralph McTell. For nearly 30 years, he has been one of the premier folk singer songwriters in England and much too absent over here.

His new album, his first American release of new songs in far too long, contains 14 songs. Producer Maartin Allcock is the album's MVP as he contributes keyboards, various six- and 12-string guitars, accordion, mandolin, uilleann pipes and fretless bass parts. Other key players are drummer Gerry Conway, guitarists Alun Davies and Jerry Donahue, and violin and viola player Chris Leslie. The arrangements are elegant with subtle touches to suit spe-

cific songs. Keyboard-simulated Celtic harp fits "The Islands." Trumpet, sax and clarinet give "Care in the Community" a sad Dixieland feel, "The Enemy Within (The Band)" gets a summer bandstand feel, while "Daddy's Watching" receives a jazzy slow swing.

As they always have, Ralph's songs touch strong chords of human experience: The question of what happiness and love really are in "Tous Las Amimaux Sont Tristes," the plight of lost homeless souls which he addressed so magnificently in "Streets of London"; he takes another slant in "Care in the Coamunity," the lives of miners and factory workers bereft of identity and wages after the

mines and factory plants close in "The Enemy Within (The Band)," the life of a simple farmer trying to grow "Peppers and Tomatoes" as war rages all around in Bosnia.

Ralph's voice is untouched by the 30 years since his debut. It still oozes sincerity and warmth and empathy. It has been a valued friend over the years, and it sure feels great to have him back on an American label. *Sand in Your Shoes* is a classy, thoughtful, beautifully wrought work with a powerful emotional wallop.

Prior to this, Red House issued a retrospective Ralph McTell album *From Clara to Here* (RHR CD 86). It, too, is highly recommended.

Blues

The Jimmy Rogers Allstars
Blues Blues Blues
Atlantic 83148-2



THE SEMINAL CHICAGO blues innovator Jimmy Rogers played electric guitar in the Muddy Waters Blues Band and wrote many songs which contributed to the shape of blues and rock for years to come. He finally got a major record deal with Atlantic Records, who put together an All-Star Band to back him up featuring Eric Clapton, Keith Richards, Jeff Healey, Jimmy Page, and Robert Plant and made the album of his career. Unfortunately, he passed on before the record was finished. Now *that's* the blues.

If this record had come out 15 or 20 years ago, people would have bought it in droves and it would have done for Jimmy Rogers what *The Healer* did for John Lee Hooker. Times have changed, and the contem-

porary music audience has already started to turn its back on many of the guest stars on this album, so it is highly unlikely that this album will be the major reversal of fortune that Rogers deserved. The guy's gone now, so in any case it's too late for him to reap the rewards. But it's not too late for music fans to take notice of a great artist who inspired everyone who plays the blues, from Freddie King to Eric Clapton to Johnny Winter to—well, all the guys on this album.

The album opens with "Blow Wind Blow," featuring a surprisingly soulful performance from Jeff Healey, and one of the first things you notice is how beautifully the album is recorded. Roger's own rhythm section of Ted Harvey (drums), Freddie Crawford (bass), and his son

Little Jimmy D. Lane (rhythm guitar) are used throughout the album and play it like it's supposed to be played. The spacious sound of the record makes the performances by the guests feel even more special and intimate, and Jagger hasn't sounded this good since *Some Girls*. Tracks like "Don't Start Me To Talkin'," "Boom Boom," and "That's All Right" are the standouts, but even the more-minor cameos by Taj Mahal and Steve Stills still ring true.

Maybe they should've gotten Jonny Lang or Kenny Wayne Shepherd to come in and do their bits, and then the masses would've come running. Regardless of how many people grab this one, this will be one of the best blues albums of the year. Get it!



MILT JACKSON'S JAZZ vibraphone play has intrigued me for many, many years. Whether he was performing as part of the renowned Modern Jazz Quartet or on his own, I have been and remain a long-term, loyal fan of his. With his full rich tone and lyrical, smooth and flowing style, Jackson's recordings have always been high on my list of most-sought-after jazz discs. Unfortunately, in my opinion, not all of his later recordings have been what I would consider up to his early standard.

The good news is that *Sa Va Bella* is a quality recording (musically, that is), and I am once again a happy camper. The music on this CD bounces, swings, sways, slides and glides, offering a full plate of delicious renderings of talent, lyrics, tex-

ture and substance. The teaming of Quincy Jones, as one of the executive directors, may also have something to do with the sauciness of this recording.

Noticing the CD cover had "(For Lady Legends)" as a subtitle, my curiosity was raised. Checking further, I became even more interested when I saw the fine selection of classic jazz tunes listed on the back cover. For me, many of these tunes provide strong images of some of the greatest female jazz singers to ever come along. This recording is a tribute honoring those esteemed lady singers. Legendary ladies including the likes of Billie Holiday, Sarah Vaughn, Dinah Washington and the ageless Ella Fitzgerald are all much in evidence throughout this recording.

The tribute aspect, along with the fact of my having been a long-time Jackson junkie, left me with little option but to buy this CD. Rather than wait to get home, shortly after leaving the record store, I quickly popped it into my car CD player as I prepared to make my way home. From the very first opening notes, of this recording, I knew I was in for a treat. In fact, I was even glad to have a fairly long drive to get home. Truly, once I started listening to *Sa Va Bella* I didn't want to stop.

So what was it that I liked so much about this CD? For starters, the opening vibrant rendition of "Oh, Lady Be Good" got my juices flowing. It has a nice bouncing rhythm and interesting vocals provided by another long-time favorite, Ms. Etta

Jones. Throughout this very nicely done cut, Jackson's vibe playing is most pleasantly evident and put him unquestionably back into my good graces. Along with Jackson's juicy playing, the full warm acoustic bass, swinging piano and delicate drum and brush work all add to the overall positive effect.

Immediately following this opening up-tempo cut, Jackson slides ever so gently into a beautiful version of the classic "Don't Go To Strangers". However, Jackson doesn't simply let you drift off totally into musical dreamland while listening to this silky smooth selection. Slightly past the two-minute mark, Jackson picks up the pace and converts the dreamlike condition of this tune to a gently glowing and lightly swinging number. Again, the effect of switching over parts of the solo time to his pianist and acoustic bass players is captivating.

As the recording continues on, Jackson masterfully plays in and out of lead and support roles while always remaining ever present in tonality and musical spirit. This variety of attack is why I've come to really appreciate his playing style. With so many fine selections on this recording, it's hard to narrow my choices down to a few very best ones. However, early and repeated listening sessions have riveted my ears to several tunes that became standouts by now gone but never forgotten female jazz vocalists. One in particular is Billie Holiday's rendering of "Good Morning Heartache" and the all-time favorite of the sassy Sarah Vaughn, "Send In The Clowns." Jackson drenches both of these cuts with musical subtlety, style, grace and emotion.

Overall, the music on *Sa Va Bella* is accessible, relaxing yet inspiring, joyful but never rau-

cous, and at all times entertaining. Additionally, the combined musical talents of the assembled group makes for a very pleasant and enjoyable 58 minutes of listening. Musically, there are many things to like about this recording.

In terms of the sonic quality, by most standards it is very good sounding. However, I hope next time Jackson decides to lay down some seriously groovy tracks, he will instruct the recording engineer to allow a bit more fade time at the ending of each musical selection. Quickly cutting a tune off at the end can be disturbing to the emotional flow of the total recording. Other than this, all I can say is if you like jazz vibes and really good music, Milt Jackson's *Sa Va Bella* may provide you with the musical meal you've been waiting for. For me, it did the trick and let me know HE'S BACK!

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Contemporary
4ccd-4425-2

THIS FOUR-CD SET IS AT ODDS with itself. On the one hand, it has affection for and wants to document a style that took hold on the West Coast from the early to mid fifties, called alternatively "Cool" or "West Coast Jazz." On the other hand, the "West Coast" label seems to upset someone, and so they also try to prove there is really no such animal, by programming any jazz recorded on the Pacific coast (as if finding polka bands in

Chicago means there's no Chicago blues).

As with most musical categories, lines often blur, and recognizing the style is easier than defining its parameters. But let's try. The music comes from the Basie Band and Lester Young by way of Miles Davis' "Birth of the Cool" nonet, Lennie Tristano's groups, and the Stan Kenton Orchestra. It swung more lightly, with drummers frequently using brushes and rhythm sections

playing softer. Arrangements were often more complex than in bebop, with composed and/or spontaneous polyphony. Unusual instruments appear, such as cellos, various flutes, oboe, and valve trombone, and a gentle experimental streak is often in evidence (gentle compared to what was around the corner). Finally, many (though not all) of these musicians were white (their relative success may have led to some critical back-

lash; a topic has exploding into controversy in the jazz press).

Bebop from the early part of the decade, on two live recordings (Wardell Gray/ Dexter Gordon on "Move", Sonny Criss' "Intermission Riff") and a studio date by Gray demonstrate how the previous decade's revolution had been incorporated into the local jazz consciousness. With track five, "Popo," something's brewing. The sound is fresh, reminiscent of Miles' "Birth..." band, augmenting a two-sax- with-trumpet group (led by Shorty Rogers) with French horn and tuba. Many future stars are here, including Art Pepper, Jimmy Giuffre, Hampton Hawes, and Shelly Manne. The arrangement features tightly harmonized lines, with commentary behind and following solos. Gerry Mulligan, the first "cool" star, presented his ground-breaking pianoless quartet on two tour de force recordings "Bernie's Tune" and "My Funny Valentine." He could get the usually lumbering baritone sax to float gracefully (like the ballet-dancing hippos of Disney's "Fantasia"). With Chet Baker's trumpet the perfect foil, lines dance around each other as they support and converse with each other in a unique improvised counterpoint.

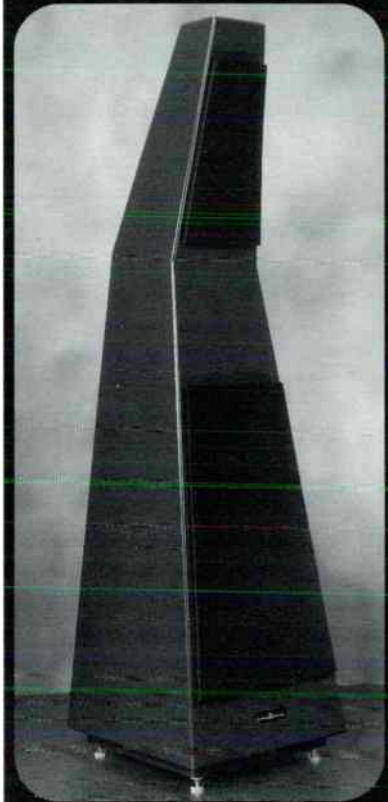
CD 1 continues in this vein, with Dave Brubeck (featuring the "dry martini" sound of altoist Paul Desmond), Stan Getz, and more from Chet Baker, Howard Rumsey, and Shelly Manne. On Getz's "Crazy Rhythm," his Lester Young-derived style bounces off commentary by Bob Brookmeyer's trombone (and vice versa) at breakneck speed.

On CD 2 the variety of "cool" is the focus. A Latin strain is heard on Laurindo Almeida's "Blue Baião" (Brazilian, to be

precise), and of a more Afro-Cuban nature on Cal Tjader's "Mamblues" and altoist Frank Morgan's "Whippet" (with Machito's rhythm section). Almeida, a classical guitarist who didn't improvise, left the soloing to Bud Shank's able alto. Shank also appears on flute on Howard Rumsey's "Aquarium" (dueting with Bob Cooper's oboe), and on his own date "Lotus Blossom." Herbie Harper's "Herbstone" and Lennie Niehaus' "Who's Blues" are classic cool, the latter an up-tempo up-dating of New Orleans conventions, features stoptime, and polyphonic blowing from the three-horn front line in an exciting outing. The great Clifford Brown plays the classic "Daahoud" on an early (for him) octet date with a fine local group. We hear a few piano trios: A tasty "One For My Baby..." by Gerald Wiggins, Hampton Hawes spinning out one imaginative chorus after another on "All The Things You Are," and the highlight, the incomparable Art Tatum on "Trio Blues," on which he starts out like a barrelhouse pianist but very quickly lets you know who he is, dazzling with technique while always remaining rooted (this is the track to play for those who criticize him for being all technique). The unknown bass trumpeter (it has a sound somewhere between a trombone and a flugelhorn) Cy Touff offers a fabulous swing-based "Keester Parade," composed and arranged by Johnny Mandel. It features a centerpiece-like melody line, and purrs along until blasting away on the out chorus (nice solos, too). The renowned Stan Kenton Orchestra, the source of many of the ideas and musicians, swings mightily on "Fearless Finlay."

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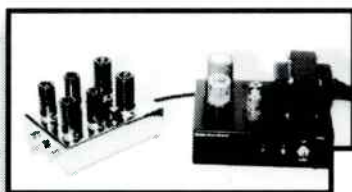
CD 3 opens with a fabulous 5¾ minutes of very original and enjoyable music on Jimmy Giuffre's "Pickin' 'em Up and Layin' 'em Down" This unorthodox trio of clarinet, trombone (Bob Brookmeyer), and guitar (Jim Hall) functions like a chamber ensemble, with shifting lines and textures integrated into a

soulful, unselfconscious whole. (John Zorn must have had this in mind when he premiered his similar "News For Lulu" trio). Red Norvo's "Red Sails" sounds squarely in a "cool" vein, with some of the usual suspects (Collette on flute, Bill Smith on clarinet, and Barney Kessel, Red Mitchell, and Shelly Manne)

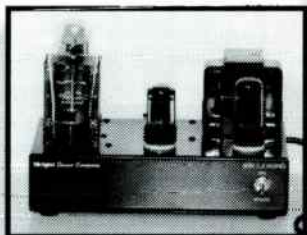
though the sound of Norvo's "Selected Sextet" date (with Bird and Diz) of a decade earlier is also in evidence as it swings at breakneck speed. Sonny Rollins, an East Coaster if there ever was one, brings his big-toned, witty style to "Way Out West" recorded in L.A. utilizing the locals (Ray Brown and Shelly Manne), and while there is some restraint to the proceedings, Rollins always dominates this great cut. Benny Carter, actually out of the swing era, was known both for his solo style and his arranging. His "A Walkin' Thing" brings both skills to the fore, Carter's solo a model of grace and swing (Ben Webster, also out of the swing era, also contributes a muscular solo). Another ubiquitous presence Bill Holman, weighs in with "No Heat," a blues for big band, with Holman's astringent harmonies and pithy commentary behind solos adding shadings to this most basic form. The next two tracks, by Frank Rosolino ("Love For Sale") and Curtis Amy ("Katanga"), are Hard Bop, pure and simple, demonstrating how the stylistic lines have blurred by decade's end. "Carl's Blues," by Curtis Counce, is a funky blues featuring the leader's brawny lines and pianist / composer Carl Perkins' harmonically daring yet earthy piano stylings. The disc ends with two adventurous groups: Chico Hamilton's and Ornette Coleman's. To me Hamilton's groups, featuring flute (or sax), guitar, cello and rhythm, tread dangerously close to the self-conscious, kitchy area experimenters must beware of. The track here, "Far East," has a legato "A" section, a more jazzy "B," and the distinction of introducing Eric Dolphy. Coleman is a true original, and his "The Sphinx" is in the character of his

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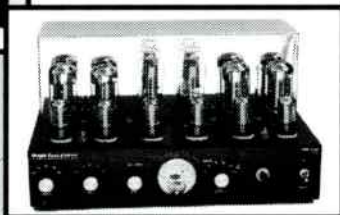
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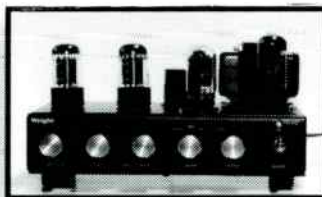
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early music, with a catchy, bouncy tune that changes tempo, and melody-based solos ignoring chord changes.

By CD 4, covering 1957 to 1964, "cool" is clearly in decline. One of my favorites, the fabulous Art Pepper, opens with a pair, the first recorded with "The Rhythm Section" (that is, Miles') on an unrehearsed "You'd Be So Nice To Come Home To," with all principles flexing their improvisatory muscles. The tightly arranged and executed "Shaw Nuff" has Pepper strut his stuff before a large ensemble. (This LP *Art Pepper + Eleven* was frequently seen under my arm upon entering audio salons to audition equipment). Another large group, The Richie Kamuka / Bill Holman Octet, is the most "West Coast" sounding on this disc, with a jumping performance and Holman's always engaging arranging. Hard Bop is

here, on Harold Land's "The Fox," Shelly Mannes' "Theme: A Gem from Tiffany," and particularly on Teddy Edwards / Howard McGhee's "Together Again," which would sound at home on, say, a Blakey set (the front line, particularly Edwards, solo with ferocity). Phineas Newborn, the pianist on the last date, fronts a trio for "Cheryl." His style, a chops-rich blend of Bud Powell, Oscar Peterson, Errol Garner, and his own soulful sensibility, is finely showcased in this fluid, swinging, riveting performance. Big Band is represented by Gerald Wilson's and Terry Gibbs' bands, and even modal styles (Paul Horn) are here. Ben Webster, who of course only plays in the "Webster" school, brings "Georgia On My Mind" to the mix, his sinewy phrases erupting out of a velvety tone. We end on a soft tribute to the gypsy guitarist on Joe Pass' "For Django"

Sonically, things do vary considerably, as might be expected when you program mono, stereo, live and studio recordings. Transfers are clean and rich sounding (remember that many of the albums these cuts are culled from have been lovingly reissued by JVC, Analogue Productions, etc). I pulled some of these for comparison, and while the audiophile reissues did offer better sound in the ways they often do, this set had nothing to be ashamed of.

This anthology does what I feel it should; it presents a coherent picture, collects many examples of terrific music, and points you in directions you may not have previously been aware (I myself must find that Cy Touff album.) While it's not the "cool" anthology I would have compiled (I'm available to all you record execs in need of my services), it nevertheless is fun and engaging listening.

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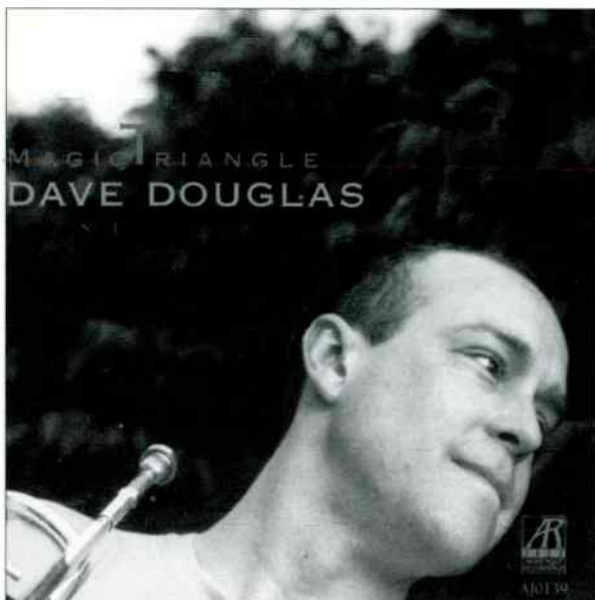
-Les Turocz,
The Audiophile Voice,
Vol.4, Issue 6

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-Aaron M. Shatzman,
The Absolute Sound,
February 99, Issue 116
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JAZZ

Dave Douglas
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DAVE DOUGLAS is one of the most important figures on the jazz and new music scene for a number of years. He has appeared in groups led by Myra Melford, John Zorn (check out the fabulous interplay between Zorn and Douglas on any of the Masada CDs or, better yet, catch them live) and other "Downtown" artists. He's also amassed a fabulous catalog under his own name utilizing various group configurations. He's recorded a number of tributes (to Booker Little and Wayne Shorter, among others), as well as straight ahead, "out," and Eastern European folk-jazz of varying sorts.

This date has Douglas in a more conventional two horn, bass, and drums configuration (other groups feature the trumpet, guitar, drums of the Tiny Bell Trio, or the accordion, violin, trumpet, and bass of Charms of the Night Sky) playing unique music with jazz trappings.

Much has been made of the Ornette Coleman influence on this music, and surely Douglas

has listened to Ornette's classic quartet dates. The sound of the band without a chording instrument and playing non-traditional music instantly conjures them. I also hear much of Booker Little and Eric Dolphy in the compositions, and even Gerry Mulligan and Chet Baker in the instrumental arranging and interplay. Tunes are built in sections, often changing tempo suddenly. Tenorist Chris Potter and trumpeter Douglas, both of whom have fabulous chops, often riff behind the other's solos or solo simultaneously (shades of Mulligan and Baker). The writing, as on most Douglas dates, is entirely engaging and engrossing.

The title track, a theme and variation dirge, has a "Lonely Woman" feel. "Padded Cell" is aptly named, with mood and tempo shift every four bars, going from excited to sad to agitated, with bop rhythms and free sections colliding in fascinating ways. No matter how far out it gets, thematic material is always front and center. "Kisingani" is a

chilling and mournful evocation of the African genocide, with Douglas' muted horn crying in pain and anger. On the odd-metered "Odalisque," Potter's solo builds in intensity until Douglas joins in, the horns spraying notes like semi-automatics. The closer, an attractive Gothic theme, finds Douglas blowing fast, fierce lines, with Potter indulging his penchant for off-beat quotes.

While arrangements are tight, there is a sense of risk-taking, playing on the edge, that is very exciting. Sound is superb. I've seen this band at the Knitting Factory and this is very close to my memory of them. Douglas' slightly burnished tone (Clifford Brown or Booker Little school) and Potter's round sound (reminds me of Hank Mobley) are well captured, as are the fabulous group interactions and imaging.

Highly recommended, as are the previously mentioned Douglas discs, for those interested in involving new music with intelligence and passion.



Classical

Prima Voce: Marian Anderson, Vol. 2
Nimbus NI 7895

EVEN FOR THOSE music lovers who believe that a historical recording necessarily makes historical context a vital element, the great American contralto Marian Anderson (1897 - 1993) has a unique status. Her concert on the steps of the Capitol Building in Washington, DC after the Daughters of the American Revolution had refused in the 1930s to rent her a hall on the grounds that she was black, still resonates as a pioneering civil rights gesture, like the famed refusal of Rosa Parks to sit in the back of a bus in America's Deep South in 1954. The fact that tens of thousands of spectators and even

Eleanor Roosevelt were then present to cheer on Ms. Anderson (which was not the case for Rosa Parks) points to the special power of art to plead cases that would otherwise be unheard.

In fact, since the 1930s at least, it was widely known that Marian Anderson had a voice that, as Toscanini said after hearing her, came along once a century. The fullness and richness of the sound, its spiritual density, the sailing quality of forthrightness and dignity all made for unforgettable vocalizing, and these are evident in the pair of historic reissues from Nimbus (on Nimbus NI 7882, as

well as this disc). Paradoxically, however, Marian Anderson's role in history, perhaps exemplified by her appearance as the first African-American woman in a principal role at the Metropolitan Opera in 1956, has obscured somewhat a clear estimation of her real vocal strengths.

It must be said at once that Ms. Anderson, who is often mentioned in the same breath as

Arias by Bach and Handel, Lieder by Schubert, Schumann, Brahms, Rachmaninov, and Sibelius. Marian Anderson (contralto), Kosti Vehanen and Franz Rupp, piano. Originally recorded from 1936-1947.

the bass Paul Robeson (for Civil Rights reasons) has little to do with her promethean male colleague, whose quite diverse activities left a far more varied bag of recordings. Marian Anderson was a singer first and foremost, and she persisted in being so despite all career discouragements. Other gifted singers of color fell by the wayside the soprano Mattiwilda Dobbs (whose fine recordings were recently rereleased by Testament, distributed in the USA by Harmonia Mundi) could not make a career in the early 1950s, and retired to Virginia to teach. At least her records speak for her achievement today, but an earlier black American soprano, Dorothy Maynor, made so few records that we can only hear snippets from the 1930s reissued on EMI's The Record of Singing.

Fortunately, widespread fame meant that Marian Anderson did not share this fate and today we are able to judge her in a variety of musical situations. Let it be said that the more distinguished her musical colleagues, the more she rose to the occasion, which makes one regret even more that she never recorded with Toscanini. Her Brahms' "Alto Rhapsody" as conducted by Pierre Monteux, available in the BMG Monteux collection, is to be treasured, and in Nimbus' first Anderson set, Bach arias conducted by Robert Shaw with soloists from Toscanini's NBC Symphony (violinist Joseph Fuchs, oboist Robert Bloom, and cellist Samuel Mayes), offer tantalizing hints of what a Toscanini-Anderson collaboration might have been like.

Anderson's vocal "flaws" have been much chewed over by critics; that she could sound

flat, or too ladylike and refined, or placid. On the second Nimbus issue, just out, piano duties are divided between the comparatively relaxed and free-wheeling Finn, Kosti Vehanen, and the rather more stately and

Marian Anderson's voice is one that comes along only once in a century.

even pious Franz Rupp. Vehanen's slightly improvisatory air goes especially well to draw out the elements of folk music in a set of Sibelius songs. Rupp, an intelligent musician of great personal integrity, tended to treat every song with Anderson with the sacred aura surrounding a hymn. This approach, however justified, may have removed some immediacy or direct contact with the listener, and created an instant old-fashioned "classic" treatment of the songs. Again, given the historical treatment of African-American singers, over-refinement was an understandable reaction on the part of performers, but this may have made some of Anderson's recordings seem dated even at the time they were issued.

Still, some of Anderson's performances may have been actually under-rated, such as her much-discussed Met debut as Ulrica in Verdi's "Ballo in Maschera," when she was almost 60, an invitation intended to pave the way for the young soprano Leontyne Price to be invited to sing Aida and ruffle fewer feathers among the Met public, if the first black woman singer were the familiar name, Marian Anderson. It has often been commented that by this time Anderson was past her

best, and had little stage experience to begin with, but careful listening to the recording which exists of this performance (currently unavailable outside of some sound archives) proves otherwise. Something of the tragic and solitary nature of her voice, its lone existence on a pinnacle, which made it so moving in the Brahms "Rhapsody" or indeed in her deeply tragic interpretation of spirituals, touch-

es the heart in her Ulrica. Not exactly a subtle character, or one in which many singers can find much human resonance these days, Ulrica as sung by Anderson may have been flat at times, but then some great Verdi performers like the soprano Leonie Rysanek sang entire operas flat. The point is that Anderson's individuality and vocal weight and density made for a convincing dramatic personality onstage. Photos of her singing in her latter years do not belie this: Indeed, the famous Avedon photo of her singing Ulrica, with her eyes characteristically shut and vocal "mask" perfectly placed, makes her look like she has always been Ulrica and will always remain so.

Such strongly identified singing makes for unforgettable opera performances, which may be reason enough that it is time for a thorough re-evaluation of Marian Anderson's Met opera debut, as well as the rest of her vocal achievement. The invaluable Nimbus reissues are therefore doubly timely and welcome. Sound quality is, putting aside Nimbus' much-debated transfer method, sufficient to get a good idea of the voice and its meaning, which is the purpose of such a historical reissue to begin with.



Classical

Beethoven, 9 Symphonies, NBC Symphony, Arturo Toscanini (cond.)

Vol. I Symphonies Nos. 1-4, Egmont Overture BMG CD 74321 55835 2

Vol. II Symphonies 5-8 BMG CD 74321 55836 2

Vol. III, Symphony No. 9, Missa Solemnis, BMG CD 74321 55837 2

WHEN IS RECORD industry hype not merely hype? One is tempted to reply, when it involves BMG and the recordings of Toscanini. Take a look at the new three-volume remastered set of Toscanini Beethoven symphonies, where the description in block letters, "The Immortal" is as large as the conductor's name, and considerably larger than Beethoven's name. Is that overstatement? Well, no, because as long as the symphonic art is cherished, then Toscanini's sublime achievements with the NBC Symphony will be treasured. Indeed, despite such killjoys as the sour Joseph Horowitz in his misguided book "Understanding Toscanini" which, as reviewers aptly noted, might have been better titled, "Misunderstanding Toscanini," the Italian maestro's achievement was truly Michelangelesque. Yet I have

found that in any field of art appreciation, Philistines will try to downgrade the achievement of indisputably great creators. When I was an art history grad student at the Johns Hopkins University, a professor there omitted Michelangelo from his seminar on Renaissance painters because he felt that this painter of nude muscle-men could be easily left out of the list of really noteworthy artists. And so any number of imbeciles may sooner or later try to discount Toscanini's achievement, and these recordings in particular. Let it be said therefore, that these new BMG reissues are by far the clearest and most vivid of these immortal late Toscanini performances, which are not just remarkable for a maestro in his 80's. In terms of lucidity and clarity, instrumental virtuosity, and getting great orchestral musicians to outdo themselves

in genius-level playing, they are ideals to be aimed at for all future generations of musicians. These performances are important as a standard for Beethoven interpretation, of course, but even more so, they are a standard for the whole domain of orchestral playing. Who but Toscanini has managed to get entire string sections to play with death-defying virtuosity and recklessness, attaining perfection while risking everything for the drama and vivacity of the moment? There are moments, and they are not rare in these CD's, which are not just remarkable, they are properly unbelievable.

The present reissues, with much cleaned-up sound, suggest that it is time, over forty years after "The Immortal's" death, that certain things be understood. First of all, that Toscanini was a genius such is rarely seen

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in art, and to be permitted all eccentricities, the kind of tolerance we automatically extend to artists like Michelangelo or Pontormo. Therefore the Toscanini heirs should stop worrying about things like the maestro's famous temper tantrums, and agree to release rehearsal tapes and other live performances that involve the Maestro's screaming when dissatisfied. We must also be allowed to hear on CD the amazing 1937 Salzburg festival performances of "Falstaff," "Die Meistersinger," and "The Magic Flute," hitherto blocked by the Toscanini heirs, because they revolutionize generally-held concepts about Toscanini as opera conductor, based entirely on his concert performances recorded late in life.

As we advance to a new century, it becomes clearer that we will not again see the likes of Toscanini as conductor, and therefore every one of his recordings attains documentary significance. Based on the holdings of New York's Lincoln Center Library, Rodgers and Hammerstein Sound Archive, the amount of revelatory material still awaiting reissue is amazing. Real audiophiles like the legendary recordings connoisseur Harris Goldsmith have spent hours upon hours listening in the worst conditions to this material — the Lincoln Center library, now closed, offers paltry and intransigent service even when open — but all lovers of music deserve access to this cultural treasure which is the repository of recordings left behind by the Maestrissimo, Toscanini. This new BMG reissue is a start, but only a start, in the right direction. May it be followed by many more and much-needed Toscanini reissues. Amen.

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FELLOW ANALOG ADDICTS, phonogramians, and vinylphiles, I'm here to spread the good news! As some of you are doubtless aware, the Lehmann Audio Black Cube phono stage has caused quite a stir, not only in the audio press, but at most of the audio-related sites on the World Wide Web. Norbert Lehmann, the Black Cube's designer, has reaped his fair share of kudos for his efforts in introducing this inspired device to a market niche sorely in need of an affordable alternative to the prices normal to high-end phono stages.

The Cube really isn't much to look at; in fact, it's a little two-

piece affair that is very plain and unpretentious. I'd say it was designed to be listened to and kept out of sight—heard, but not seen, as it were! It boasts no face-plate, no fancy emblem, no embossed logo or even anodizing for that matter. The best part of that tune is that you, the consumer, won't be paying for any of that jazz. Le Cube is all performance and no jive. If you're looking for glitz or a status symbol or a trophy, then I recommend that you purchase a Rolex and put it around the Cube. Secure it with a dab of Mortite, and I don't see how it could fail to impress your friends or significant other!

Upon close inspection of the device in question, I detected one minor inconsistency. The Cube, when measured, was in reality more of a chunky rectangle than a true cube, as it measures 108 mm wide by 114 mm deep by 44 mm high. Hmmm, perhaps this was grounds for suspicion—but then, what's in a name?

The Cube, however, is all business. Lehmann uses double-sided PCBs in both the power-supply and phono-stage modules. A passive RIAA phono network is employed, using high-grade, 5%-tolerance WIMA MKS capacitors and low-noise metal-film resistors. Although the gold-

plated RCA input and output jacks could not pass for expensive German WBTs, they are soldered directly to the main circuit board. This technique ensures a short, intimate signal-path to and from the circuitry, thereby eliminating the usual connecting wire and extra solder joints. This would appear to be a very effective strategy, especially in view of the very low voltages produced by the many low-output moving-coil cartridges on the market today. An outboard regulated power supply features a very low-noise, high-precision, dual-voltage regulator chip and fast diodes that provide excellent transient response and linearity. A female IEC connector allows the use of aftermarket power cords. It is tethered to the phono chassis by a two-meter umbilical cord and supplies clean power to the main print-

ed-circuit board (PCB) where the power is further regulated and purified.

To accommodate both moving-magnet (MM) and moving-coil (MC) cartridges, the Cube offers switchable gain and loading options via two PCB-mount-

re: 775 millivolts, is stated as -77 dB for the MM input and -69 dB for the MC. Both are good specs. I found the unit to be extremely quiet in actual use and I didn't encounter any unusual hum or noise-related problems. The input capacitance is 220 pF, and the output impedance is less than 100 ohms. Both are proper figures. The first means that there will not be a roll-off filter formed at the input by too much capacitance being designed in.

The second means that the Lehmann Cube will have an easy time driving virtually any preamp with an input impedance of 10 kilohms or greater (practically all preamps), be it active or passive.

An on/off switch is not included on this device as it is designed to be powered-up at all times. Since it takes several days to a week for the Cube to

**Both build and parts
quality of the Black Cube
are very high.**

ed sets of DIP-switches. You can toggle between 40 or 61 dB of gain at 47-kilohms, 470-ohms, or 100-ohms input resistance. An additional position allows the user to simply plug-in his choice of quality custom-value load resistors, and I utilized this option with excellent results.

The unweighted signal-to-noise ratio, referenced to 0 dB



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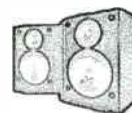


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sound its best, or so I found, this would appear to be the best strategy. Its power consumption is a low 0.7 VA, so this won't add much to your electric bill.

Preparing for Insertion

Installation of the Black Cube into my system was both easy and painless. To select between moving-magnet and the higher-gain moving-coil configuration, it is necessary to remove the four Allen-head cover screws and then set the internal dip-switches for each channel to the desired positions. For use with my low-output Transfiguration MC cartridge, I chose the higher gain +61-dB setting and set the cartridge load for 100 ohms, the same value that I normally employ with my AHT/P phono stage. I tried some preliminary listening to this configuration and then did a comparison involving use of higher quality 100-ohm Vishay resistors in the optional loading position. It's my feeling that the Vishay resistors demonstrated smoother and more detailed high-frequency reproduction and were generally more transparent sounding than the stock resistors. Therefore, the bulk of my impressions are based on listening with the Vishay load resistors in circuit. It should also be noted that when using the 47-kilohm MM position, this extra load resistor is effectively eliminated from the signal path and does not factor into the sound quality.

To The Grooves!

My audiophile cronies never fail to chide me whenever I use Debbie Gibson's 12-inch disc *Shake Your Love*, the "Bad Dubb Version" (Atlantic 0-86651), for reference; but I do so for a couple of reasons. First, it throws a huge multi-layered, three-

dimensional soundstage with some interesting quasi-surround effects. And secondly, not only does it have some slammin' deep bass, but it contains some very high-frequency cymbal crashes that are precisely focused and just appear to pop-up out of nowhere in specific locations within the soundstage.

Using the Krell KAV-250p line stage in conjunction with the Cube revealed the strengths of this particular recording to a surprising degree. In fact, I can't remember when I've heard the high frequencies on this cut sound quite so precise in their position and in their extension and focus. This was due, at least partially, to the imaging precision of my new reference speakers. Still, it showed clearly and beyond any doubt that the Black Cube is very detailed and focused in its high-frequency reproduction. What's more, the quality of those highs shimmered silky smooth, with no edge or hardness to detract from the presentation.

I dare say the little Cube is so adept in its reproduction of the uppermost audible frequencies, that it will take a near state-of-the-art line stage to exploit the Cube's full potential in this area. I mention this simply to make you aware that in many instances the Cube's considerable sonic virtues may be limited or masked by one or more of the downstream components in one's system.

Switching to my new AHT tube line stage and going to some "real" music, I broke out my 1961 copy of the Columbia Masterworks' release *Igor Stravinsky Conducts* (Columbia MS 6272). Playing through the various cuts on this album revealed that the natural timbre of the instruments was captured quite well. On "Double Canon for String Quartet," for example, George Neikrug's work on the cello was extremely convincing. One could clearly discern the state of the rosin on his bow, but without the exaggerated spitty quality that lesser electronics

CUBE GENEALOGY

IT SHOULD be noted that the review sample of the Black Cube represented in this review is the *late* version with the improved op-amp. The optional 3M Co. Visco Elastic damping material had been applied to the inside of its cover. About six months ago I had the opportunity to audition an *early* version of the Black Cube in my system for a couple of months. In thinking back to my impressions of the earlier version and in reviewing my notes, it is my feeling that the current version sounds a bit more transparent and refined, especially in its treble performance.

Additionally, I was informed that future production Cubes will be using aluminum for the chassis rather than the current ferrous box. Aluminum is thought by many designers to "sound better" than its ferric counterpart. Being a non-magnetic material, there is less interaction with the current flowing through the internal electronics.

I applaud Lehmann Audio for continuing to refine and improve a product that was already considered by many to offer superb performance at a bargain price.

routinely impart. Instead, the cello sounded more like what one might expect to hear in the concert hall, sweet and immediate, without veiling.

On the next cut, "Epitaphium for Flute, Clarinet, and Harp," Dorothy Remsen's harp plucking sounded very natural, with good dimensionality, and displayed a good sense of the string's snap, without any excessive ringing or overbite.

Proceeding to my heavy-hitter, *Witches Brew* (RCA LSC-2225), the Classic Records reissue, provided plenty of excitement and musical surprise. Starting with "Danse Macabre, Op. 40" on side 2, I was very impressed with how easy it was to discern the low frequency rumble from the train in the subway near Kingsway Hall in London. The rumble was quite recognizable as having been produced by a train, a rather noteworthy accomplishment.

Enter the violin, ripping in dramatic fashion from the left of the soundstage; the aural onslaught had begun! Now, the most prominent feature of this recording is the incredible dynamic range this violin presents to the listener when reproduced on the best equipment.

Without the slightest reservation, I recommend the Black Cube for any high-end system.

I'm happy to report that the bone-chilling crescendos of the full symphony orchestra were reproduced very cleanly with little if any perceptible compression and with no homogenization of the instrumental lines. In other words, the trumpet blasts and the impact of the BIG bass drum with all the other instruments blaring with ghoulish glee, pretty much pinned me to my seat. Dear readers, I implore

you to tell me how much more one can expect of a phono stage—regardless of price!

Female vocals proved to be captivating "Cubed" as well. Listening to Karla Bonoff's soulful duet with James Taylor, "The Water Is Wide," from *Restless Nights* (Columbia JC 35799) was, in a word, "enchanting." The interplay of their two acoustic guitars, neatly located on the far left and right of the soundstage, served to frame their vocal harmony in a vivid picture of musical bliss. I could kick back in my listening seat and stay engrossed in that type of sound for hours without a thought to mundane matters.

Flaws—What Flaws?

I know you aren't expecting me to tell you that the Black Cube's performance was perfect and I'm not about to do that. If I did, I wouldn't have *any* credibility with you readers. However, in view of its low price, it is closer to perfection than I would have ever imagined. To lend some perspective here, I'd have to say that my custom AHT/P phono stage, at several multiples of the Black Cube's price, sounds conspicuously similar to the Cube. My particular AHT/P unit has a Class-A modification that makes it sound just a touch sweeter and perhaps slightly more fleshed-out than the Black Cube (or a stock AHT/P). But other than that fairly small difference, I'd have to admit it was a very close contest between them.

Compared to the top-of-the-line AHT Non-Signature phono stage, the Black Cube gives up a bit more ground. Images through the Non-Signature are more solid and palpable, and it seems

NOTES

Lehmann Audio Black Cube Phono Stage, \$695.00; manufacturer: Lehmann Audio, Mozartstr. 16a, D-51145 Cologne, Germany. Web-Site: <http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/entecaudio/dacovere.htm>. U.S. Sales and Distribution: Hy End Audio Imports, 576 State Road, North Dartmouth, MA 02747; phone/fax 508/994-8450; e-mail: hyendaudio@juno.com.

Associated Equipment

Townshend Audio Rock MK III turntable; modified Rega RB300 tonearm; Sumiko Transfiguration moving-coil cartridge; AHT/P phono stage (custom); Bylux Dedicated Powerline Conditioner; AHT tube line stage and Krell KAV-250p preamps; Sonogy Black Knight and Monarchy Audio SM-70 (as bridged monoblocks) amplifiers; InnerSound Eros speakers; WireWorld Equinox III, Harmonic Technology Truth-Link, and Full Spectrum Signature interconnects; WireWorld Equinox III and Sonoran Desert speaker cables; Full Spectrum Exotic and Clayton Audio power cords.

to throw a more expansive soundstage. The dynamic range of the Non-Signature is flabbergasting and while the Black Cube is very competent in its rendering of dynamic contrasts, it is not quite the equal of the Non-Signature here. The Cube's articulation and dexterity in the nether-regions is quite impressive and satisfying, while the Non-Sig exhibits virtually iron-fisted control over the entire bass range that results in unrivaled articulation of bass lines and a heightened sense of pace, with spot-on pitch. Then again, at AHT's price of nearly \$6,000, you'd hope and expect such a piece to be demonstrably better.

However, I really don't see how this diminishes the virtues of the Black Cube in the slightest. Many could argue—and perhaps justifiably so—that this is a very unfair comparison. But for me, to have to compare the Cube to a piece costing more

than eight times its price before any areas for improvement could even be detected speaks volumes for the performance that this feisty competitor brings into the arena. It should be interpreted as a testament to its outstanding value—not an indictment. I know of no other phono preamp remotely close to the Black Cube's asking price that can better or even rival its performance.

Conclusion

It would be easy for me to go for the obvious cheap shot here by criticizing the Black Cube for being *too modestly priced*. However, after enjoying the considerable sonic attributes that this cocky little contender sports in spades, one profound thought did cross my mind. Perhaps it is the Black Cube that is fairly priced—with most other high-end phono preamps being way overpriced!

I found the build quality and the quality of the individual component parts used in this phono stage to be very high in relation to similarly priced competition. I like the flexibility in the various cartridge-loading options, the switchable gain, and the fact that this flexibility will allow the Black Cube to properly interface with almost every phono cartridge on this planet. Also, the outboard power supply with IEC receptacle facilitates use of quality after-market cords, which many 'philes use and appreciate.

Without the slightest hesitation or reservation, I can wholeheartedly recommend the Lehmann Audio Black Cube phono stage for inclusion in any high-end analog playback system. It offered performance comparable to my reference phono preamp for a small fraction of its price and I'd call that a bargain—The Best I Ever Had!

"At an unbelievable \$1475 the pair, this one is going to knock 'em dead."

***HARRY PEARSON, THE ABSOLUTE SOUND, JULY/AUG., '98**

STEREOPHILE MAGAZINE

"In my 20 years of involvement in the audio hobby, I can't think of another product that has offered as much performance for as little money as the MG1.6QR. Highly—very highly recommended." * Brian Damkroger, *Stereophile*, January '99

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ULTIMATE AUDIO MAGAZINE

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* Myles Astor, Editor, *Ultimate Audio*, Jan./Feb., '98

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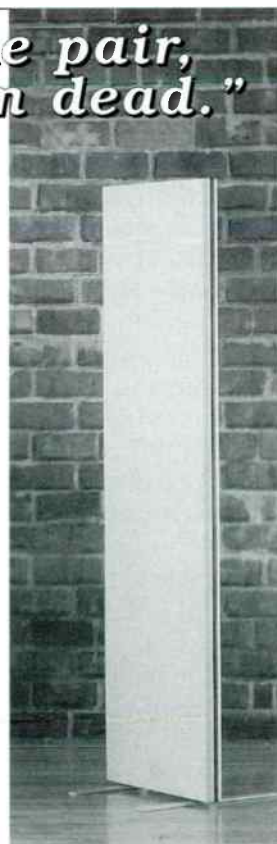
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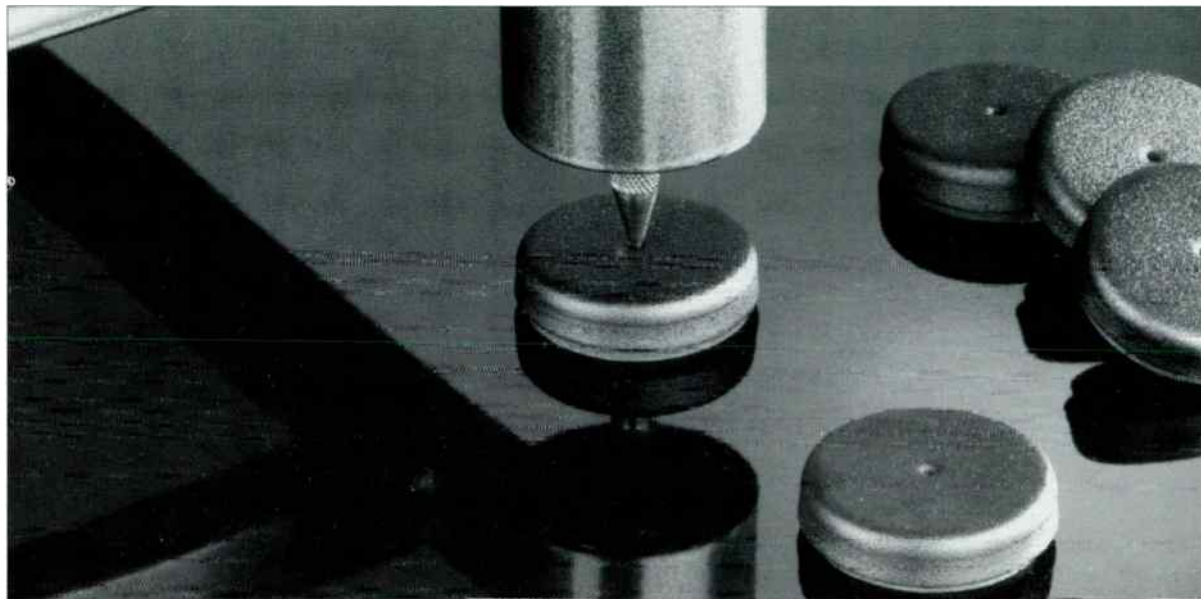
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Target Floor Protectors

Joel Shumer



IS THERE a problem with using heavy speakers with spiked feet in your listening room? If so, the Target Floor Protectors may be helpful. When I had wall-to-wall carpeting in my listening room, I adopted an attitude of "what I didn't see wouldn't hurt." I used spiked feet without concern, wherever and whenever I chose. But I recently moved to a new house, one with highly polished oak flooring, and the use of spikes is out of the question.

But spikes are often essential. Not only do they provide an effective way of leveling an equipment rack or a speaker, they are said to also reduce the travel of unwanted mechanical energy between the floor and your component. In the case of some floor-standing speakers, such as the Wilson Watt/Puppies for example, spikes can improve the system's sound by raising the

speaker so it is firing at the proper angle. Sitting directly on the floor, the Watt/Puppies have excessive mid-bass warmth and to some people sound tubby. To address this, Wilson provides spiked Puppy Paws that raise the speaker three or four inches. Users reportedly find that the frequency response is smoothed and the imaging is focused as well.

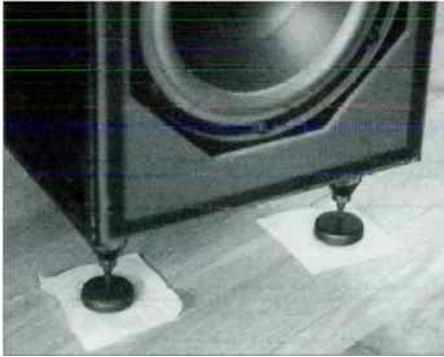
So, here was my dilemma: I wanted to listen to the speakers raised on their spiked feet but I didn't want to deface my nice oak flooring.

Target, an English company best known for its equipment racks and speaker stands, has recently addressed this problem. They manufacture an item they refer to as "Spike Shoes," while their U.S. distributor, May Audio Marketing, has named them "Floor Protectors."

To get an idea of this product, imagine a steel end cap for a tube $1\frac{3}{4}$ inches in diameter. Further imagine that the cap has a $3/8$ -inch rim and an attractive crackle finish. Now, squeeze a hard rubber puck (one just a bit thicker than the cap's rim) into the cap. Then, with the rubber side down, punch a small hole through the center of the cap. Your Floor Protectors are finished and ready to accept a spiked foot, which is locked in place by the central hole.

Use

The Floor Protectors couldn't be easier to use. They work exactly as intended. According to the distributor, each will support a weight in excess of 100 pounds, so a 150-pound Watt/Puppy up on four Floor Protectors will be no problem. It looks to me like the Puppy spike



went into the Floor Protector's hole less than a quarter inch, so I believe your oak floors will be well protected.

The black rubber bottom leaves no marks on the floor but it is not easily moved. It truly is a non-skid material, and I could not slide my speakers around once they were shod with the Floor Protectors. This made adjusting speaker location in my listening room quite difficult, but there is a simple solution. Place little squares of wax paper under each Floor Protector. I hadn't used wax paper since my elementary school days when I would wrap it around my PB&J on Wonder Bread sandwiches. Wax paper is readily available at supermarkets and, with the help of an extra pair of hands, it was easy to place a small piece of wax paper under each protector. With the wax paper in place, sliding the WATT/Puppies is a cinch and the wax paper leaves no marks on the floor.

Listening

How do they sound? I really don't know. The theory is, at

least when they are used with speakers, that the steel cap locks the spike in place, and then the cap transmits unwanted mechanical energy into the rubber insert where it is absorbed. They seem to work effectively, but for obvious reasons, I did not do an A-B test with the speaker spikes going first into the Target disks (A) and then into my wood flooring (B).

Conclusion

Spikes on speakers are considered essential by many people, and are said to improve imaging, help correct tonal imbalances, and level a speaker on an uneven floor. Some even use them to lean a speaker backwards or forwards to more accurately aim the speaker's high-frequency energy, as some systems are beamy in this region. If you already use spikes directly into your flooring, then the Target Floor Protectors will probably be unnecessary for you. But if damage from spikes is still a potential problem for you, then the Floor Protectors offer a solution that appears to work quite well.

My two sets of Target Floor Protectors were not some promotional freebie or give-away; I bought them and I consider the money well-spent. If you want to use spikes without marring your floor, then you really have to look at this product.

NOTES

Target Floor Protectors, \$25.00 for a kit of four. Distributor: May Audio Marketing, 10524 Lexington Dr., Suite 300, Knoxville, TN 37932; phone 423/966-8844, fax 423/966-8833.

Associated Equipment

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The Disc Doctor's Miracle Record Cleaner:

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DESPITE ONCOMING new digital formats, LPs still thrive in various corners of the universe, and many people continue to collect them. Reasons range from sound quality, availability, cost and wherever in-between. The care of records has become an integral part of the vinyl science for the advanced hi-fi enthusiast.

The days of getting by with just a Discwasher brush or a damp cloth went away just shortly before digital came along. Several vacuuming devices have been available, as has "advanced" care from the Last folks, and amongst them, the cleaning world's best kept secret, the Disc Doctor's Miracle

Record Cleaner. While the VPI, the Nitty Gritty, and Last products have gotten the bulk of the spotlight, the Disc Doctor materials do something none of the others do nearly as well—clean the record.

Even brand-new LPs, right from the jacket, benefit greatly from a cleaning. The most serious contaminates on an average new LP? Sterate salts and silicone oils. They come from the process of making the discs, but are inhibitors in getting to the music. Additionally, used records require a good cleaning when brought home from the vinyl hunts too (space and good manners prohibit me from

detailing the many alien artifacts present in them). Many don't even consider playing their records unless they've gone through their own personal battery of cleaning techniques.

Use of the Disc Doctor materials will strongly assist in making proper cleaning a certainty to all, the results being that pronounced and that consistent. Even if you use a VPI or other type vacuum machine, you may well no longer find, as I did, that its scrubbing action is completely adequate as a cleaning tool. The VPI's cleaning brush is, truth be told, a poor implement for scrubbing insofar as properly working the fluid into the record

NOTES

grooves, and you may, as I have done, invent your own procedure for using the VPI as just the vacuum source and spinning platter along with the Disc Doctor's brushes and solution.

The Disc Doctor materials, with either manual or vacuum machine-assisted procedures, produced audible results of the type one usually experiences with a serious system upgrade like a new cartridge, pre-amp or other main component. I found that the noise floor was lowered, surface noise was reduced, soundstages opened up, occurrences of mistracking were less frequent, and, ultimately, a higher level of involvement with the performance was achieved after a single cleaning. Indeed, the manufacturer even maintains that the LP needs only one cleaning, with further attempts being redundant in their view.

It is now acknowledged by many in the industry that master tapes are deteriorating rapidly, and further, many that were saved were transferred to 16-bit digital, often with little care for the delicate historical content. It seems to me that the LP will be with us for generations to come, if for just being the "only" way to hear many performances in their best view. I have much more of a "safe" feeling when I use this superb cleaning system, but you shouldn't just read about it, you must try it. I urge those of you who are interested in getting the most music out of a groove or preserving your 78s, Edison Diamond Discs, LPs (or whatever else of a vinyl or shellac nature) to consider the Disc Doctor materials an essential tool. I am now using my second order of supplies, and I can say for certain that they've established a permanent home here next to my LP player.

Disc Doctor record cleaning supplies, pint of cleaner and a pair of LP-sized brushes with extra pads, \$62.40, p/h incl., cleans 300 to 350 LPs in average condition. A quart of cleaner, \$14.50. Lagnaipe Chem. Ltd., P.O. Box 37066, St. Louis, MO 63141; phone and fax 314/205-1388, website [HTTP://disc-doc.com](http://disc-doc.com).

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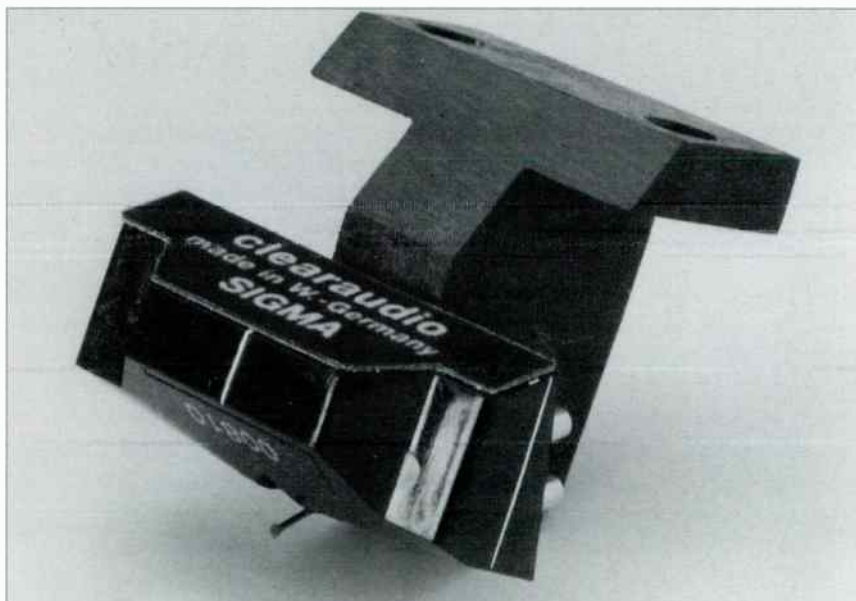
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Clearaudio Sigma Phono Cartridge

And, in this corner,
The 1999 Featherweight Champion



I AM NOT USUALLY one to ah and gush over a phonograph cartridge, but what we have here has caused me to rethink what is possible when an expert refines years of work to a not-so-dear price point. I am referring to the Sigma cartridge, the new and lowest priced gem in the "well-healed" and oft-reviewed Clearaudio line-up which includes respected cartridges named Insider, Accurate, and Signature.

This is the first Clearaudio I have had the pleasure to hear, and it is one of the best overall cartridges to grace my reference system, period. The Sigma sports a wooden body and is shaped like all the Clearaudios, with a

thin motor housing and wide protruding stylus assembly which you connect the leads to. As with other Clearaudios, you will set the counterweight on the arm forward to compensate for the cartridge's feather-light weight and high required tracking force. This high tracking force, to my knowledge, has not been reported on and was at first cause for concern. My sample carried a specification of 3.3 grams tracking force, and I am using very close to the manufacturer's recommendation. The generic setup instructions say that tracking force should be around two grams, but I've heard from a well-respected table manufacturer who has set

up numerous Clearaudios that in his experience with Accurates and Insiders, proper tracking force more usually approached three grams and that the individual cartridge specifications are spot on. This high tracking force has not damaged any records and surprisingly when I skip from track to track, no "clicking indentation" has remained. I speculate that the stylus shank is tall, with a large footprint stylus, and thus the downforce is spread over a greater surface area than with other cartridges. Whatever the case, do not be concerned with a tracking force higher than you have used with any other modern-day cartridge.

The Clearaudio Sigma is a new offering from the hands of Peter Suchy and replaces the Gamma as the bargain basement model. Bargain in price, but not in sound. This is the first time I have had a cartridge properly reproduce the full weight and body of an instrument. Its bass extension and foundation far surpasses any cartridge that I or my listening panel has ever heard. It is, frankly, groundbreaking. The Starker Mercury *Bach Suites for Unaccompanied Cello* (and I am referring to the

Philips reissue) has never before conveyed the physical presence of the instrument in my room. The Sigma's outstanding bass and lower midrange reproduction is taut, full, and true to the recording. This unheard-of low frequency power adds to the foundation of the instrument, leading into the midrange and treble portions that are seamless, clear, crisp and as real as life. It forms a holographic gestalt that is startling. I have not, in all my years of listening, had the fortune to be as completely fooled, as the Clearaudio will do, into hearing and visualizing a real instrument and performer in my room. The only thing missing is the physical presence of the man and his cello.

Large-scale orchestral works and power music are dissected with scalpel accuracy to reveal each specific instrument along its air envelope to again fool you into hearing musicians in your

home. For example, the individual violins on Classic Records *Witches Brew* are immediately apparent; equally, the whole string section as well, forming a perfect blend with the remaining orchestra. Detail of instrumental individuality combined with string section togetherness adds to the sonic impact as the full orchestra plays to climax conveying the dynamic impact of live music. The bite of each bow, with the Sigma, is percussive, drawing you into the physical force preceding each sustain. Uncanny as it is, it is also extraordinarily musical. My main complaint with high-end reproduced sound is an over-etching of instrument(s) that overshadows musical enjoyment. None of that here. The Clearaudio Sigma opens the door wide on detail but within is an equivalent musical landscape that is eye-popping realistic yet very natural and true to life.

Lateral and depth timing cues are replicated accurately, contributing to the cartridge's state-of-the-art soundstaging. The Sigma's timing excellence pinpoints images and locks them into the orchestral spread in a three-dimensional hologram better than any cartridge I've experienced. You can sense the angular chair rows within the orchestra as if you are there. The air in and around each instrument, section, and the total orchestra is presented naturally without being frequency dependent. Let me explain: A cartridge I reviewed elsewhere changed its presentation of air and space depending on what part of the frequency range was being presented. The cartridge, while a great tracker and overall musical performer, over emphasized spatial reproduction in the upper bass and lower midrange, resulting in an unnatural top-to-bottom presentation. The Sigma's

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flat frequency response and paralleling reproduction of air and space tie together from the low bass through the treble, another first for this listener. The resulting lack of dryness across the entire response curve is uncanny for such a detail-retrieval champion as this.

As impressed as I am with the Sigma, there are two nits that I have to pick. One is most probably due to the relatively low price point, the other perhaps because of the stylus shape. First, I detect a smidgen of grain in the upper midrange that results in diminished transient refinement. This very minor defect in no way impairs the overall performance of the cartridge. It makes me wonder just how good the higher priced brother Clearaudio cartridges are! The second criticism is, I guess, due to the large surface contact area of the stylus which extracts so much detail that

groove rush comes along with it. This is record dependent and not overly distracting once you become accustomed to it.

I can think of no better cartridge at this price point. These are analogue minority days and thus high-priced, limited-production cartridge runs have caused me and many other vinyl lovers to feel like second-class citizens when we fail to rational-

ize multi-thousand dollar expenditures on what really should be a reasonably priced device. This cartridge will allow many of you to reenter the top performance envelope and not look over your shoulder at what can be attained by extraordinary financial sacrifice. This is effectively a rave review of a noteworthy product that will bring you closer to the elusive target of musical realism.

Clearaudio Sigma Phono Cartridge, \$1,100.00. Imported and distributed by Discovery Cable, P.O. Box 7, Stuart, FL 34995; phone 561/219-7979, fax 561/219-2668, website www.discoverycable.com, e-mail discoverycableinc@worldnet.att.net.

Associated Equipment

Walker Proscenium Gold Signature turntable; Walker Motor Drive; Convergent Audio Technology Signature MK III preamp; Cary 805C and Komuro 845 Push Pull and 845 Single Ended amplifiers; Classic Audio Studio Standard IIs loudspeakers.



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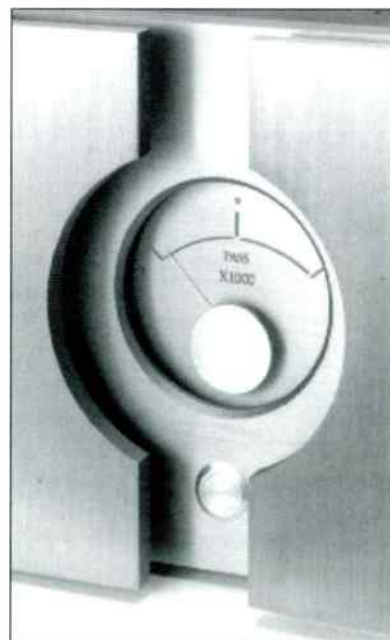
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Wilson Benesch A.C.T. 1 Loudspeaker



TODAY'S BEST LOUDSPEAKERS exhibit a very sophisticated level of complexity. This is not manufacturer one-upsmanship nor an attempt to create a long list of features unique to their brand. Instead, it is a process of evolution such that effective speaker designs must be based on implementation of a carefully chosen set of scientific principles that best serve the designer's vision. Consequently, the current competitive crop of speakers exhibits

a level of attention to detail that is heretofore unprecedented. The upside for the consumer is that the resulting performance possibilities are also unprecedented, while the bad news (for both consumer and manufacturer) is price. Complexity is a costly consideration, but without it, state-of-the-art sonic achievements are impossible.

This is why I'm here to point out that neither the \$11,000 price tag nor the relatively mod-

est physical presence of the Wilson Benesch A.C.T. 1 are accurate reasons to diminish this speaker's stature. Remember that old saying: Do not judge a book by its cover? Well, it applies here in spades.

Even a casual look is certain to reveal that this is not your ordinary loudspeaker system. While the size, the shape, and the exposed materials are rather different, the A.C.T. 1 was never intentionally designed to appear

different. Rather, it was a case where the end result as a whole (and that means performance and presentation), were predicated by the desired performance requirements. A clear case once again, where form follows function—all the way. As far as I'm concerned, Wilson Benesch has managed, very successfully, to create a strikingly elegant enclosure that is a welcome departure from the typical boxy loudspeaker cabinet.

Just give this product a listen and it will be very obvious that the A.C.T. 1 is a very special design. At that point, this product's mission should be very clear—it was created to reproduce music with a minimum of aberrations from cabinet distortions or difficulties due to misbehaving drivers. Obviously, the price merely reflects the inescapable result of having to pay for the implementation of those design features that will fashion the desired goal effectively.

And believe me, this is a very clever aggregation of state-of-the-art materials and concepts. In that respect, it's about as advanced as you are likely to encounter in a commercially available product. The A.C.T. 1 simply wears its heart on its sleeve—with most of its sophistication laid bare so that it can be fully appreciated.

The Design

Physical properties of every material, regardless of size and shape, result in a commensurate resonance. Choose common materials and shapes, and uncommonly rampant cabinet colorations are inescapable. While the design and implementation of loudspeaker cabinets is

very much a process of eliminating resonant reverberations, it is also a procedure of stifling and shifting these coloration culprits to levels of least intrusion. What can't be eliminated has to be prodded to a point where the ear-brain system is least likely to

Both the design and the construction of the Wilson Benesch A.C.T. 1 show much original thought.

pick them up as distortion. As such, this is a high priority for the more sophisticated loudspeaker designs.

Though the loudspeaker system under consideration stands 42.5 inches tall, is 9 inches wide, and 14.5 inches deep, and weighs 100 lbs., relatively small and lightweight as things go these days, the mix of materials in this seemingly simple product is absolutely mind-boggling.

Would you believe the A.C.T. 1 incorporates a mix of carbon fiber, aluminum, steel, wood, brass, silver, and copper in a variety of densities, and a myriad of forms and shapes? By the way, A.C.T. stands for Advanced Composite Technology. When all was said and done, the A.C.T. 1 ended up using 17 different types of materials in each enclosure. And that's without counting the contribution of the drivers and the crossover components. To hold it all together and complete the robust structural requirements throughout, six different adhesives were selected because of their specific properties.

The Enclosure

As I said, this surely is much more than your ordinary loudspeaker. A mere frontal view

won't begin to tell the total tale. Here, its relatively narrow 9-inch front-panel width, which combined with the 42.5-inch height, gives the speaker a rather lean and elongated look. The slight forward down-sloping top panel assembly adds to that illusion. The magic, however, lies beyond this.

The first obvious hint that something unusual is going on is conveyed by what have to be some of the largest speaker spikes in the industry (at 2.1 inches in length and 0.6 inches in diameter) and by the very elaborate means of coupling them to the enclosure proper.

In order to create a very firm foundation for the whole speaker system, a horizontal two-tier assembly of stacked machined steel plates, 10-mm thick, are utilized. In addition to mass loading the enclosure and anchoring the spikes to the bottom of the enclosure, the steel plates also tune the low frequency port.

Removing the front grille makes it easier to discover the various materials. Here one would notice that the vertically aligned woofer, midrange driver, and tweeter array can be found mounted to a sub-baffle that is a separate insert of the front panel. Delving further into the construction would reveal this sub-chassis to be an aluminum plate, one-inch thick. Why the metal mounting panel for the three-driver array? Well, any wood derived front panel is not up to the task to provide the required rigidity for the drivers that metal can.

As interesting as these features are, a view from the side is the most revealing of what really sets this speaker apart. Here the curved side panels of the A.C.T.

1 are in full display. Extending from the bottom to the top and stretching from each outer edge of the front panel to meet at a vertical spine some 12 inches behind the front, a set of gently curved, carbon-fiber panels can be found, one on each side. And it is precisely here, folks, where the heart and soul of the A.C.T. 1 can be found.

There are many techniques that might be used to make speaker enclosure walls more inert, stiffer, and less resonant. But the techniques implemented here are dramatically more effective. The choice of carbon fiber, with its very high stiffness-to-mass ratio, for the wall material already puts this design in a class all its own. In addition, the implementation of curved wall surfaces creates, in one fell swoop, a cabinet that is inherently more rigid and without parallel walls to boot. Furthermore, this shape is very

NOTES

Wilson Benesch A.C.T. 1 Loudspeakers, \$11,000.00 per pair. U.S. distributor: Pro Audio, 111 South Dr., Barrington, IL 60010, phone 847/526-1660, fax 847/526-1669, website www.wilson-benesch.com, e-mail proaudio@AOL.COM.

Associated Equipment: Mark Levinson No. 31.5 transport, Museatex BiDAT and Theta Generation Va A/D converters, Jeff Rowland "Synergy" and Ayre K-1 preamps, Krell FPB-300 and FPB-600 power amps, Cardas "Golden Cross" interconnects and speaker cables, TARA Labs "The Decade" interconnects and speaker cables, Echo Buster and ASC room treatment.

resistant to allowing intrusive resonant modes to develop. Sonically destructive effects on the reproduced sound are further reduced to insignificant levels by a carefully crafted and judiciously distributed internal bracing pattern. Obviously, Wilson Benesch have an enclosure that leads the pack.

The preparation of each ACT panel is performed by hand and

goes on to be pressed in dedicated, mirror-finished, stainless-steel tooling. Each spine, the structure responsible for anchoring the A.C.T. panels and the internal bracing and visible at the rear of the enclosure, undergoes 14 machining operations before it is declared fit for its intended function.

For any given thickness, A.C.T. panels are more than five

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times stiffer than a corresponding MDF board. Since curving a panel adds even more rigidity, the curvature of the A.C.T. panels, as implemented in this design, move the first resonant frequency to beyond 30 kHz. Now we are talking! Usually, cabinet colorations can be moved, but only to some frequency still in the audio range, though higher. The contribution from the major A.C.T. 1 cabinet wall components, however, end up being placed in the inaudible portion of the spectrum, a place of least harm, a most proper place.

The Drivers

It was some time ago that Wilson Benesch proudly announced their newly developed capability to manufacture all of their drivers in-house. Calling it the TACTIC Dynamic Driver System, these components feature completely new design concepts and incorporate newly developed materials. One of the main and unusual features of these drivers is that they can be used with great effectiveness in all the major types of enclosure designs, from isobarik, through bass reflex, to midrange in a standard acoustic-suspension system.

Starting with the motor system, they chose an axially magnetized neodymium-iron-boron ring as the basic building block. This is not only easier to manufacture but ends up having 50 per cent less mass and realizes a 30 per cent power increase. The improved magnet is incorporated with an innovative basket design where the reflective shadow effects have been much reduced, while optimizing the strength and stiffness of this

assembly.

The material for the driver cones has been completely reevaluated as well. Relying on the efforts of British Professor I. W. Ward, the driver diaphragms are now using a radically new

For a given thickness, the A.C.T. panels are five times stiffer than the MDF board ordinarily used.

material called Isotactic polypropylene. All that can be said at this time is that the material, when woven and compacted in an innovative manner, will exhibit "very high levels of damping both at the structural and molecular level." Despite their previous fondness for carbon-fiber cone materials, Wilson Benesch concluded that its application for driver cones can be significantly bettered by the Isotactic polypropylene. Having found this new composition to be five times stiffer than ordinary polypropylene, they feel it provides significant gains in the system's sonic performance due to a wider, more-linear bandwidth and higher power-handling capability for each driver.

The bass and midrange drivers are custom built by Scan with the Isotactic polypropylene come to Wilson Benesch specifications. The woofer is a 170-mm, mass-loaded, high-linearity driver featuring a high-power, 42-mm voice coil and a cast magnesium-alloy frame. The mid-range driver is also 170 mm in diameter with a high-temperature, 42-mm voice coil in a die cast frame.

The tweeter is a "Scan derivative" because it uses a low-resonance alloy Wilson Benesch

chassis. The wide-bandwidth, 25-mm, woven-silk dome is transmission line loaded. It puts Ferrofluid to good use for damping and cooling.

The Crossover

Sophisticated, wide bandwidth drivers allow the designer the luxury of a simple crossover design. How simple? So simple that only one air-core inductor is used for each woofer and midrange unit, while the tweeter response is controlled by a single, selected capacitor. This provides essentially minimum phase, first-order (6 dB per octave) crossovers at 400 Hz and 3 kHz. To remove them from the internal environment of the enclosure, all internal interconnections, using nothing but only pure silver wire, are imbedded into the 80-millimeter thick vertical spine which forms the rear of the enclosure.

The enclosure's low-frequency loading is a fourth-order, Bessel-alignment reflex design. For those of you more technically inclined, it is a double-reflex, stagger-tuned, boundary-matched, tapered response.

Connections for the speaker cables are handled by solid copper terminals, turned from a solid copper bar. They are gold plated to maximize the integrity of the connection. The good news is that three sets of these very substantial speaker terminals, designed to accept 8-mm diameter ring terminations, are provided to accommodate tri-wiring. The bad news, at least for a reviewer, is the terminal location—right at the bottom of the enclosure. So every time I wanted to change connections, the speaker had to be tipped over on its side. But for those

who are not into making frequent cable swaps, the out-of-sight connections are bound to be very welcome.

The suggested minimum power input is 25 watts, but system's specifications say it can handle 200 watts of program material. Sensitivity is a very user friendly at 91 dB for one watt. The same goes for the impedance which is 6 ohms nominal, never dipping below 4.5 ohms nor rising above a 10 ohm maximum.

Sonic Splendor

The very first hearing of the A.C.T. 1, in a CES setting no less, left me with a haunting feeling. Could this speaker really be as sonically striking in conveying a squeaky clean impression, or was it just something I was hoping for? Well, folks, having had the chance to put it through its paces, this speaker is

really different. And it is really clean.

Like it or not, we are polluted with transducer-induced contributions. Since the exact extent of component colorations is very difficult to determine, the process of eliminating these intrusions is in its infancy. Without knowing it, we go on

This "must audition" speaker gives very credible reproduction with minimum coloration

being very tolerant of what are really very disturbing distortions. How come? Well, because we simply don't know better. It is only when a rare glimpse of a world less corrupted and more revealing presents itself that our hopes are rejuvenated and, as a result, our expectations can be

more demanding.

The Wilson Benesch ACT 1 is just this kind of revelatory loudspeaker product.

Everything gets better, timbres, dynamics, detail, focus, the works. All this adds up to a more resolute presentation. The resulting sound is more taut, more tactile, and much more enjoyable.

It may not be quite fair to call it luck, but opportune circumstances can get the most out of a product. For starters, having some really good equipment on hand can't hurt. My good fortune of being able to round up such components worked better than normal, and the ACT 1 stature sonically kept increasing with each introduction of more refined equipment into the system. Since such product riches don't avail themselves to me instantly, I end up keeping

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equipment for very extended time periods.

The evaluation certainly got off on the right foot; the initial audition of the ACT 1 was all the more outstanding since it just so happened that a Krell FPB-300 was on hand. This is one amp that can serve up pristine signals all day long, and the A.C.T. 1 just thrived on these delicacies. This loudspeaker converted its electrical input signal into an acoustic output that, in many respects, was about as accomplished as anything I had experienced up to now. I am delighted to tell you that this was a very thrilling encounter.

Even though the ACT 1 was creating a very creditable impression, it got even better when I obtained something that has to be Charlie Hansen's best electronics' work to date and another, more powerful, Krell amp. I'm talking about the Ayre Acoustics' K-1 preamp which was used to drive a Krell FPB-600 stereo power amp. Yes, that's 600 Krell watts per side, which means 600 watts into 8 ohms, 1200 watts into 4 ohms, etc., etc.

Obviously, the performance of the speaker per se did not change, but I was in a position to hear just how much more resolution was available. I shudder to think of the instances where the reviewer's equipment is not able to reveal the full capabilities of a particular component under test. This makes it just about impossible to unravel the full potential of a product. In this case, the Ayre and Krell combination did have something special going on in terms of resolution and transparency—qualities that the ACT 1 thrives on and

consequently displays in all of its corresponding glories.

I do want to mention one very unusual discovery. The ACT 1 is capable of setting up a stage of incredible proportions and spaciousness. That's obviously very desirable. But the extraordinary part has to do with the seemingly unlimited distance that the speakers can be spread apart. The ACT 1 is like no other speaker in my experience because they threw up a soundstage that was as vivid and



valid regardless of how far apart I spread them. I mean I had these speakers sitting some 14 or 16 feet apart laterally and they still provided a very exciting stage. It just so happened that I just ran out of space within my room. It could be that because of their relatively light weight these speakers could be moved very readily making it easy to experiment. But I recall that previously my propensity for moving speakers far apart always reached its limits. Eventually, a deficient soundstage would materialize and at that point I knew I had to curtail my efforts in this direction.

Despite the prodigious staging prowess of the ACT 1, my

take on the speaker is that it isn't fully suitable for large rooms due to its bass power restrictions. After all, it only has a 170-mm (6.6-inch) bass driver doing the work in the nether region and that can only do so much. So the one area where I wanted the ACT 1 to act up was in the bass. At reasonable levels and not overly demanding program material, the ACT 1 was wonderful. The music was provided with a desirable sense of foundation, a base from which the

music could grow. When larger demands were placed in this area, the speaker responded with a very slightly strained demeanor. The sense of freedom that thrived in the spectrum above the bass frequencies lost some of its luster. The speaker sounded constricted and restrained.

However, the rest of the frequency range was handled in a marvelous manner. The significantly reduced coloration acted to enhance the purity of the timbres, transient attacks became more urgent, decays could now linger unobscured by cabinet induced distractions, and what could now be perceived as musically essential details surfaced to cap off the restoration of the presentation.

What resulted was a wholesome feeling. It consisted of excellent transparency, very unbridled dynamics, and a wealth of credibly resolved inner details. This loudspeaker was capable at times of approaching the airiness and the sense of speed that are inherent to electrostatic speakers, while at the same time retaining the forceful demeanor of dynamic drivers.

From The Grooves

Here's what I noted while listening to several selections:

Sonny Boy Williamson, *Keep it to Ourselves*, Analogue Productions CAPB 036 (24 Karat Gold)

Cut 1: "The Sky Is Crying." Resonance and chestiness of voice credibly conveyed. Room ambience abounds along with superb definition of instruments and voice. Sibilance revealed minimal spittyness that is part of this very revealing recording. Absolutely amazing rendition of the complexity of the harmonica harmonics. Richness of the numerous reeds resonating were riveting and captivating. Guitar is well balanced with properly proportioned weight, tactile transient snaps, and delicately delineated decays. At 3:08 a foot-stomp literally startled me with the abrupt forcefulness of its impact. The might of the impact and all of the suddenness was presented intact.

Cut 4, "Don't Let Your Right Hand Know": At about 50 seconds into this cut, the foot tapping in the background and the more prominent harmonica were reproduced with resounding resolution of the harmonics as well as the soundspace of the recording room. The finger snaps revealed the force of the impact and the palm cavity resonance. The numerous slap-echo bounces materialized superbly. And the room size—it was huge! It was as ample as I've ever heard it. Cut 5, "Movin' Out," had a newfound sense of drive and rhythm, and appeared to be more forceful than I remember from before. From start to finish, this cut was a revelation.

—Pepe Romero, *Flamenco*, Philips 422 069-2

Cut 2: Was this the best ever hearing of this dramatic cut? No!

But it was close, very close. What was lacking was the lower register force behind the elaborate virtuoso footwork as demonstrated by the stomping, tapping, and glancing of the dancer's boots against the stage floorboards. But it just could be that the space as well as clarity of the impacts was replicated here with more volume and finer detailing than heard elsewhere.

Rosewood, Sony Classical SK 63031

The low frequency growls of the opening cut of this original motion picture soundtrack were somewhat too rich and overblown. But the rest of the selection was heard with astounding resolution. The tendency to approach the "hot" region of this recording was very apparent. But the speakers did not transgress and remained in control. Moving on to cut 2 where the choir was resolved into the multiple voices that comprised it. This ability to delve into the detailing was simply marvelous.

Summary

The ACT 1 is a "must audition" contender for those listeners who value precise and minimally colored reproduction of music. It is a marvelously versatile loudspeaker able to deal with soundspace, staging, and dynamics in an exhilarating manner. The near-total absence of cabinet induced distortions allows the refinement of the drivers to shine through and display their awesome performance capabilities to the fullest extent. And when it comes to recreating a detailed and credible musical experience, only a very few of the loudspeakers available could conceivably rise to the level exhibited by the ACT 1.

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Don Keele, Audio, August 1998

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C. Perry, Audiophile Voice, V4 #4

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ACK PAGE



The Camera Never Lies!

THIS PHOTO from two issues ago is being reprinted to show the “Back Page” column’s power of prediction. In Vol. V., No. 1, we “gently” joshed the guy in the photo, Jon Scull, about looking for a promotion at *Stereophile* Magazine since Wes Philips had joined J. Bryan Stanton’s public relations agency. Well, Jon was made Senior Editor, Wes’ old job. So, we think Jon will be able to buy lots of furs and perfume for his wife; she’s the lady on the left. As for the lady on the right, well, we think that Jon ought to buy lots of JVC XRCDs from her, and maybe some Evett & Shaw speakers, too. Cary Goldberg does public relations work for both those firms.—*The Editor.*

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Home Theater, Feb, 97



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The Sensible Sound, Issue # 60



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Stereo Review, Dec. 96

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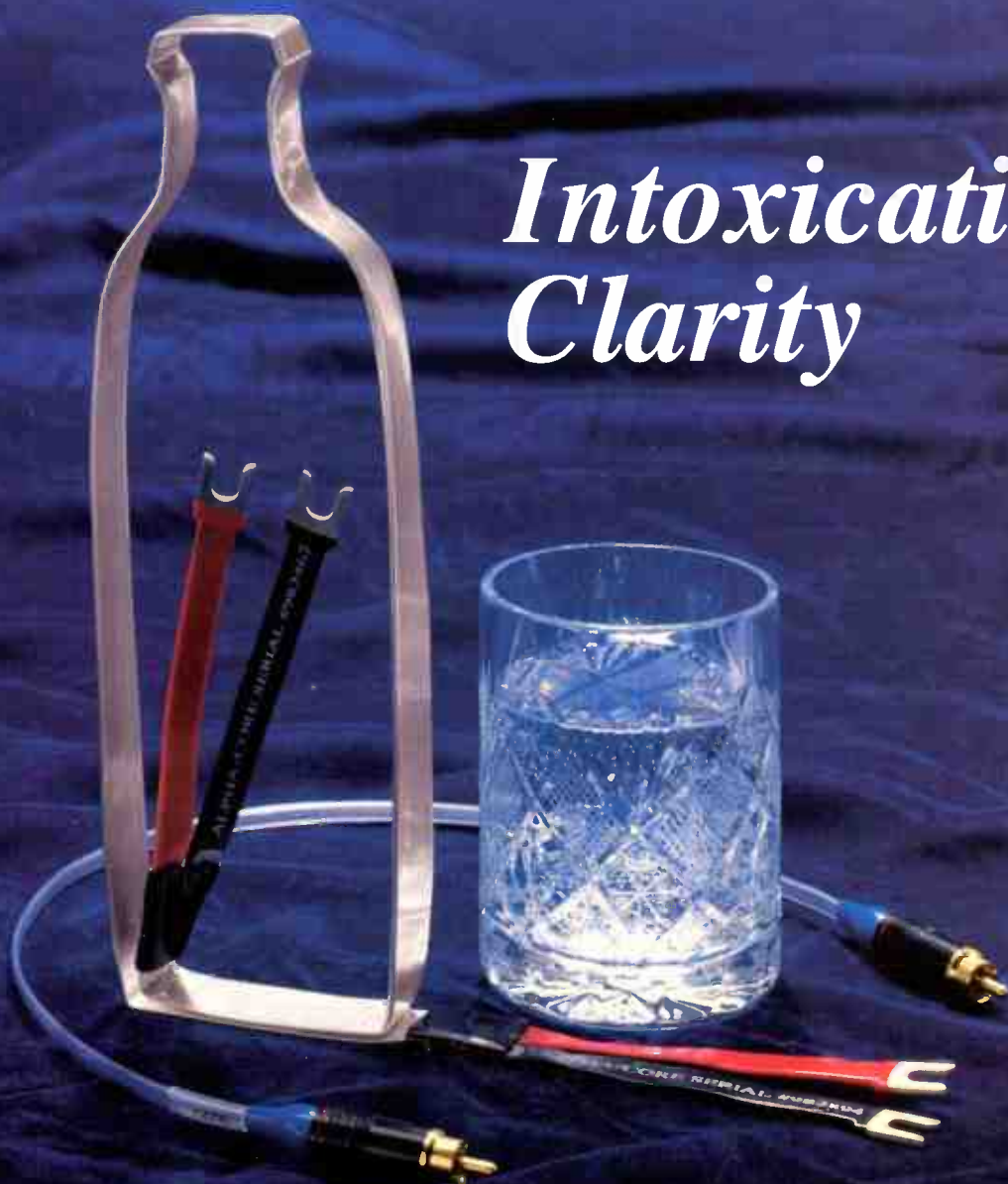


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