

# The audiophile voice™

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Volume 6, Issue 6

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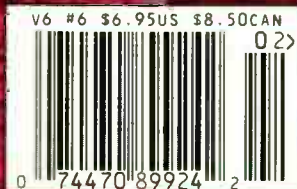
## Don't Leave Them Behind!

## High-End Audio In 2010



### Reviews

Yamaha Computer-Receiver,  
TacT Digital Room/Speaker Correction,  
Sony Digital Preamp,  
Music Hall LP Turntable,  
Induction Dynamics Custom Speaker



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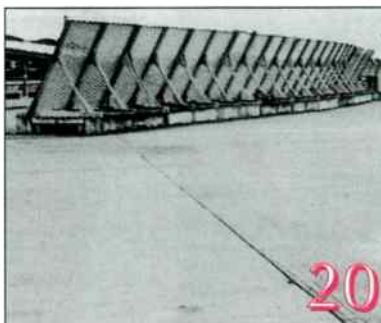
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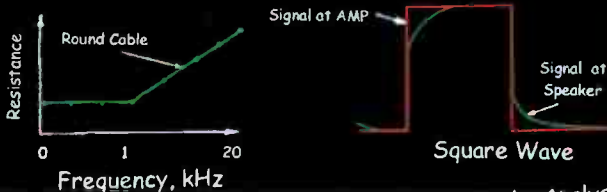
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Executive Editor Arnis Balgalvis  
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Russ Novak  
Cover Artist George Angelini  
Additional Art Sharon Pitts

### CONTRIBUTING EDITORS

Frank Alles, Bill Brassington, Chuck Bruce, Hector Chrest, James Dowd, Howard Ferstler, Jim Frane, John Hellow, Benjamin Ivry, Lewis Lanece, Karl Lozier, Ron Nagle, David Nemzer, Christopher Noblet, Arthur Paxton, Clement Perry, Robert Perry, Joel Shumer, Michael Tearson, Jon Tiven, Les Turocz, Ross Wagner, Jerry Walsh, and Bill Wells.

### ADVERTISING DIRECTOR

Alan Keister, 800/671-4030  
FAX, 9-5, Eastern Time: 973/535-3210

### THE AUDIOPHILE SOCIETY OFFICERS

Founder Hy Kachalsky  
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Inquiries regarding reviews should be made to the Editor at the production offices.

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### PRODUCTION OFFICES

215 Glenridge Ave., Lower Level  
Montclair, NJ 07042  
973/509-2009  
FAX 973/509-2032

E-mail: [epitts@ix.netcom.com](mailto:epitts@ix.netcom.com)  
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# New Products

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provides outstanding dynamic range, imaging, and detail while maintaining accurately controlled dispersion for minimal room interaction. Both compact and beautifully finished, the Ascent will fit easily into virtually any listening room and decor. The two-way system replaces the firm's SL3 and makes use of the firm's many advances in electrostatic speaker system design and manufacture. Its size — just 64 inches tall with a 13- by 22-inch footprint — will make proper positioning in the listening room a relatively easy task. A close reading of the technical specs shows the system will mate easily with most amplifiers: Sensitivity is 90-dB SPL for 2.83 volts at one meter, 4 ohm nominal impedance with 1.2 ohms minimum at 20 kHz, 200-watts per channel power handling, and +/- 3-dB frequency response from 35 Hz to 22 kHz.

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Data: [www.martinlogan.com](http://www.martinlogan.com)



## The Proton SRC-2000 Remote Control

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Prices: SRC-2000, \$170.00; SDS-2000, \$90.00.

Data: [www.proton-usa.com](http://www.proton-usa.com)



## The Ikonoklast Speaker System

uses a unique tweeter, two cones stacked point to point in a "bending wave" Walsh-type coherent line-source design, producing 360-degree dispersion. Frequency response is specified as 30 Hz to 30 kHz from the moderate sized cabinet which measures 24 inches high, 12 inches deep, and 8 1/4 inches wide. A 3/4-wave transmission-line enclosure loads the 5 1/4-inch mid/LF driver. Perhaps most unusual is the total lack of crossover circuitry, as the system depends solely on complimentary roll-off curves of the two drivers. Sensitivity is 95-dB SPL for 2.83 volts at 1 meter.

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Data: [www.warregregoire.com](http://www.warregregoire.com)





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**The Miles-Trane Box**

Dear Editor:

I enjoyed the review by James Rozzi of this terrific CD set. I immediately purchased it and I'm still listening to it. The remastering work is incredible. It is easily the best yet of these great reissues. Thanks for the info and review.

Frank F.

Frank's Sound Room  
Via e-mail

**Grapes Make You What?**

Dear Editor:

I have two new CDs that are quite impressive: Pierre Boulez, Repons, on the DG label. This is an intricately recorded and mastered work consisting of six soloists, a 24-musician ensemble and an "electro-acoustic system made up of a computer (used to analyze, transform and spatialize the sound of the soloists) and a set of six loud speakers." And that's exactly what it sounds like. It's incredibly "spatialized," projecting a very vivid three-dimensional sound picture. Some of the sounds even seem to come from beyond the outer edges of the Quads I am running. This is demo quality sound. Unfortunately, the music is a bit spacey and contemporary for my tastes. Maybe you could have one of your classical reviewers with a broader appreciation review this CD. The sound alone makes it deserving of a closer and more knowledgeable look. I give it a "2", you can't dance to it and you can't hum the tune.

Ravel, Works for Piano, Violin and Cello by the Kalichstein-Laredo-Robinson Trio on the Arabesque Recordings label. This is a fabulous CD, great for late-night introspective listening. The sound is great. The one piece I did know is the "Pavane pour une infante defunte for Piano." I'd heard this piece several times but I did not know it was Ravel. This piece alone is so beautiful that it makes me proud to belong to the same species as Ravel. It will be a long time before I tire of this wonderful two-CD set.

I watched the PBS special last night "Piano Grand," hosted by Billy Joel. It was an impressive two-hour special featuring all flavors of

piano artists. The music varied from Beethoven to a tired but lovable Grandpa like Jerry Lee Lewis.

I was knocked out by Dianna Krall. I've heard her enough on our public jazz station to never want to buy a CD of hers. If I hear that song "Peel me a Grape" one more time, I'll puke. From the jewelbox inserts, she just seemed too good looking, too smooth, too packaged to be real.

Surprise! Krall is not as good looking as she appears on her CD covers, but she's still good looking and better yet, real looking — with imperfect hair and a fleshy, big boned, and cuddly look. That's the way I like them. Viking women turn me on. She played great — effortless and with no attempt to dazzle, no diarrhea of the fingers, just tasteful, frugal licks and lines that blended beautifully with her skilled trio. I was amazed. She just seemed so natural, no affectations at all, no facial contortions, no stage persona, just a talented woman very comfortable with her place in the world of music. Very genuine. I'm going to buy every Krall CD that doesn't have "Peel me a Grape" on it. I think I'm in love.

Robert Perry  
Via e-mail

**I'm Sorry, Mrs. Ford, but ...**

Dear Editor:

I just had a browse through the latest issue and wanted to pass on a couple of comments.

First, I enjoyed the writing in the review of the Sony Headphones (even though I have little or no interest in the product).

Second, keep up the analogue content. You had great equipment reviews, but your writers only looked at the CD versions for music reviews. The Hendrix box, for instance, is available on vinyl, and sounds very good. To see either a review based on vinyl, or maybe even the more labor-intensive double review comparing both formats, would be nice once in awhile.

Finally, the Michel review was also very good, but perpetuates a myth about *A Clockwork Orange* that should be put to rights. If you look at [www.transcriptors.co.uk/](http://www.transcriptors.co.uk/), and in particular at [\[tours.co.uk/pg1.htm\]\(http://tours.co.uk/pg1.htm\), you will see that the turntable in that movie was not a Michel, but a Transcriptors Hydraulic Reference. The site has an interesting story maintained by the son of the original designer, and it may be worth you having a look for use as a human-interest sidebar or something. In any case, I think that a small note in a future issue is the least one should do to correct what is a commonly held but still incorrect attribution of the turntable in the movie.](http://www.transcrip-</a></p>
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Bill Spohn  
Via e-mail

**Gasbag Ego?**

Dear Editor:

Just an observation for what it's worth.... I've read every hi-fi publication in the U.S. and U.K. that came out at the same time as your Jimi Hendrix issue, Vol. 6, No. 4. That includes *S'Phile*, *Listener*, *Positive Feedback*, *TAS*, *HiFi News & Record Review* and *HiFi Choice*.

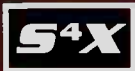
*TAV* was by far the most interesting, informative and entertaining. Every other one of those publications has gotten, to one extent or another, into a boring rut. I was surprised that it happened to *Positive Feedback*, disappointed that it happened to *Listener*, and amazed at how quickly much of *TAS* has returned to (poor) form. *TAV*, on the other hand, was concise, fresh, gracefully offbeat and enthusiastic. Not formulaic. Not predictable. No sign of gasbag egos on display. Instead, it was just plain enjoyable and worthwhile to read.

I doubt it's the first time that *TAV* was the best of the bunch in all respects. But in this publishing cycle it was powerfully evident. Your mag was way better than any of the rest.

(Yeah, I know, I'm a reviewer so I can expect to be biased. But I'm also an old hack, so I know when I'm being objective and when I'm full of BS. And I'm also a hobbyist, so I know what gets me off.) Objectively and as a hobbyist, you da bes'. Keep it up, bro.

Chris Noblet  
Via e-mail

*Editor's Note:* Friend Chris wrote the Sony headphone review in that issue.



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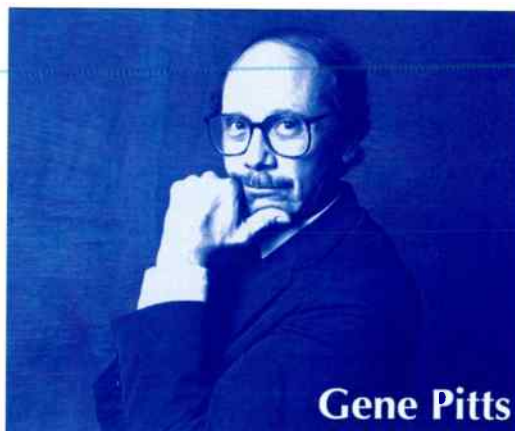
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## A Little 'Net Music

**T**HE PROSPECT OF MUSIC being "pay per listen" when it comes to you over the Internet is starting to get closer and closer. The United States Copyright Office, a division of the Library of Congress, is considering whether stations that put music programs onto the Internet must pay record companies for the use. According to a Bloomberg News report, some 4,000 radio stations of the nation's 14,000 transmit programs over the Internet. The Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) might be one agent used to collect and distribute such royalties, and indeed the RIAA has urged the Copyright office to use its SoundExchange. A coalition of music artists and indie labels has, however, asked the Copyright Office against selection of the RIAA for the task, urging instead that an independent body be established to collect and distribute web-cast monies and the funds collected from digital copying under the 1992 Audio Home Recording Act.

Speaking on behalf of the National Association of Broadcasters, Dennis Wharton said that "What the music industry is trying to do is saddle broadcasters with new fees that Congress has always exempted us from paying. It could cost broadcasters millions of dollars and would probably cripple or seriously impair the streaming of radio signals over the Internet."

### MS HDCD???

At the time of the Audio Engineering Society Convention, Microsoft announced that it had purchased Pacific Microsonics (PMI), the developer of the High Definition Compatible Digital (HDCD) process. No specific programs or products were announced by either Microsoft or Pacific, and it is difficult to see what Microsoft plans to do with the technology. However, the PMI HDCD filter for CD and other digital work is widely viewed as one of

the best available, whatever the level of HDCD use on the Compact Disc. PMI says that 50,000 titles have used the HDCD technology, of which 225 are *Billboard's* "Top 200" and that more than 30 million HDCD discs have been sold to date.

Mark Mays, Microsoft's group manager for Windows Media Appliances, did give one hint about the firm's ideas. "The whole industry is wondering and worried — probably at the same time — about Internet delivery." In addition, Mays drew attention to the "understated theme" of this year's Audio Engineering Society Convention, alternative delivery systems, and forecast that "production for Internet music delivery will be the convention's major theme next year."

Funny, but I can't see the RIAA pushing Microsoft around, no matter what leverage the Copyright Office gives the association.

### Watermarking Woes

The Warner Music Group has been widely reported in the techie- and music-business news media as signing up to use the Verance Corporation's copyright protection on its DVD-Audio discs. Covered is encryption and watermarking. Jordan Rost, Warner Music Group's senior VP of technology, fended off questions as to why Madonna's *Music* or other recent hits were not among the firm's first batch of seven releases. "We're working on such titles as k.d. lang's new release and Joni Mitchell's latest album."

An early version of the coding was supposedly cracked by a hacker, and there have been reports that the watermarking audibly degrades the audio signal on playback.

The only other announced DVD-A release is *Swingin' For The Fences* by Gordon Goodwin's Big Phat Band on Silverline Records from 5.1 Entertainment.

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# High-End Audio In The Year 2010



**H**IGH-END AUDIO is now undergoing a painful and highly uncertain transition. There is great promise in the future. Digital technology is now approaching the level of transparency we were promised decades ago, we are edging towards an era of multi-channel sound, sound processing offers the potential of revolutionizing the home listening experience, and slow and steady technological advances are improving every aspect of the performance of "traditional" high-end audio gear.

The problem is that these advances are now disguised both by format wars and by the prospect of rapid obsolescence. The limits of what is currently on the market

makes virtually any investment in high-end equipment uncertain. The challenge to end-user and maker alike is to look beyond these problems and frustrations and to deduce at where high-end audio will and should go.

This speculation no one individual can hope to get right, but it is also a kind of speculation that is essential if high-end consumers and manufacturers are to set goals for the marketplace that go beyond "getting the next best thing," mass consumerism, and market hype. So take the following comments for what they are worth — an attempt to start a debate and not an effort to finish one.

## The Hobby Ain't Dead

Let me begin with one key point — stereo isn't going to vanish. A small core of high-end consumers and manufacturers will probably still be using and making stereo systems in 2010, ones that will look very much as they do today. There will be high-end audiophiles that still use today's best equipment as "classics," much as we do items such as Marantz 10B tuners. There will be audiophiles who never give up on analogue stereo. Not without irony, there will also be some audiophiles who stick with the CD — which will by then have taken on the same romantic character and technological mystique as the LP.

This particular group of “high enders” will then be at the fringe of high-end audio, but they will often still be getting damn good sound and have a listening experience and enjoyment of music well tailored to their personal needs. They may be dismissed by the “cutting edgers” of 2010, but their systems will still provide a far more rewarding experience than those the shallow status or technology geeks get from rushing out to buy the very latest or most expensive, without ever really caring about music.

Yes, most 2010-ers will then regard such audiophiles as being just as marginal as today’s audiophiles regard those devoted to single-ended triode tube amps or horn speakers — both which will also still be around. In broad terms, however, the audiophiles of 2010 will also be the remnants of the much larger group of high-end audiophiles who made the right investment choices during the period between now and then. These will be the audiophiles who focused on the source material and musical listening experience. They will be the music lovers who did not try to ride the crest of every new wave, waited out the “format wars” and “next best things,” and continued to invest in high-end stereo.

They will get the best out of today’s vast library of recorded music during the first half of the coming decade, while others rush into formats that come and die with alarming speed — inevitably leaving a narrow legacy of often third-rate music as well as technical efforts that failed to get the best out of each new medium.

There is nothing wrong or stupid about being technically conservative and musically wise. But let’s forget about the many technologies that will be casualties during the next 10 years. Let’s speculate about the victors as of 2010. My guess is that the most important change will be the high end version of a battle now being fought out at the MPEG-3 and Walkman level. Today’s crude on-line access systems and downloadable sound will have

improved amazingly — just as cassettes were improved and eventually helped trigger the CD — and they will be tomorrow’s high end.

By 2010, we will have largely ceased to use any form of commercially packaged disc or consumer-owned medium. A combination of truly transparent digital sound — and connection to a national or global network of sources through some medium like fiber optics — will mean that we will be able to



access vast libraries of recorded music and audio-video sources. Some network providers will be dedicated to purists and high-end audio, and they will allow the consumer to download anything he wants to hear, and they will do it in real time.

There will be no scarce recordings or need for a future equivalent of record and CD stores, except for the odd collector. While there will still be a major pop mainstream, it will have gone the way of the networks. There will be hundreds of specialized network sources for classics, jazz, audiophile recordings, movie buffs, etc. They will compete in content, sound quality, and remastering. And by the way, remastering will in 2010 be something anyone will be able to do to remove clicks and scratches, add apparent depth, improve color, etc. The technology of recording will have reached the point of diminishing returns in terms of quality and cost. Between 2005 and 2009, any serious studio will be operating with equipment that is virtually noise free and which will have pushed digital processing well beyond the 24/192

barrier. And storage will be irrelevant. Home and garage studios will routinely have mikes, processing equipment, and storage media better than anything available today in today’s cutting edge studios. Many small purveyors will independently put the end result on line. Any live music group will be able to record its music well and sell the output direct from their own server or through a specialized distributor.

The core of a 2010 high-end audiophile’s home system will not be a pre-amp as we know it, but rather a processor that provides high-end access to such material in the most transparent, accurate, flexible and ergonomically superior form. Some systems may well use separate components to do this, but there will be a high dollar premium for single-box, modular, and upgradeable units capable of updating their software (that is, their performance) automatically on-line. Most high-end audiophiles

will use a single processor or pre-amp. By the year 2010, true high-end systems will also treat formats such as SACD, DVD-A, and similar processing and storage mediums as charming anachronisms. Home storage will consist of something like a multi-terabyte hard drive capable of downloading and storing thousands of recordings and videos on a single recording medium, one that combines complete audible transparency with total ease of use and copyright protection.

The size and nature of this home library will be a matter of personal taste for each high-end audiophile, who will be able to do any amount of independent processing and editing to suit his taste. Instant access to all non-recorded material will mean that high-end audiophiles will only bother to store the best, the most personal, or the material needed for relatively esoteric purposes like tracing the history of a given performer or composer, comparing passages or scenes, doing collages of music or movies, or processing the performance.

Most high end consumers will have shifted away from an emphasis

on a single listening or viewing room. These same processing devices will allow them to send different music and video sources to any room in their house, and to also download what they want into surprisingly high-end portable and personal listening and viewing devices for remote audition. There will still be a main listening and viewing room, with the best in high-end performance. However, high-end audiophiles will have nearly global access to the best in music and video, and even items traditionally aimed at the mass-market, such as the Walkman, boombox, or portable TV, will in 2010 will have a surprisingly high-end character.

Most high-end audio-videophiles will also have opted for other digital options that will revolutionize every other aspect of the high-end system. The core of this revolution will be digital processing of the basic sort one finds in today's systems for room correction and equalization. These systems will still allow the high-end user to get the kind of smooth, flat in room response he wants, but they will also correct for time and phase, ensure clean dynamic range, and provide the proper balance of direct to reflected sound. In the process, amplifiers and speakers will have been redesigned to produce the best interactive synergy between processing and results in the actual listening experience in a given room and in the listening positions the high-end user most desires.

The bitter on-going debates over how best to blend audio and video will continue, but most high-end systems will in 2010 produce both audio and video creditably. The visual image in mass-market video tracks will often remain today's kind of prurient material, but in high-end audio, issues of imaging and depth will no longer be mere guesswork. It will be clear from the video what depth, what width, what imaging, and what kind of hall character really go with the audio performance.

Moreover, today's generally tasteless or sometimes outright horrible processing options like "concert hall" and "jazz club" will be replaced with multiple ways of really doing it right. Room correction will only be part of the high-end

audio experience. Fully accurate room synthesis to match the sound character to the performance will be the high-end norm, and there is a good chance that recordings will have a key at the start to tell audiophiles and their new breed of gear exactly how to tailor the sound to recreate the actual performance hall. There will also be live broadcasts and on-line performances that will do the same.

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### **In another 10 years, any high-end system will handle both audio and video very creditably.**

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#### **The Damage Done**

There will be a very real downside to these advances. The ability to do real harm to sound quality is the inevitable corollary of the ability to come closer to absolute sonic truth than ever before. The sheer confusion of options may even drive some self-appointed purists back to mono 78s. In this respect, nothing will have changed.

There will, for the most part, be positive and truly innovative changes. Most high-end audiophiles will now have a multichannel and surround system. Such a system will not, however, have a fixed number of channels and will not require fixed types of speakers. Processing power will allow a complex signal to be used to create as many or as few channels as a given high-end consumer wants in any given room. The mix between direct, dipole, and bipole radiation will be a subject of intense debate, and the high-end user will be able to use the processor to match the output signal to suit any mix of these speaker characteristics that he or she wants.

In fact, the processor will adapt its processing to the source material, which will carry an encoded signal to tell the processor the performer's preferred mix of sound characteristics. There will be many competing systems for doing this — somewhat like today's THX, Dolby, and DTS. The recording engineer will also add specific data for each performance so the home system processor can adapt to provide precisely the kind of sound the performer and

engineer had in mind — always subject to the high-end user's desire to use that same processor alter the end result.

This level of interaction will be aided by other major changes in the rest of a high-end system. First, interconnects will be Firewire, USB or CAST-like devices if they even still exist in the market place. At worst, components will communicate using a much broader home network that will include the computer, video, and phone. At best, they will use advances in r.f. communication to avoid any hard wiring at all. Speaker cables generally will have gone the way of 78 cartridges. Users will tolerate hard wiring components, say within a stack, but not multichannel speakers. As a

result, consumer demand for a totally transparent method of r.f. signal handling will require development of a processor that communicates directly with any number of multichannel amplified speakers, anywhere in the room or house, using specially encrypted signals to prevent interference between the various systems.

Let me bring up that ugly and sexist phrase, The WAF Factor. Fortunately, by 2010 it will have largely ended. The lack of ugly wires, the sonic improvements brought by digital processing, and the seamless integration of subwoofers with the sound of on- or in-wall mounted speakers will mean that complex multichannel systems will be far less visible — and far less objectionable — than high-end stereo systems are today. The same will be true of high-end components, which will also be largely invisible except for the high-end audiophiles who insist on keeping their own personal CD, DVD-X, and LP source components. After all, there is no reason that any of the new components I have discussed have to be visible. It is the remote control for all of this capability that will probably be the only component the high-end consumer normally uses and sees.

This does not mean, however, that technology will be frozen in place or that tweaking will have ended. There will be an amazing number of downloadable software updates, chip updates, and independent high-end accessory boards,



chips, and other downloadable replacements and supplements. The architecture of virtually every component will be modular, including speakers. It will allow steady upgrading by both the original manufacturer and his competitors. The "snake oil" content of future high-end equipment will be just as important and pervasive as it is today, but similarly real will be the innovations from out-of-the-blue from previously unknown firms initially dismissed as part of the lunatic fringe.

### See It Now

The video component of the typical high-end system will also have changed. Projectors and tube video will be dead. Flat panel systems with HDTV-plus accuracy, true blacks and true whites, in widths well in excess of 80 inches will still be very expensive, but will have become a normal and key part of the high-end componentry. Today's problems with video standards will have vanished. Outside calibrating technicians and viewing in the dark will have vanished. Displays will not only autocorrect, producing the most accurate picture at any ambient light level, they will be able to

autocorrect to match the incoming video signal, adapting their settings to produce the best picture for any given program. Full on-board correction and user-controllable video-processing menus will be the rule. So, incidentally, will be on-board diagnostics for both the video panel and every element of the audio system, along with diagnostics for the quality of a.c. power and of the incoming audio and video signals. Automatic on-screen warning of systems problems will be provided to allow immediate correction of problems.

A small number of high-end audio-videophiles will, incidentally, be going further. At the extreme high end, there will be tall, curved panels capable of recreating a Cinerama or IMAX-like experience, but with a far more stable and detailed picture in the viewing area than is possible in any of today's cinemas. The industry will see such high-end consumers as a market segment too small to take seriously, little dreaming that by 2020, these high-end media-philes will have become the early Avatars of the home video wall(s) that will be a feature of virtually every middle-class home.

To close what is almost certain to prove an awkward mix of half-baked prophecy and wrong guesses, let me note that I have asked friends in the digital and TV industries to review these comments. The end result has been to conclude that while each step is technically possible, it is extremely unlikely that all the items prophesied will take place so quickly in so many areas. Thus, it could easily be 2015 or 2020 before the level of audio and video quality I predict is available in many individual areas.

Most importantly, the commercially-oriented commentators make two key points. One, no one can predict consumer behavior even one year in advance. Two, high-end audio is as likely to have to respond to advances driven by mass consumerism as to drive them, and the present direction of mass consumerism favors interaction with the computer and users outside the home over improving the more passive aspects listening and viewing experience. These commentators feel that crystal ball articles like this need to be written by men and women in their late teens and early twenties, and that even they may be "too old" to guess right. Care to try?

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# Dueling Haydns — Better than Beethoven?

Benjamin Ivry



**H**AYDN'S STRING QUARTETS are more than great music, they are great companions. Ideal friends who are witty, mentally brisk, emotionally tender, and who do not stay on too long, the quartets make nourishing listening. No one can feel alone when they are playing. Hence the new appearance of a 23-CD box set of the complete Haydns by the Kodaly Quartet from Naxos (8.5023021) can only be a matter of rejoicing. Recorded cleanly at Budapest's Unitarian Church and Hungaroton Studios by different teams of engineers, this set is budget priced, a further attraction. The Kodalys capture the brisk energy and blitheness of most of the pieces, with occasional lapses like a dreary set of opus 20 quartets, which seem to have been captured on an off

day. But at their usual best, they offer a real sense of social conversation, a give-and-take that puts the listener in the thick of things.

Franz Josef Haydn (1732 - 1809) composed bunches of quartets at different periods of his life, and stuffed them full of a delightfully sarcastic sense of humor. Musicologist W. Dean Sutcliffe even refers to the composer "poking out his tongue" with twanging plucked strings in quartet opus 33, no.5. The Kodalys pair an emotional density with straight-faced jokes of this kind, which makes their overall performance admirable, despite the inevitable highs and lows of any project of this size.

Haydn is correctly known in musical history books as the "father of the string quartet," in that he was

the first to really embrace the medium, and his works are still unsurpassed in many ways. His early efforts, such as his Opus 9 quartets, written in 1769-1770, are witty to a point which even offended some humorless listeners of his day, who complained about the "debasement of music to common fooling." Later, his opus 33 quartets (1781) reached new heights of speed and aphoristic energy. Critic Julian Rushton wrote that opus 33 reveals "an athletic coordination and economy unique until Beethoven." In later quartets, the composer's "withdrawal into irony or comedy," as one writer called it, makes for even more delightful listening. Charles Rosen has pointed out how Haydn imitated "speech rhythms" that "enhance the air of conversation." It



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is almost uncanny how four string instruments when assembled can convey the impression of four human voices chatting in unison. At their best, the Kodaly Quartet recordings do evoke this coffee-house ideal. Yet Haydn's wit can also have the aspect of a friendly saboteur, something a later generation of dadaists like Kurt Schwitters might have admired. The deceptively cozy nickname "Papa" Haydn does not deceive biographers to point to Haydn's cutthroat negotiations with music publishers, selling the same works — including some of these quartets — to several printers, claiming to offer them "exclusive rights." Other composers, from Beethoven to Wagner, were guilty of the same sort of business practices, but none managed to get away with it and still keep the reputation of a funny and sunny genius, as well as Haydn did.

For a composer with as many facets as Haydn, clearly different interpretations are needed to get the full picture of his genius. Anyone seeking a smaller-than-23 CD sampler need not look far among current issues. The Quatuor Mosaiques is made up of three Viennese musicians and the French virtuoso cellist Christophe Coin. Their recording of Haydn Quartets opus 20 and opus 33 have just been reissued (on Astree E 8802 and Astree E 8801, respectively, both distributed by Harmonia Mundi). The much-praised Mosaiques group aspires to original-instrument authenticity, but are particularly intriguing for the emotional makeup of their performances. Coin is a mighty virtuoso, full of deep emotions, but also dour and rather tragic as an artist. His Viennese partners have some of the surface brilliance and coolness of that city's most famous ensemble, the Alban Berg Quartet. Together, the Mosaiques creates a musical balance that is engaging, not just bowing hot and cold. They are well recorded in Austrian locations. Although the true choice for audiophile listening of Haydn quartets is another new item: The superb Budapest-based Festetics Quartet, has just released a magical 2-CD set of Haydn string quartets, opus 71 and 74 on Arcana (A 418, distributed by Harmonia Mundi). Recorded in the Budapest Technical Library, the transparent sound is exceptionally vivid and rewarding.

The Festetics play so well, they should be better known. For once, one wishes some hysteric might conceive a slogan like: "To add festivity to your esthetics, listen to the Festetics!" Actually, in Hungary, the name Festetics is quite well known, belonging to an ancient noble family who built many palaces with elaborate music rooms, many of which are still standing. So in 1982, when Budapest Conservatory virtuosos Istvan Kertesz and Erika Petofi (violins) began playing with Peter Ligeti (viola) and Rezso Pertorini (cello), it was natural enough to choose the Festetics moniker.

After a series of recordings for Hungaroton, they have most recently produced some profoundly emotional recordings of Mozart, Schubert, and especially Haydn for Arcana, a label created by veteran producer Michel Bernstein, once the presiding genius over the French label Harmonia Mundi. Arcana recordings (distributed by Harmonia Mundi in the USA) are of extraordinary quality, both in terms of recorded sound and the performance as they preserve.

The Festetics began in the early 1980s by attacking baroque music, and Hungarian 18th century dance tunes. To this day, they retain a lilting sense of enjoyment in move-



**The Kodaly Quartet**  
 "...four human voices in unison."

ment and velocity that pays off particularly in Haydn's works, so deeply based in the civilized, tender dance figures of the Enlightenment. The Quartet, which made their professional debut in Budapest in 1985, made a habit of consulting scholars like the eminent Haydn expert Laszlo Somfai on questions of dynamics and tempos.

Yet despite this academic authoritativeness, the group plays with delightful freshness, perhaps because of their refusal to cloister

**The Festetics**  
 "...movement and velocity."



themselves among early music "specialists." Kertesz was active for 10 years as a soloist in the Hungarian Chamber Orchestra, conducted by the famed Vilmos Tatrai, and would often sit in with Tatrai's string quartet when they played works requiring another fiddle. All of the Festetics have performed works by Bartok and Kodaly, and admire the contemporary Hungarian composer Gyorgy Kurtag, having coached with him at the conservatory.

A website for the Austro-Hungarian orchestra includes pen portraits of two of the Festetics, authored by the conductor Adam Fischer. We are told of the Festetics cellist, Rezso Pertorini, who is also leader of the cello section of the Austro-Hungarian orchestra: "He is a very big person and with his cello, he looks larger still. When he visited Japan with the Haydn orchestra, he enjoyed sushi and Japanese rice wine, and was very happy." Sounds like a great guy to spend some time with, let alone play a Haydn quartet with! And imagine how beneficial it must be to play Haydn's symphonies as well as his quartets.

The Festetics' viola player, Peter Ligeti, is described this way on the Haydn orchestra website: "Although

he is a quiet person, he is a very important leader of the viola section and shows a strong leadership." We begin to sense a reticence and inner strength that must compliment the cellist's extrovert nature and sake guzzling, especially on prolonged tours...

The listener to the Arcana recordings will immediately note how the players strongly differentiate Haydn from Mozart and Schubert. Kertesz states, "In Haydn's music we find many folk motifs and the impression of a Hungarian taste and lots of breathing and artfulness. To us, Mozart is sonorous and rich in character, never pausing for an instant. Although Schubert was a mighty follower of Haydn and Mozart, his music has its own uniquely rich colors and folk motifs that differ from Haydn's."

While dreaming of future projects, the Festetics are great fans of listening to CDs by other performers. Among their hit parade are "Simon Standage, the Salomon Quartet, the Kuijken brothers, and the Vegh, Cherubini, and Hagen quartets." This great variety of taste once again stands out, in their listening as in their performances. If

ever an ensemble was equipped to tackle an encyclopedic project like the complete Haydn quartets, without the least fear of repetition or ennui, it would have to be the Festetics — long may their esthetics be festive!

But for now, we must be grateful for the Kodaly Quartet project from Naxos. Since masterpieces abound among these quartets, it is of great value to be able to hear them all together.

Musicologists inform us that Haydn's string quartets made possible the chamber works of Mozart, Beethoven, and even Arnold Schoenberg. But hearing Haydn's entire achievement in the quartet field only reestablishes what a uniquely delightful musician he was, and how his specific qualities were never achieved again in precisely this way. There is an old joke from elementary school, "Why couldn't Beethoven find his teacher? Because he was Haydn (hidin')."

But after hearing the Naxos 23-CD box set, the question and answer might be reformulated: "Why couldn't Beethoven find his teacher? Because his teacher's talent and accomplishments were beyond his reach."

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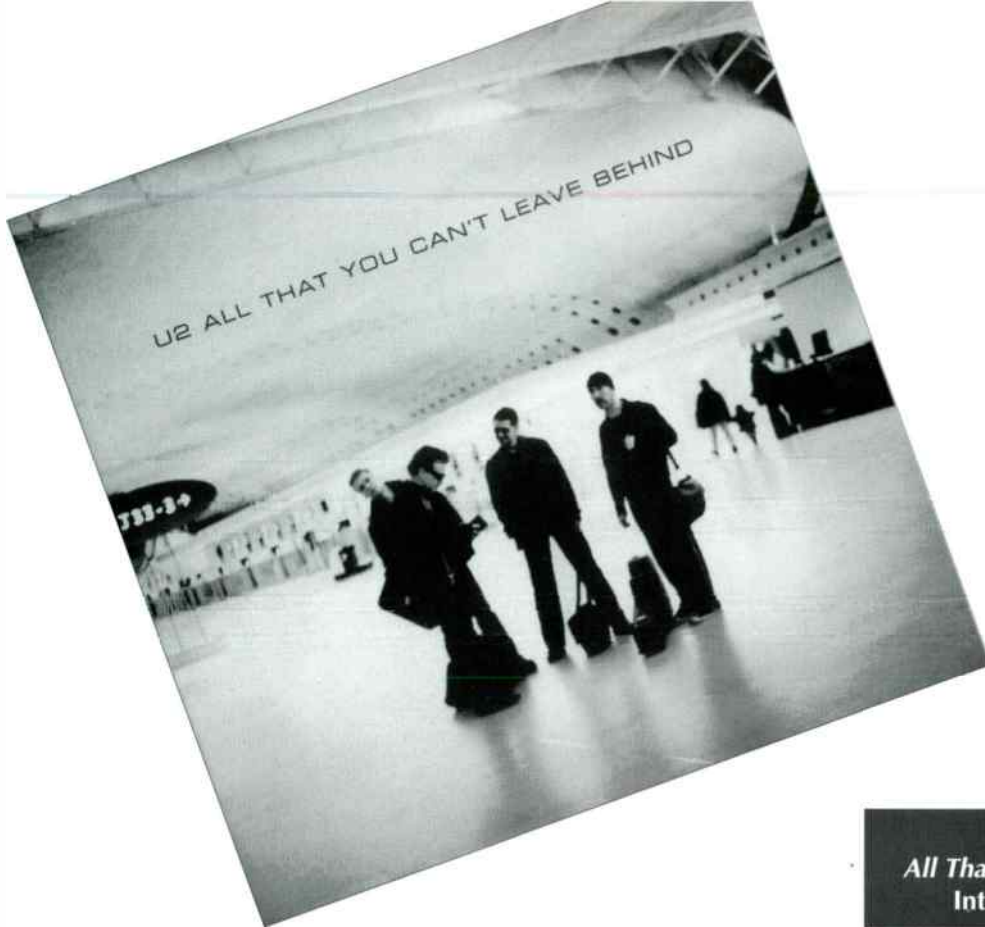
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## Rock

U2  
*All That You Can't Leave Behind*  
Interscope 3145246532

**W**ELCOME BACK, U2. All That You Can't Leave Behind, U2's first album of new material since 1997's Pop, is a full-fledged return to the sound, feel and even the look of the Irish band's best work. From the opener, the smash hit "Beautiful Day," to the closer, the gentle "Grace," the album is a crisply focused and brightly melodic gathering of 11 songs.

U2 is a self-contained unit again here. Outside of the band itself (Bono, guitar and voice; The Edge, guitar, piano and voice; Larry Mullen, drums, and Adam Clayton, bass) and co-producers Brian Eno and Daniel Lanois, the only other player is brass man Paul Barrett. The Lanois / Eno team has been part of how U2 records for so long now that it is not really inaccurate to count them as "almost official" auxiliary band members. Eno has always driven the band on a quest for fresh sounds, while Lanois' knack for imbuing his record productions with an atmospheric aura of mystery and wonder has been a key ingredient in the sound of U2's records.

The songs are a buoyant, surprisingly optimistic lot. "Beautiful Day" opens with an Eno synth wash over

a chugging, insistent drum machine loop. It blossoms into a gloriously catchy melody that mirrors the song's subject, that glorious feeling of having just met someone who could become special to you. It could be read either in terms of human relationship or spiritual seeking.

"Stuck in the Moment You Can't Get Out Of" feels like an anthem; the song is an attempt to reach a troubled friend. In the thumping "Elevation" the title is a synonym for enlightenment. "Walk On" is a moody meditation about the palliative effect of letting go what doesn't really matter.

"In a Little While" is a soul song Otis Redding would have loved trying out. Its soaring melody has a Steve Cropper-esque guitar figure as underpinning. "Peace on Earth" is a Christmas carol that can play well all year long. The closer "Grace," a closing benediction, is both about a woman named for a prayer and the prayer itself.

"New York," a paean to the diversity within the City That Never Sleeps, is equally a tribute to that quintessential New Yorker Lou Reed and his classic band the Velvet Underground. For the first verse,

Bono intones in his best Lou Reed impression complete with New York accent. Then when the band opens up to full throttle, the track sounds like a sleek "Waiting for my Man."

After U2's mixed results attempt at techno music in Pop and the costuming and staging of that album's tour, it is quite satisfying to hear U2 strip back down to its strengths: sleek, uncluttered yet ear-tweaking sound and production that still includes smart yet subtle detailing plus songs that aim directly at both head and heart. All That You Can't Leave Behind feels a lot like Joshua Tree, arguably is U2's best album. The new one immediately assumes a spot as one of the group's best works.

The return to a vintage U2 sound is reflected in the packaging with its stylish layout of b&w photography by Anton Corbijn.

One last possibly apocryphal note: At the session when U2 (as a group) first listened to the completed and sequenced album, it is reported that The Edge grumpily remarked that the album sounded too much like U2. I respond, and you should too, "Hey, if U2 can't sound like U2, who can?"



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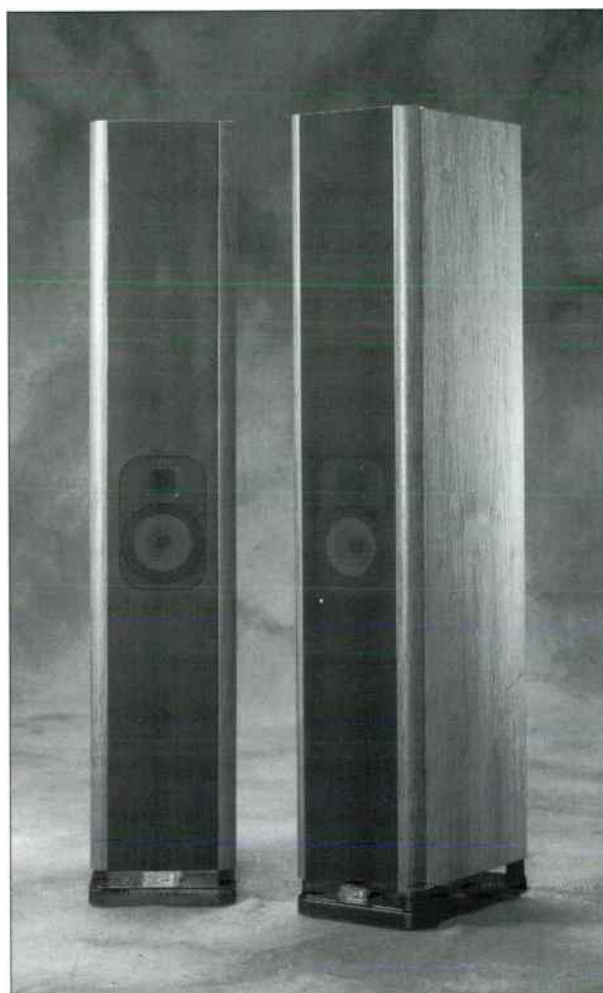
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THEY SAY that "The Blues had a baby, and they named it Rock and Roll." Anyone with more than a passing interest in the "child," should, it seems to me, also want to check out the parents.

If these three volumes are any indication, there would be no better place to start than this 12 volume set of blues recordings culled from the Bluesville Records archives. The roster of blues artists represented here read like a "who's who" of the genre, including such names as Roosevelt Sykes, Sunnyland Slim, Jimmy Witherspoon, Lightnin' Hopkins, Sonny Terry, Willie Dixon, Memphis Slim, James Cotton, Big Joe Williams, Scrapper Blackwell, Blind Willie McTell, and

Tampa Red, to skim the cream. If you are already a fan of the blues, you may well already have much of this material. However, being as much of a vinyl-oriented blues fan as I've been, it's nice to have this material on tick- and pop-free CDs. These transfers sound extremely good, given their recording dates and, for the uninitiated, represent a great cross section of blues.

Those people whose impression of the blues has been shaped by the great Chicago bluesmen such as Muddy Waters or Southern blues-slinger like B.B. King, may be a bit perplexed by the dearth of electric guitars on these CDs. Most of this music is played on acoustic instruments, and where electric instru-

ments are included, they're used sparingly. The majority of the artists represented began their careers before Muddy, as they say, "invented electricity," and they stuck by their acoustic format. Of particular interest are some of the lesser known (at least to me) artists such as Mildred Anderson and Shakey Jake.

The liner notes are also excellent, going into great detail about the musicians and the recordings themselves. Wade Walton, for example, was a barber in Clarksdale, Mississippi, who kept his guitar in the shop to entertain the customers (and himself) during slow periods. The two cuts by Scrapper Blackwell were recorded in 1961, a year before his death. He

had been a well-known and influential blues musician in the 1930s, but was found living in obscurity in Indianapolis when he was "rediscovered." He had teamed up with Leroy Carr in the '30s, and they recorded many songs together, including "How Long, How Long Blues," one of the most successful of all blues singles. However, after Carr's death, Blackwell retired and faded into obscurity until being "found" by Bluesville.

The three discs here showcase different aspects of the blues. Volume 9, *Down The Country Way*, reflects the acoustic country blues that was descended directly from the "field hollers" of the African slaves working in the cotton fields of the old South. This disc also displays the regional differences that made blues from Mississippi stand apart from those from Texas, for example. There were even subtle differences between areas within the same state, Mississippi being a prime example. On Volume 12, *Jump Jumpin' the Blues*, the music is livelier, showcasing the up-tempo music folks wanted to dance to in the blues clubs. Volume 11, which is my favorite, *The Blues is a Heart's Sorrow*, shows how the blues came

to be called that, by telling stories of heartache and heartbreak.

The recordings featured here were all recorded at different times, using less than what we would call "state of the art" equipment even for that time, so some of it is pretty rough sounding by today's cutting-edge standards.

A lot, however, is not, but one way or the other, so what? The music is great, isn't that what counts? My favorite cuts, Jimmy Witherspoon's "I'll Go on Living" and Lonnie Johnson's "Evil Woman", along with much of Volume 11, combine a great sense of the studio's acoustics with very good recorded quality. And it's absolutely great music besides! Other great cuts include "Some Sweet Day" by St. Louis Jimmy, Billy Boy Arnold's "You Better Cut That Out," and a classic

railroad blues called "Locomotive Blues," by Smoky Babe. The music represented here has become, in the intervening years, much more important than its original practitioners could have ever imagined. It has become an essential part of the musical heritage of America, and is treasured throughout the world. Highly recommended to both those who are already fans, and those who would be fans, of the blues. I can't wait to hear the other nine volumes!



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## Rock

Steve Earle *Transcendental Blues*  
E-Squared / Artemis 751033-2  
Neil Young *Silver & Gold*  
Reprise 47305-2

**T**HE LONGER THESE EARS and brain review music, the more I come to cherish and depend on a very short list of artists. These few who all march to their own vision regularly deliver records that challenge me and redefine the artists' parameters.

Two on that list are Neil Young and Steve Earle. Each has recently issued an album, and each album is quite a turn from the one which preceded it.

Neil Young's *Silver & Gold* has been hailed as a return to the feel of *Harvest*, his biggest album. While the new one is an acoustic-based album with some country elements, to call it a "new" *Harvest* or even a new *Harvest Moon* (the successful 1992 album that really is the closest thing to *Harvest's* successor) is to miss the point of the new album.

*Silver & Gold* is a song cycle about trying to hold onto the things that give a life meaning, things more precious than those valued metals. Things like family life and love.

The album opens with its brightest and happiest song "Good to See You." It is a song about coming home from a long road swing and seeing your wife after too long apart. Its joy is infectious. Next the title track (written back in '82) reflects on how dearly valuable that love is. "Daddy Went Walkin'" is a memory of a great day of hiking through woods with his father. Or just as easily a song from his child's point of view about a similar day with him.

"Buffalo Springfield Again" grew out of the work Neil and Stephan Stills did in preparing the recent Buffalo Springfield box. That time together with his mate from that great band rekindled Young's fondness for the long-gone band which he'd like to reconvene — less for the money to be made than for "the fun we had."

"The Great Divide" is the album's linchpin. After four songs that are happy, reflective and wist-

ful, the tone darkens here in a song about a marriage grown stale and uncomfortable. The morose "Horseshoe Man" ruminates about how little the young truly know about love. "Red Sun" takes place in a working-class "railroad town," where the protagonist just can't be part of the brightly lit night life due to his own lonely sorrow. "Distant Camera" is a desolate aftermath song, and the 1987 vintage "Razor Love" comforts a lover distraught over the broken marriage of her parents. Here he offers the notion of the curative powers of his own love for her. The closing "Without Rings" is a song of separation, of love reaching through the miles between. For the record, Young's own marriage is quite secure.

This is a gentle set, softly played with no sign of fury from Neil's electric guitar. Suitably, he performs the album with old friends: Duck Dun on bass, Keyboard man Spencer Oldham, steel guitarist Ben

Keith, and drummers Jim Keltner and Oscar Butterworth. Emmylou Harris adds a delicious duet vocal to "Red Sun."

The album is so very mellow that its darkening subject matter might easily be missed. The songs often feel fragile or slight. However, one facet of Young's art has always been disguising the substantial with a smooth facade. I first dismissed the album, but time and a little more attention has made it ever more valuable. As a side note, the digitized cover photo is more than a little reminiscent of the pebbled cover shot of *Everybody Knows This Is Nowhere*, the very first Crazy Horse album over 30 years ago.

Steve Earle's *Transcendental Blues* is characteristically thorny. Following *The Mountain*, his brilliant bluegrass collaboration with the Del McCoury Band, word was that he'd follow with his hardest rocking album ever. In part he has. But there is a new bluegrass song, too, and a pair of Celtic-flavored songs recorded in Dublin plus a couple of soft, sad songs, too. The cover art is a clue: an elaborate psychedelic piece of art that sets the table for the very '60s-scented songs inside.

The first two are very Beatlesque. The title song was recorded in the garage studio of the Philadelphia band Marah that Earle signed to his E-Squared label. After a harmonium and tablas intro, the song reveals itself as a deceptive song about how things in life are most often not what they seem. With its goofy mini-Moog effects, it has a dreamy, hallucinatory sound that still rocks convincingly. Continuing the same theme, "Everyone's In Love With You" sounds like a song Steve built over the guitar riff that opens the Beatle classic "Rain." It even has *Revolver* era backwards guitar and drum effects. The two songs have melo-



dies that are almost too similar, but they add up to a bracing opening.

"Another Town" rocks on about Steve's restless wanderlust as a traveling musician, while "I Can Wait" is a more reflective song about time

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and miles separating lovers. "The Boy Who Never Cried" with its Middle Eastern-styled string-quartet chart and moody harmonium and bouzouki is a distinctively '60-ish take of a solitary, tearless man.

Then come the Dublin songs. "Steve's Last Ramble" could have been another bluegrass song, but here, with accordions and fiddles and strummed banjo, it is Celtic, another rousing traveling-man's song that is blessed with one of the happiest melodies ever concocted. "The Gal-way Girl" is a raucous gem about a poor sap who falls hard for a mysterious raven-tressed, blue eyed lass, and then wakes up alone — just as in "Norwegian Wood."

The very soft "Lonelier Than This" is just one of the saddest songs I've ever heard. It is at least as bleak as anything Steve's dearly missed friend Townes Van Zandt ever wrote. "Wherever I Go" picks up the tempo again, further exploring that "on the move" theme.

"When I Fall" is a duet with Steve's little sister Stacey Earle, herself an impressive songwriter and singer. It is a charming song of true sibling devotion. "I Don't Wanna Lose You Yet" is a song about seiz-

ing the moment to salvage good from a tough spot, and the acoustic "Halo Round the Moon" tells of the aftermath of "Lose You Yet" when despite good intentions he's lost the girl again.

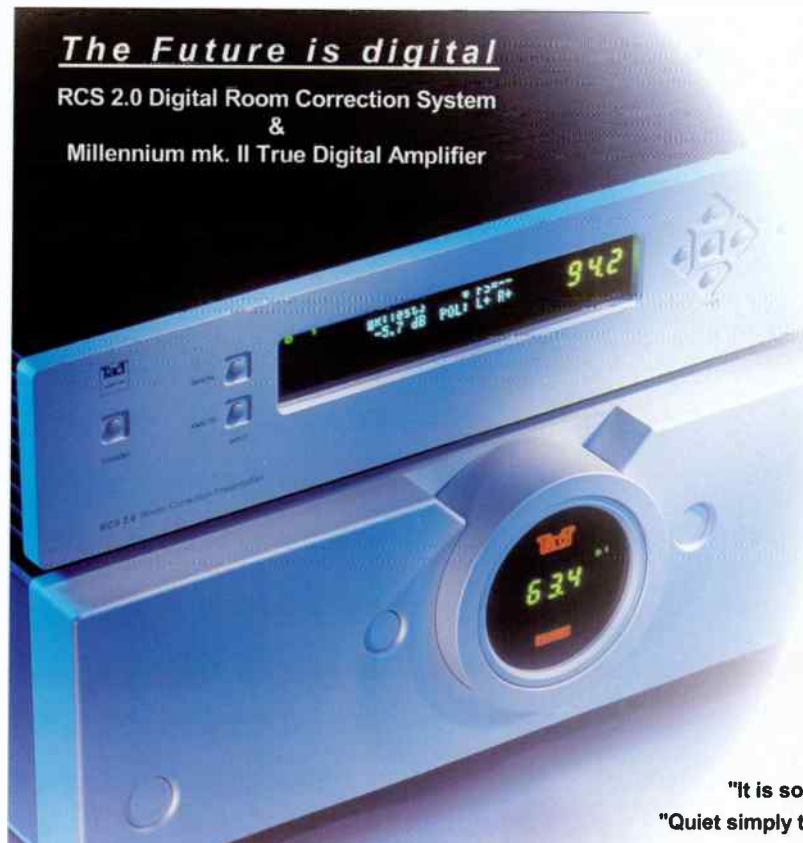
"Until the Day I Die" is the album's bluegrass sizzler. It is about a prison lifer, and it sounds like a traditional song with its timelessness. The *Exile on Main Street*-styled thumping "All of My Life" first appeared in the soundtrack of the remake of *Psycho*. The dense-sounding rocker grabs you by the throat and throttles you.

The closer "Over Yonder (Jonathan's Song)" Steve wrote just after attending a Texas execution at the doomed man's request. The song is a virtual last will and testament of the condemned, a companion to "Ellis Unit One," the chiller Steve wrote for *Dead Man Walking*. "Yonder" is a perfect closer for this cycle of wanderlust and passion, a sobering and sharply focused parting shot.

All through the album Steve is both at his most intense and playful, and the songs are terrific. The production is as nervy as it is eclectic. But despite the variety of sounds used, it still has a nice wholeness.

Like Young's *Silver & Gold*, Earle's *Transcendental Blues* is an album that reveals more each time you listen to it. Like Young, Earle is a poet whose best work cuts to the heart of the human condition. *Transcendental Blues* is don't you dare miss it material.

Earle has also been involved with other E-Squared projects that you are quite likely to enjoy if you like his own work. Marah's E-Squared album *Kids in Philly* (E-Squared / Artemis 751024-2) is the best pure rock-and-roll album I have heard in ages. The songs have depth and real meat to them. The other is the soundtrack to the Abbie Hoffman bio-pic *Steal This Movie* (E-Squared/Artemis 751038-2). Steve's contribution is a torrid duet with Sheryl Crow on "Time Has Come Today." A couple other key tracks are Bonnie Raitt's "It's All Over Now, Baby Blue" and the Joan Osborne/Jackson Browne duet on "My Back Pages," Timothy B. Schmit's "Carry On" and Ani DiFranco's very personal takes of the Woody Guthrie anthem "This Land is Your Land" and Phil Ochs' "When I'm Gone." The flick may well prove to be a stinker, but the soundtrack album is super.



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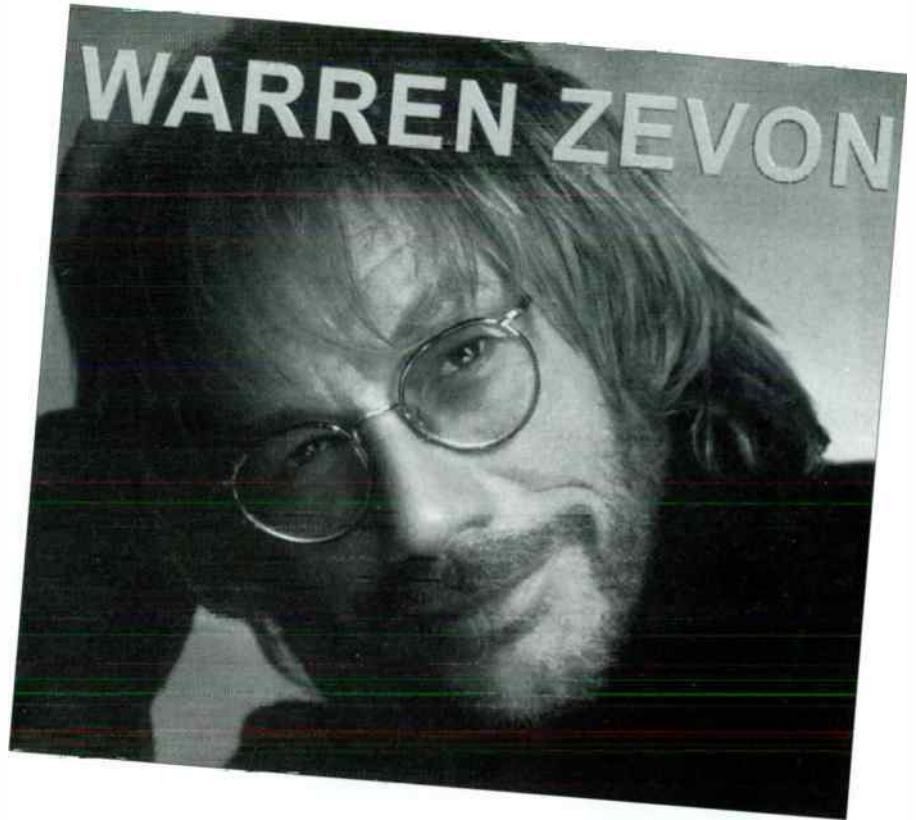
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## Rock

Warren Zevon *Life'll Kill Ya*  
Artemis 751003-2

**L**IFE'LL KILL YA, Warren Zevon's first album in nearly five years, is lean and hungry. Its songs are pure Zevon: Dark songs, some of them tender, some bizarre and disturbing and twisted. The sparse support includes old friend and occasional collaborator Jorge Calderon on bass and harmony vocals and Winston Watson on percussion. For his part, Zevon, along with his usual guitar and piano, plays piccolo, penny-whistle and Theramin. Chuck Prophet adds electric guitar to one song, Jimmy Ryan mandolin to another.

All through the album Zevon's songs are sturdy vehicles. He opens with "I Was in the House When the House Burned Down" which serves to reintroduce the artist as a man never too far from trouble, a vortex of bad luck. His sardonic humor drives the title track, a meditation on mortality, the one and only thing we all share. "Porcelain Monkey" is an Elvis Presley parable about an entertainer who hits it huge but tosses everything away for the comfort of a religious fixation on the title icon.

"For My Next Trick I'll Need a Volunteer" is a portrait of an inept magician: "I can saw a woman in two/ But you won't want to look in the box when I'm through." "I'll Slow You Down" is a sad song about having to let go when one has become a burden. "Hostage-O" is a pretty little thing about a sick pup who loves being abused, while its flip side "Dirty Little Religion" is about another sicko who loves the abusing.

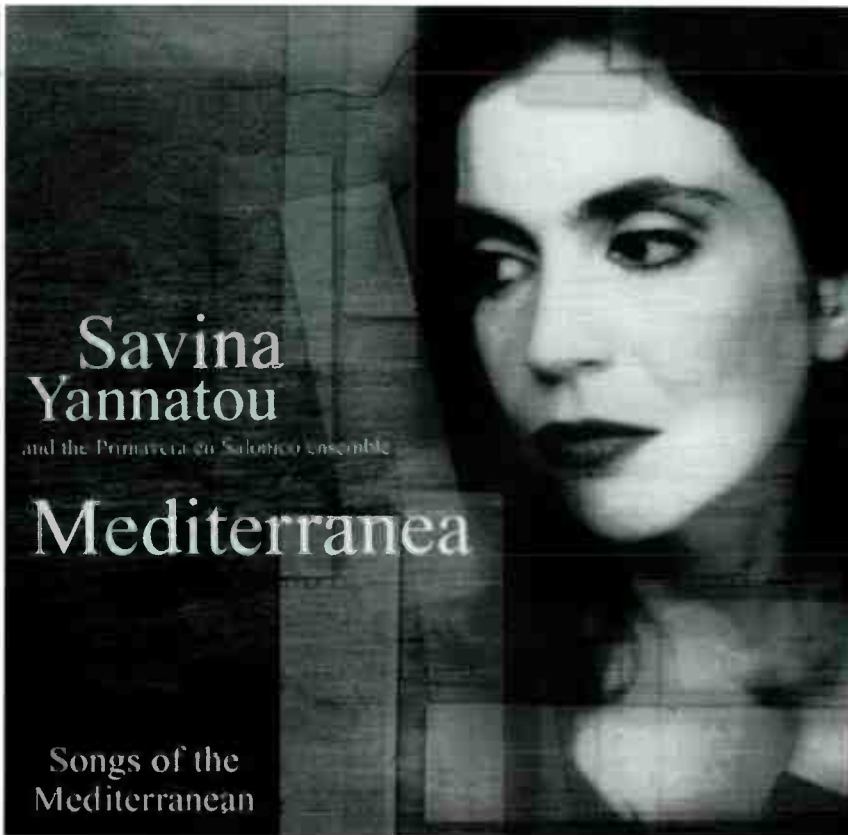
Yet another sick one is at the core of "My Shit's Fucked Up," a meditation about a life breaking down. By the way, this song is not listed with the rest on the back of the CD's jewel box so as to avoid problems with the likes of Wal-Mart, though the list on the back of the insert includes it. (Why, Michael, is this a challenge to your First Amendment-oriented editor? — Gene.)

The Gospel-esque "Fistful of Rain" is a cheery song about false hope. It features the Fairfield Four-styled vocals of Babi Floyd, Dennis Collins and Curtis King. "Ourselves

to Know" relates a brief story of the Crusaders who, 900 years ago, looted all the way from their home in Rhodes to Jerusalem and back, seeking the elusive Holy Grail. The finale "Don't Let Us Be Sick" is a quiet little benediction that sends the listener back into the world on a message of gentility and kindness.

Nestled in the midst of the album is a most unlikely cover, Steve Winwood's "Back in the High Life." Warren gives the song a softer, more melancholy tone than the original had. Zevon's version also has a slightly slower tempo and a gentler, less-driven sound. He really nails the yearning in the song's fiercely hopeful lyrics. There's a note of self-doubt in his read, too.

*Life'll Kill Ya* may not be a blow-away masterwork, but it is a very satisfying album. I have to put it among Zevon's best work. The sound is crisp and bracing, the execution sure and pointed. It is the welcome return of a friend who has not been heard from in far too long. I'll be glad to have this one around while I wait for his next CD.



## World

Savina Yannatou and the Primavera en Salonico Ensemble:  
*Mediterranea*  
Sounds True STA MM00118D

AS THE SUN RISES over Athens, the warm breezes from throughout the Mediterranean converge over this ancient city. One can almost hear the music that is carried on the wind from as far away as the Nile delta and Andalusia to neighboring Cypress and Kalymnos. These rich sounds have made their way to the ears of Savina Yannatou. Her current recording *Mediterranea* spans the music of 14 countries including the rich traditions of Spain, Israel, Turkey and Lebanon and features her skillful approach to language, music and dialects.

Nestled in the heart of the Mediterranean, the Greek Islands have been influenced by the cultures that surround them. They have served as a center of commerce, a focal point of intellectual thought

and as an area to be conquered by several invaders. This has created an interwoven tapestry formed by the powerful effect of great civilizations and cultures that have come in contact with the island nation. From this central location, one can also look outward at the whole Mediterranean as an interwoven tapestry with examples that include the Greek influence in Northern Africa (Alexandria) and Sicily, the Moorish and Jewish influence in Southern Spain, and Roman influence in Lebanon. Savina has embraced this connection and in *Mediterranea* offers a compilation of songs that strives for authenticity both from her native Greece as well as from many of the other nearby countries that are part of the Mediterranean miscellany.



It is obvious that Yannatou has taken great pains to bring the listener true artistic expression as well as an authentic representation of the music. She acquired instruction for each of the languages and dialects that are represented on the album from the diverse immigrant musician population in Athens. Noting that each language has its own musical character, Yannatou has made a sincere effort to capture the unique qualities of these languages in this recording. Her ensemble, Primavera en Salonico, lends authenticity to this project with the intelligent use of traditional instruments including percussion (bedir, darabuka), woodwinds (nay, zourna) and stringed instruments (qanoun, oud and tamboura) that are standard throughout the Mediterranean. All of these factors bring a synergy that makes *Mediterraneo* enjoyable as well as an enriching opportunity for the listener to understand the character and the many similarities in music from the Mediterranean.

In *Mediterraneo*, Yannatou offers a diverse listening experience ranging from the folk influenced

melodies of Italy (*Lu Purtuni*) to the moving a cappella lament in *Yad Anuga* from Israel. Throughout the region, melisma (a group of more than a few notes sung on a single syllable) is a vocal technique that is used in many songs including *Lama Bada Yatathana*. In this song, the ensemble produces an excellent

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**It is obvious that  
Savina Yannatou takes  
great pains on authentic  
musical expression.**

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representation of a *mouachchah*, a song form that is rooted in the Arab-Andalusian tradition and typically speaks of the issues of love. This song form requires skillful improvisation for the introduction of the piece. The Primavera en Salonico ensemble executes this introduction with great skill and gently caresses and carries Yannatou's melismatic melody of lament to create a powerful performance. Of special note is the last composition on the album that mixes two traditional songs, of

which one is from Greece (*Yati Pouli Dhen Kelaidhis*) and the other from Tunisia (*Rabbi Blonni Bemlayan*). This combination highlights the similarities that are prevalent in Mediterranean styles of music.

This recording can be very intimate and includes many impressive musical interpretations that are both penetrating and beautiful. The recording quality for this album is first-rate and this compilation establishes a pleasant representation of the music from the Mediterranean. It is a pity that this recording is limited to only 18 songs, for there is so much more music to

explore in the region. General Publishing Company (Greece) and Tami Simon (listed as Executive Producer) have produced an enjoyable album that has allowed a capable artist to show the world some of the region's musical wealth. The winds of the Mediterranean will continue to blow over Athens. Hopefully Savina Yannatou and the Primavera en Salonico Ensemble will continue to hear the echoes and sounds of music that ride those winds.

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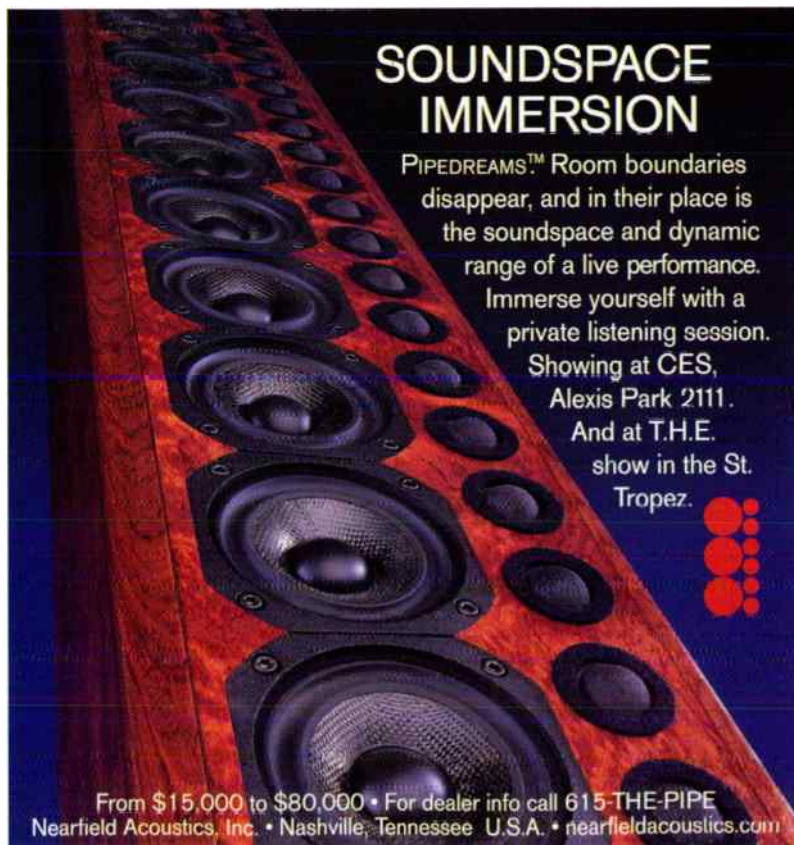
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*Classical*

Murray Perahia  
*Bach's Goldberg Variations*  
Sony SK 89243

**B**RONX-BORN MURRAY PERAHIA is, at 53, one of the world's few pre-eminent pianists, on the artistic level of such keyboard paragons as Richard Goode, Andras Schiff, and Maurizio Pollini, who are so majestically accomplished that each can give the impression on a specific evening of playing a given work better than any other mortal can. Like Goode, Schiff, and Pollini, Perahia's excellences are difficult to describe in full, even though they are apparently communicated to even the most tone-deaf daily newspaper critic. All of these performers have deepened their artistry over decades of study, like the layers of paint Leonardo da Vinci applied to a canvas, and to fully investigate what they achieve would take an exceedingly lengthy and probably tedious study. Instead, let's take a relatively brief look at Perahia's progress, on the occasion of a superb new recording of Bach's ever-popular keyboard masterpiece, the "Goldberg Variations."

This piece has far exceeded the fame of the composer's other keyboard works, and this noteworthiness actually preceded Glenn

Gould's two justly celebrated recordings for Sony. The work was revived in the 1930s by the Polish harpsichordist Wanda Landowska, who played it in public for the first time since Bach's day; Landowska's recording on EMI Classics is still worth hearing, even if her rather acerbic way with Bach can seem excessive. Modern-day harpsichordists, led by the mightily gifted virtuoso Pierre Hantai, take the Goldbergs as brilliant fodder for their instrument, but this does not keep fine pianists, among them Schiff and Charles Rosen, from tackling them. Indeed, the range of performances is so great on keyboard instruments that one feels doubly justified in rejecting all the extant kitschy variant recordings of the work as arranged for brass ensemble, jazz trio, etc.

In recent years Murray Perahia went through a much-publicized health episode in which an infected thumb led to a forced repose for four years, during which he studied scores and worried about his performing future. The resulting "suffering," as he aptly terms it, has contributed to add an emotional edge

to his sound, which could previously appear almost ladylike in its delicacy. It is a maturer Perahia we hear on this disc, with some of the relaxed tempos of one of his teachers, Mieczylaw Horszowski, who continued concertizing until he was 101 years old (another student, Goode, claimed that Horszowski was really 106 when he finally retired). Perahia's Goldberg Variations sound most like Horszowski playing when they have a certain domesticated feel, almost a Biedemeyer quality, of being performed in a salon for an intimate audience. Playing for oneself over an extended period of time, as Perahia undoubtedly did while recovering the use of his thumb, no doubt helped develop this aspect of his playing.

Another important development is Perahia's appearing to be fully his own man. Modest to a fault, he was always eager to submit to higher authorities, older and wiser musicians who offered advice and opinions about his playing. Thus Perahia would play for and with such greats as Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears, Solomon, Clifford Curzon, Pablo



Casals, Rudolf Serkin, and many others, not to mention fierce conductors like Georg Solti and Leonard Bernstein. Only a strong-willed individualist could have survived all these contrasting personalities, but Perahia seemed at times to go astray, such as when he became chummy with the glitzy and superficial Vladimir Horowitz. Happily, there is nothing of Horowitz in these Goldberg Variations. Whatever advice he may have listened to, Perahia emerged a unique artist.

The interplay of voices in the present disc is something that only a very great master could balance, perhaps Pollini on one of his best days. There is poise and aplomb here, and an admirable directness and simplicity. Indeed, not since the great (and sadly forgotten) recordings of the mighty virtuoso Arthur Loesser, have Bach's passages of death-defying difficulty been played with such apparent ease and inner calm. One need only compare such heaving and all-too-muscular efforts of pianists from Daniel Barenboim to Vladimir Feltsman in this work, to realize the state of grace Perahia is in. By contrast, other pianists in this work can seem more like piano movers than piano players. Producer Andreas Neubronner and recording engineer Markus Heiland have managed to achieve an uncannily pellucid sound quality, adding

to the overall serenity of the work. The soothing acoustic of the recording site, the *salle de musique* at a pastoral Swiss town, La Chaux-de-Fonds, no doubt also helped. The 24-bit technology used for this recording seems to have removed any possible obstacle between pianist and listener. Instead of drawing the slightest attention to itself, the disc's sound quality appears as effortlessly superior as Perahia's superb performance.

Having Perahia back at his Astaire-like peak as a pianist is an overwhelming relief and lasting pleasure. Although he spoke of possibly going into conducting if his hands failed him, it is unlikely that Perahia would have imitated the success of violinist Peter Oundjian, longtime mainstay of the Tokyo Quartet whose fiddling days were ended by a nerve ailment. Oundjian has managed to recreate himself brilliantly as a conductor, in good part due to musical genius but also to an extrovert, charmingly communicative personality. Perahia, by contrast, is a quiet and self-contained man, whose early efforts at conducting, as preserved on his complete cycle of Mozart Concertos, seem all too reticent. We are glad to have him as master of the keyboard, and may he remain so for as long as his master Horowitz, the Nicodemus of the ivories.

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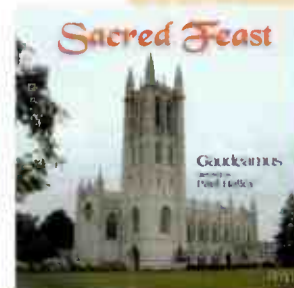


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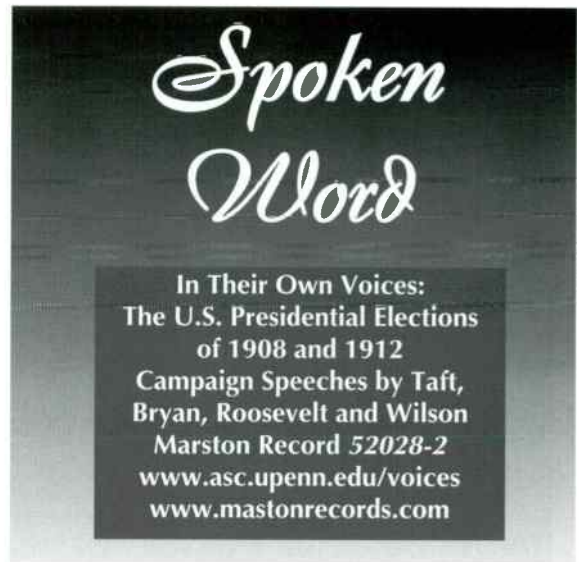
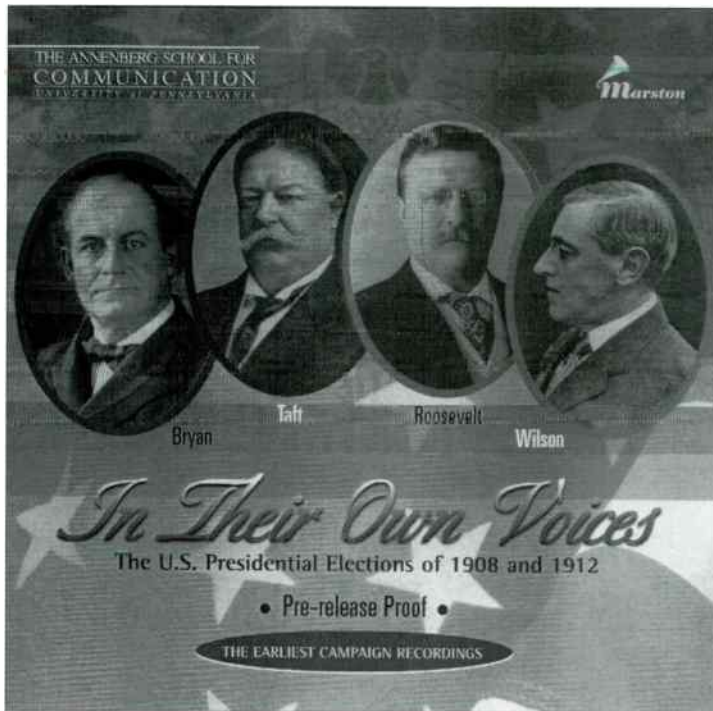
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In those days, it was really the written word, as printed in newspapers, that got you elected. There was the whistle-stop talk from the back of a train, but a candidate could only reach a few thousand people this way. In 1908, somebody got the idea to make single-sided, four-minute records since there were millions of acoustic horns out there and no competition from movies, radio or television. In any case, William Howard Taft and Williams Jennings Bryan both made extensive acoustic recordings for the Victor Talking Machine Co., and one or two for Columbia. Wilson and Roosevelt did likewise but four of the Roosevelt recordings made by Edison on cylinders are decidedly inferior in quality to those made for him by Victor.

For those whose memories are short, Taft was Theodore Roo-

sevelt's Vice-President and Bryan was the perennial left-wing Democratic Party Candidate, who became Secretary of State under Wilson, and later was the fundamentalist Prosecuting Attorney in the anti-evolution Scopes Trial in Dayton, Tennessee in the mid '20s. He won the trial but lost the battle to Clarence Darrow, the great defense attorney, and died in disgrace among liberals one month after the trial's end. Bryan was famous as the greatest orator of the era and his convention cry "Thou Shalt Not Crucify Mankind On A Cross of Gold" still resonates in grade schools throughout America.

I wish I could say that hearing Bryan in the flesh, so to speak, was one of the great moments in my life. But alas, although he speaks quite well and clearly, and these restorations are a marvel of high fidelity, he, Taft, Wilson and Roosevelt are stultifyingly dull. After listening to 156 minutes and 15 seconds of these campaign speeches, one can appreciate the 10-second sound bite. The problem is that they are simply reading speeches already prepared on various topics for newspapers and magazines to publish. A minor point is that none of these men made these recordings

when they were actually in office—except for the Taft speeches of 1912.

Since the written word was so important in those days, all these guys come across as pedantic professors or like college presidents which is what Wilson actually was. They discuss the burning issues of the day — tariffs on imported goods, trust busting, and labor unions — which are significant items still discussed today, though with Microsoft instead of Standard Oil and the WTO instead of Smoot Hawley. But they do drone on and on.

I was also surprised at how mundane their accents and voices were. Roosevelt had an inexpressive Bostonian or New York City accent. The other three sound dry all-American. They never tell a joke, raise their voices, show passion or emotion, or do any negative campaigning. The 1912 campaign pitted Wilson against the incumbent Taft and the upstart Bull-Moose party of Roosevelt. Wilson does make some remarks about third parties so Ralph Nader and the Green party is an old story.

Almost as dull as Gore / Bush, but an impressive sound document nonetheless.

## Jack Skowron



# Jazz

The Bill Evans Trio *The Last Waltz*  
Milestone 8MCD-4430-2

**T**HIS NEWLY ISSUED eight CD set documents Evans' last club engagement at San Francisco's Keystone Corner, August 31 to Sept 8, 1980, one week before the tragic death of this 51-year-old master due to complications of "the jazz life" (that is, chronic drug abuse). Each disc contains a single set at the club, and so can be listened to vertically (each disc as if one attended the set) or horizontally, across the sets, comparing sets or specific tunes on successive nights.

His preferred vehicle for improvisation was the trio, and this version consisted of Marc Johnson, bass, and Joe LaBarbera, drums. It begs comparison with his finest group, his early '60s trio that stretched the boundaries of trio improv while maintaining a lyrical bent. With Scott LaFaro, bass, and Paul Motian, drums, he explored chord voicing, harmony, and rhythmic displacements. All three were being equal partners, any of whom could be in fore- or background at any moment.

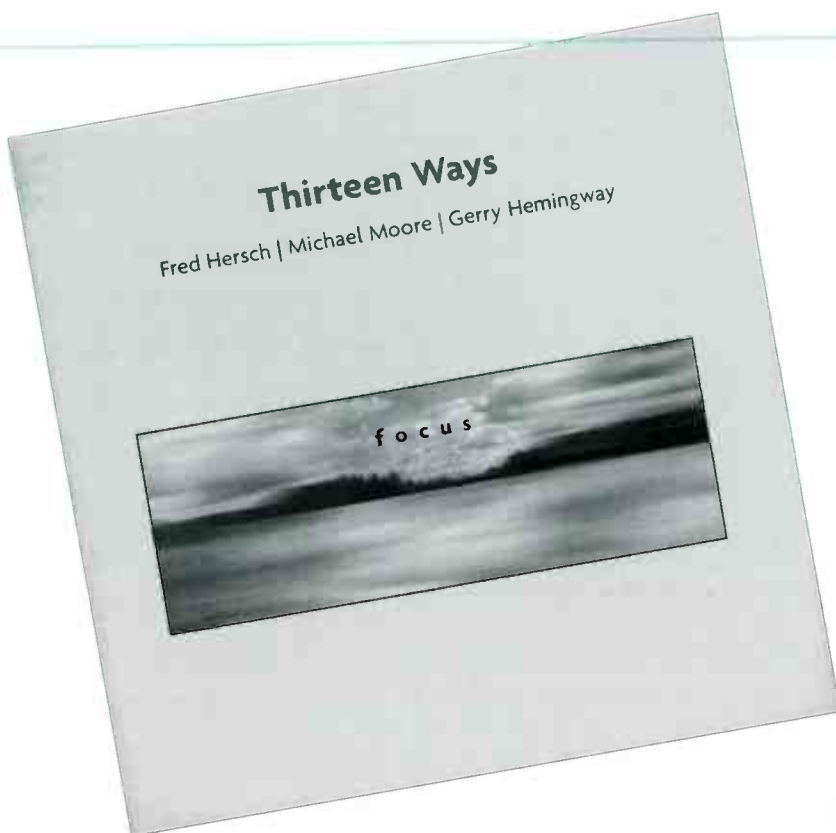
Evans' last trio continued in the same vein and almost matched that classic unit. While this last group was fully liquid in approach to time, and Johnson's virtuoso bass plays against and around the melody, LaFaro, not only created polyphony, but found the perfect counter-melody, often commanding your attention. Evans' virtuosity and style were still intact and instantly recognizable, not succumbing to the deterioration that had his physicians recommending hospitalization rather than club dates. His style had changed some, however. He played more intensely than earlier. His harmonic palette had deepened, his rhythmic sense had grown more adventurous, and his dramatic edge more florid.

On the downside, his improvisations had developed an intermittent tic, where he repeated a figure, sometimes moving it about but not fleshing it out, while his increased dramatic sense sometimes led to less subtlety than in his earlier

years. Still, this is captivating music. Sensing his opportunities were dwindling, he put his all into these sets.

The repertoire came from all aspects of his career. He played many standards associated with his early days ("Someday My Prince Will Come", "My Romance", "If You Could See Me Now"), and originals ("Waltz For Debbie", and the lovely "Letter To Evan", written for his son). He tackled Miles' Davis' "Nardis", turning it into a magnum opus, and Paul Simon's "I Do It For Your Love" sparkles with an ethereal virtuosity. The imagination, tenderness, and passion of the playing, coupled with the poignancy of the event, makes it truly a moving experience.

For the uninitiated, I would still go to the LaFaro-Motian trio first (JVC has issued many of them on fine sounding XRCDs). Still, anyone who would enjoy a "poetry reading" (as the announcer introduces the set) will find much poetry here.



Jack Skowron

*Jazz*

Focus *Thirteen Ways*  
Palmento PM 2055

**T**HIS ALBUM features an unusual, bassless trio of woodwinds (Michael Moore, clarinet and alto sax), piano (Fred Hersch), and drums (Gerry Hemmingway). This configuration resembles both pre-bop aggregates, such as the Benny Goodman trio and the Johnny Dodds-Baby Dodds Trio, and post-bop groups like Air, as well as the Paul Bley and Jimmy Giuffre groups. Focus plays in a forward-thinking manner, toying with rhythm, harmony, and tonality, in a soft, understated way, generating waves of energy like ripples in a pond. While Hemmingway and Moore have avant-garde jazz credentials, Hersch is a bit of a surprise here, being known as a Bill Evans disciple. He fits in quite well. Moore is capable of exciting straight-ahead playing with a rhythmically sharp, soaring style or of over-blowing his horns and getting non-tempered, “out” sounds. Hemmingway is a master colorist,

preferring here to accent or comment, and is especially adept at cymbal textures. As a unit, the three have huge ears, listening to each other and turning on a dime. They also are all fine composers.

The title tune is in free time, and is a lush, dreamy interactive piece. Hersch’s “Janeology” is based on standard changes (“Just You, Just Me”, I believe), but the melody is as craggy as a Monk tune, and the rhythm is herky-jerky, keeping you off-balance. He also composed “Out Someplace (Blues For Matthew Shepard),” a dark, ominous, yet attractive theme. Moore’s clarinet shines, and the interplay of the trio, as they build to a crescendo, is gripping. Moore’s peaceful “Autumn Eve” takes two notes and creates a lovely pastoral tune out of them. “En Tee” (by Hemingway) is the most “out,” with a winding, irregular melody (Monk on steroids), and Moore’s clarinet blowing quite

jolting notes. Latin rhythms (and romantic melodies) are stated or implied on “Tango Bittersweet,” “Fim de Inverno,” and “Habanera,” providing some drive and excitement, while “Bug Music” and “Identity” feature free improv over non-traditional forms. Again, interplay among the musicians is telepathic. “One Note To My Wife” builds up a nice boppish head of steam, only to be subverted with Hersch’s solo. He starts out unaccompanied, then Hemingway returns with some pre-bop sounding rim shots and shuffles.

Sound on the CD is good, with a wide soundstage and nice placement of musicians within it. Again, a Free Jazz Warning—some sounds here (mainly Moore’s outside excursions) may be hard on the delicate of ear, though the net effect of the music is always conversational rather than bombastic. I recommend this disc enthusiastically.



## Jazz

David Murray *Speaking in Tongues*  
Justin TIME Just 1118-2

**M**URRAY IS A FABULOUS TENOR sax player who came up with the second avant-garde wave of the '70s. He has been heard in many contexts, including big band, quartet, octet, and organ-based '60s soul-jazz. A founder of the World Saxophone Quartet, he has even guested with The Grateful Dead. Here he grafts two jazz hornmen onto a gospel band with great results.

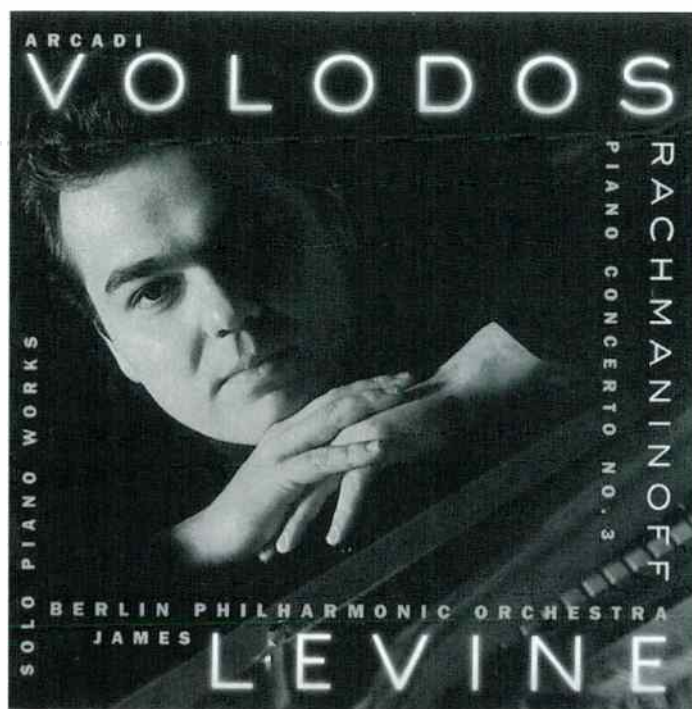
"How I Got Over," an up-tempo, two-beat burner, has Fontella Bass testifying on this gospel standard. In the 35 years since her hit, "Rescue Me," her voice has become more gravelly, rougher, while maintaining incredible range and flexibility, and, like many great singers, she turns the effects of aging into an asset. Murray shouts, overblows and plays (via circular breathing) non-stop jabbing, shouting riffs. "Nobody

Knows The Trouble I've Seen" with its hints at "Down By The Riverside" and a Crescent City rhythm reminds me of the Neville Brothers. Ms. Bass riffs and uses the entire range of her instrument. Trumpet (Hugh Ragin) flutters at high speed, and Murray enters softly; after one chorus, he raises the ante, and by the third raises the roof. His unique rhythmic approach and intensity break the tune open.

Murray's one original, "Missionary," rocks the house. The "A" theme has a vocal quality about it, while the "B" theme just grabs you and makes you dance and shout. Murray's a monster, blowing for all he's worth, occasionally skirting tonality but mostly just rocking. Ragin also makes the most of his allotted time, his velvety tone skittering then shouting. Two vocalists, Ms. Bass and organist Jimaine

Nelson (I think, he's not credited) prod each other in a fabulous duet, "Don't Know What I Would Do", over organ accompaniment (with Murray providing some heavenly obbligato as things heat up). It's a tour-de-force performance. Murray sits out "Blessed Assurance," leaving it to Ragin and Nelson (on piano) to present this lovely tune. Murray switches to bass clarinet on a funky "Amazing Grace," using its warm lower register through most of his solo. "A Closer Walk With Thee" brings Ms. Bass to walk us on out of the tune.

Sound overall is adequate, certainly not a sonic knockout. Murray is often buried too deep on the mix, thus blunting his peel-the-paint-off-the-wall sound, nonetheless this will probably not interfere with your enjoyment of this otherwise quite exhilarating CD.



## Classical

Rachmaninov Concerto No. 3  
plus solo piano works  
Arcadi Volodos, piano

**T**HE RACHMANINOV THIRD Piano Concerto increased its already mythological status when the Oscar-nominated film "Shine" insisted that it is the most difficult concerto in existence. Like most things in that movie, that claim is bogus, but myth can be a powerful thing, especially in the world of classical performance. Take the myth of pianist Vladimir Horowitz, whose 1951 recording of the Rachmaninov Third with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra conducted by Fritz Reiner (on RCA GD87754) has long been taken as one of the mightiest performances. A brand new recording by a Russian virtuoso pianist, Arcadi Volodos, has critics reaching for comparisons to Horowitz. Yet in some ways, Volodos' achievement is even more impressive.

Rachmaninov (1873-1943) was a nonpareil pianist as well as composer, and his own recording of his Third Concerto (on BMG 09026 61265 2) is fascinating like all of his magical playing. Accompanied by the Philadelphia Orchestra conducted by Eugene Ormandy, Rach — recorded late in life in 1939-40 — flies through the work with vivacity and virtuosity. So determined was he to make the work sound fleeting that he insisted on several drastic cuts to shorten it, to the point where to listeners accustomed to the full piece, the composer's version can

seem like a form of self-mutilation. True, Rachmaninov had something of an anchorite's spirit, in the tradition of Russian Orthodox elders like the Archpriest Avakum, a medieval writer whose account of his religious turmoils includes a gory passage in which he describes how, to further his self-mortification and ward off evil thoughts, he cut off his own hand. Rachmaninov never went quite so far in his ascetic urge, but he did truncate his works in alarming ways.

So the composer left a legacy of unmatchably artistic playing and dubious respect for the actual text of the full piece. Horowitz and Reiner also performed a shorter version of the concerto, and only in more recent times have performers routinely given the whole thing. Pianists like Horowitz and to a lesser extent, Van Cliburn, were up to the digital challenges of the work. Yet there is more to Rach Three than mere fingerwork. As an expression of spiritual angst, it requires a poetic approach that in recordings lately has only been achieved by the splendid Norwegian pianist Leif Ove Andsnes (on EMI 7243 556350 0) unfortunately accompanied by the less-than-sensitive conductor Paavo Berglund. The newly published "Bernstein Live" set issued by the New York Philharmonic contains a never-before-available 1977 rendition by

Lazar Berman, but this turns out to be the usual iron-fingered approach from this artist, marred further by a treacherous orchestral sound and manic-depressive moods from the podium. Now we finally have a major new recording by Volodos accompanied by the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra led by James Levine.

Producer Thomas Frost and Engineer Richard King captured the works in the admirable acoustics of the Philharmonie in Berlin during live performances in 1999, and the occasion crackles with excitement. The accompanying solo works were recorded in 2000 at Teldec's Berlin studios and these are also in excellent sound. James Levine falls into the common podium malady of Karajan-itis, named after Herbert von Karajan, who liked his orchestras to play in exaggeratedly soft or loud volumes in order to test the stereo recording techniques of his day. On this new Sony Compact Disc, the recording team was fully up to preserving the minuscule orchestral volume used to start the concerto, but that doesn't keep Levine's musical choice from seeming affected.

Volodos plays the work in an authoritative manner that is not at all like Horowitz, who focused on blocks of detail in each work he played, in a way that seemed to compartmentalize and sometimes miniaturize whatever he performed,



however brilliantly. The result was usually a loss of larger musical line and a sense of what the composer was trying to put across. Instead a Horowitz performance mainly gave a crystal clear portrait of Horowitz. Volodos could not be more different. In his forward drive and total command of the work, he more resembles Russian virtuosos like Sviatoslav Richter, or Emil Gilels. Richter conveyed at every moment of a performance that he had the entire work packed tightly into his conscious mind, so that the listener was well aware at every point where the music had come from and where it was going. These qualities of momentum, continuity, and context in performance are essential for giving life to the full drama of any longer work. Yet they are rare indeed in any art, which is why Richter is so much missed. Gilels left a memorable recording of the Rach Three (on Testament SBT 1029, distributed by Harmonia Mundi) although apparently no Richter performance is currently available. All the more reason to treasure this Volodos version in excellent sound.

Piano fans, having heard this new CD, will find irresistible Volodos' previous CD, *Live at Carnegie Hall* (on SONY SK 60893) recorded at a 1998 recital of works by Liszt, Schumann, Scriabin, and Rachmaninov. Tellingly, America's most erudite keyboard critic, Harris Goldsmith, did verbal handstands in the accompanying CD booklet notes, praising Volodos's "exquisitely good taste and patrician sensibility." For once hype is not overstated and the subsequent Rach Three on SONY proves that Volodos deserves all this and more.

Critics may exist of both Volodos and the work itself, whether miserable pen-pushers who underrate the pianist, or even scholars like Tchaikovsky biographer David Brow, who in "A Guide to the Concerto" (Oxford) who scorns what he calls "over-writing in the piano part."

The best advice I can give is to listen to the artists, spiritually acute beings like Leif Ove Andsnes, who has gone on record as preferring Rachmaninov's artistry to that of Tchaikovsky — pace David Brown. And Arcadi Volodos, whose eloquent performance really should speak for itself.

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# *The Music Hall Mmf-5 Turntable With Goldring 1012gx Cartridge*

Chris Reardon-Noblet



**I**N ORDER TO CONVEY the pleasurable reaction I've had to the Music Hall MMF-5 turntable, I need to tell you a short story.

While I was at college, I lived in a small, lakeside village. I'd recently cobbled together my first system and while I hadn't heard many others, I thought mine was the cat's pajamas. It included an AR turntable with multiple headshells

and several of the best moving-magnet cartridges of the day. Each boasted a flat frequency response and could track cleanly. Moreover, they all sounded quite — though not completely — similar; quite close enough to convince me that the most pronounced differences between them were mostly a matter of smallish changes in perceived frequency balance.

The houses at the lake were close together, chock-a-block uphill from the shore. It was an easy place to make new friends, and it happened that a close neighbor named Todd invited me over to listen to some tunes. We popped some beers, shot the breeze and then Todd got up and placed a record on one of the oldest turntables I'd ever seen. It was a Thorens, and even in

the early 1970s it looked dated. It had a wood plinth, an off-white finish that seemed to be porcelain, and a semi-circular chrome-plated dial for selecting record size and speed. Its one-piece tonearm also had an Empire cartridge that seemed at least as old as the turntable, and was painted white with a red plastic stylus apparatus.

That old thing must have tracked at 3½ to 4 grams, at least!

Todd made a ceremony of moistening a velvet pad and wiping the LP with it. I cringed, anticipating 20 minutes of groove-gouging vinyl excavation worthy of an RCA console. Well, dear reader, imagine my surprise when I heard — emanating from Advent speakers via a standard-issue Kenwood amplifier — clear, dynamic, full-bodied sound that was quite musical indeed!

Of course, I enlightened Todd that his setup, good as it apparently was, would sound a lot better reproducing the signal from a modern AR turntable and light-tracking cartridge. He enthused about the idea, and when we next got together I brought my turntable up to his place. We moved his old Thorens out of the way, gently placed the AR on his shelf, plugged in and turned on.

What followed was puzzling. The sound, while certainly clean and detailed, was by comparison dry, lean and lacking dynamic excitement. We listened to different records; we tried raising the tracking force and then lowering it. Nothing worked, until we swapped out my cartridge for his. His old Empire cartridge, installed in my AR turntable and which was tracking at quarter-taped-to-the-tonearm forces, sounded magnificent.

### So Much for Progress!

Needless to say, I soon bought and installed the best Empire cartridge I could afford — the model in Todd's possession having long since been discontinued. My disappointment was immediate and deep. The new model couldn't hold a candle to Todd's red and white monster.

Time passed. Todd and I parted ways. Though I eventually adopted Thorens turntables, I entered moving-coil land for a number of years and eventually I forgot about that old rig.

More recently, I began playing with today's moving-magnet cartridges, the best of which sounded much better than those of the seventies and eighties. Life seemed good. Then editor Gene asked me to check out the new Music Hall MMF-5 turntable/cartridge combination. And that, dear reader, is how I came to recall my old friend Todd.

The manufacturer of Pro-Ject turntables makes the MMF-5 in Czechoslovakia. Low-slung, clean of line and contemporary of design,

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## **This turntable is a credit to its maker, sporting a clean, contemporary design.**

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the 'table is a credit to Czech manufacturing, while the packaging materials in which it arrived are the typical Eastern European stuff. (Since it arrived in good condition, I was glad to see most of the material costs went into the hardware.)

Its twin, isolated plinths are finished in tuxedo black — indeed it's entirely black, except for the green-tinted glass platter and the Goldring logo on the cartridge. Very attractive. Included are an effective record clamp, a 45-rpm spindle, dust cover and an extra drive belt (a very nice touch).

The supplied cartridge is a \$175 Goldring with a Gyger stylus. Goldring is a UK manufacturer, not terribly well known in the states, but, in addition to its own line, it makes cartridges for Roksan, Reson and others. The stylus make on the 1012GX is more likely to be seen on far more expensive moving-coil cartridges.

After running in the turntable by leaving it on for a few weeks, I was less than pleased to see that the cartridge was quite loose on the tonearm. I aligned and tightened it, only to discover that the azimuth appeared considerably off. I anticipated that this meant loosening the cartridge bolts, installing plastic shims, and then realigning the cartridge and tightening down the bolts again. One of the selling points of an all-in-one turntable ought to be

plug-and-play convenience. A reviewer for another publication had simply twisted the arm to achieve a proper azimuth, but the manual had nothing on this. As I am not in the habit of torquing tonearms at the risk of damaging delicate pivot bearings, I called Music Hall. They gave me the old "how to" on the azimuth twist; I tried it and it works.

Cartridge properly installed, I tossed on a platter and sat down to listen. The sound was lively and well balanced, but a touch rough around the edges. I raised the tracking force to 2.1 grams from the recommended 1.7 grams and kept it there for the duration. Returning to the lower tracking force always roughened the sound slightly. Rumble and wow-and-flutter were never audible. Only warped records caused any variation in held or decaying notes.

As the cartridge broke in, and the more I listened, the more I thought of my friend Todd's Neolithic Thorens / Empire system — and I mean that in a nice way!

Why? Because the Music Hall MMF-5 turntable with Goldring 1012GX Cartridge sounded more dynamic, involving and downright entertaining than almost any other moving magnet-based system I have heard in the intervening years. Indeed, it rivals moving coil setups in the sense of immediacy and involvement it provides, while avoiding the hot treble found in a few of the more affordable moving-coil cartridges.

To my ears, this was the water of life! Music was delivered not with pompous, disengaging gravity, but with bounce, rhythm, body, and the best upper bass to lower treble balance I've ever heard at or anywhere near this price level.

What the MMF-5 does not do to my ears is provide as much depth of image as its higher priced competition. It's slightly lighter/tighter in the mid- and low bass, but to my ears its balance in that area is more true and accurate to the sound of live music. There is certain, in the end, no lack of dynamic or transient impact in that portion of the frequency range.

I played and enjoyed many of my most treasured LPs on the MMF-5: Japanese pressings of Kenny

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Burrell's *Guitar Forms* and the Beatles' *Past Masters Vol. 1 and 2*; the MFSL versions of Steely Dan's *Aja* (it swings hard on the Music Hall setup) and The Police's *Ghost In The Machine* (I've never heard it sound better), the Impulse reissue of John Coltrane's *A Love Supreme*, and John Cippolina & co.'s psychedelic raunch-fest *Copperhead*, a superior re-release by Edsel. As with moving coil cartridges, there was no detectable groove deterioration at the 2.1 gram tracking force; the narrow profile of modern fine-line styli like the Gyger causing less wear than older elliptical styli did tracking at lighter forces.

Other vinyl included *Letter from Home* by the Pat Metheny Group, the terrific but obscure Simms Brothers Band, the Dave Brubeck Quartet's masterpiece *Take Five*, the wonderful Verve reissue of the Ben Webster Quintet's *Soulville* Collaboration by the Modern Jazz Quartet with Laurindo Almeida and, in a classical vein, Solti/LSO's London Jubilee pressing of *Mahler's Symphony No. 2* and the Musical Heritage Society LP of *Twelve Concerto Grossi, Op. VII* by Vivaldi. Among more modern stuff was the Tom Waits' masterful *Mule Variations*.

To incorporate sounds into their component parts seems almost nit picking in the face of such a "whole-some" setup as the Music Hall MMF-5. Across the spectrum, this cartridge/turntable combination has no audible suckout or dip. I have not heard the ting-splash and radiant harmonic vapor of cymbals, nor the bounce of drumstick and skin off of each other, reproduced in a more lifelike fashion by any moving magnet setup.

(As I once learned from a forgotten source, get the drums right and you're well on the way to getting it all right.) Nor have I heard instrumental colors produced more engagingly by any MM cartridge. The presence and the dynamic bounce, twang and thrum are right up there with the more reasonably priced moving coils. Finesse? Perhaps not as much as the really high-priced spreads, at \$500 for the whole shooting match, gimme a break! Who cares when you're having so much fun?

Throughout several months with the MMF-5/Goldring 1012GX, I was most delighted with the way it conveyed the joy, the bitterness, the tenderness, compassion and rhythmic drive that are at the heart and soul of great music. If this be the sound of vinyl, play on!

**I was delighted!**  
**If this be the sound of vinyl, play on!**

**NOTES**

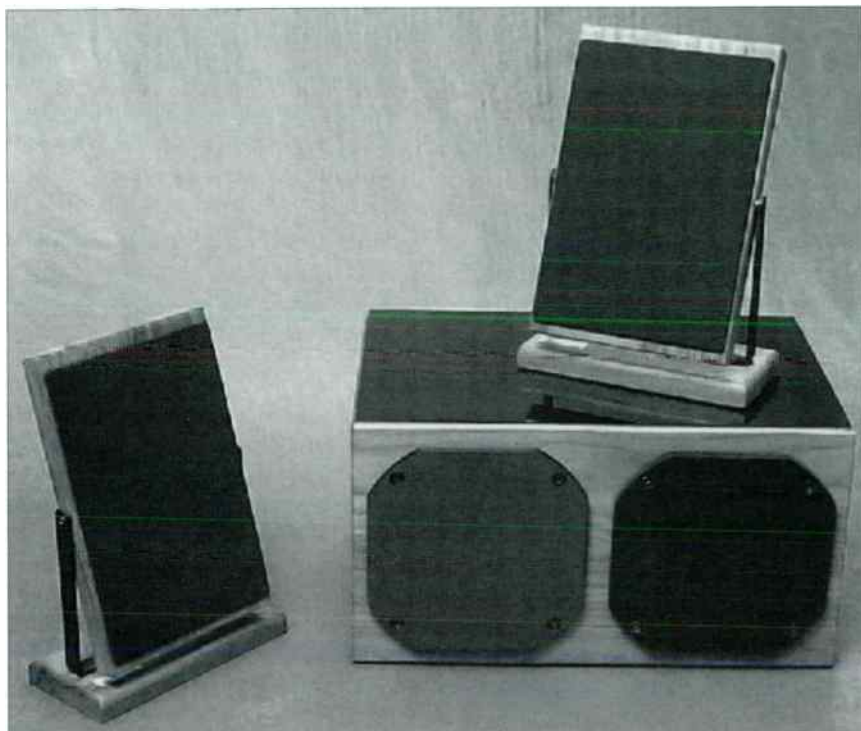
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**Associated Equipment**

Thorens TD-320MkII Turntable; Shure V15-Vmxr, Audio Technica ML-150, and Grado Reference phono cartridges; Cary 300 SEI and Luxman LV-105 hybrid integrated amplifiers; Naim 12 preamplifier and 160 amplifier; Thorens phono preamplifier; Spendor SP2/3, Mission 752 with modified, outboard crossovers, and Paradigm Titan Loudspeakers; REL Strata II subwoofer, Kimber Silver Streak interconnects and shotgunned 8TC speaker cable; Goertz M1 speaker cable; Naim Black SNAIC interconnect and NACA5 speaker cable, and PS Audio PP300 "Power Plant" a.c. source.

# *Eminent Technology LFT-11 Multimedia Speaker System*

Bascom H. King



I WAS PLEASANTLY SURPRISED to receive for review a multi-media speaker system from Eminent Technology Inc. I remember hearing some of their full-range panel speakers in the past and was always rather enamored with their air-bearing tonearm.

The LFT-11 Linear Field Transducer Planar Magnetic Multimedia Loudspeaker (whew, what a mouthful!) consists of three pieces, two planar mid/high units and a common woofer enclosure with two 6.5-inch Audax drivers. The crossover frequency between the woofers and mid/tweeter units is

said to be at 200 Hz. Frequency response is rated at 35 Hz to 20 kHz +/- 4 dB, impedance is a nominal 8 ohms, maximum power input is 50 watts, and the maximum sound pressure level out of the system is 103 dB at 1 meter. The mid/high panels are designed to be directional, which is to be expected due to the large diaphragm (aperture) size, and it is recommended that they be aimed directly at one's ears.

In my computer setup where I tested the LFT-11 system, other speakers near the monitor and an ink jet printer to the right of the

right-hand speaker prevented me from easily placing the panels directly on either side of my monitor. I ended up placing the left speaker on the table that is next to my computer cart. The right one was placed to the right of the printer and on top of a Yamaha RP-U100 Personal Receiver. This amp is laid on its side and is sitting on top of the right-most computer of the three machines in my setup. Since this put the mid/high panels at about chest height, they were tilted up to aim at my ears. The net result is that the speakers are about 4½ feet apart with an included angle of about 90

degrees. This works out quite well, giving a great near-field sound stage and panorama. Initially, I placed the woofer unit behind the computer cart. The cart itself is about 2½ feet out from a large sliding glass door as the wall behind. With the woofer unit on the floor, the bass was too boomy around 90 to 100 Hz. Placing it up on a footstool helped

out with this, but I wasn't happy with the bass balance — still too boomy. I then moved the woofer unit right next to the computer card on the left side and raised up off the floor by about 10 inches on a stool. This arrangement gave the best tonal balance.

The sound of this setup using the Yamaha RP-U100 is very articulate,

spacious, and detailed and has quite reasonable sounding bass, although there is still a mild tendency to be resonant at around 100 Hz. For this, I used signals received by the Yamaha's tuner and CDs played from the HP 8590C Pavilion computer sound card fed into the Yamaha. When cranked up, it plays surprisingly loud and can definitely boogy. The main thing I perceive as less than perfect in the overall coherence sense is the impression that the woofers don't blend perfectly with the planar drivers — they sound "slower" to me. With the woofers physically about half of the way between me and the left speaker, I sometimes tend to hear the image to the left because the woofers are to the left instead of straight ahead. To put the woofers dead-center in the middle, I would have had to remove my dot matrix printer from its shelf under the keyboard tray of the computer cart, and this I was unwilling to do.

The Yamaha Personal Receiver has some cool soundfield enhancement modes that work well with this speaker setup. It comes with a computer program that I ran on the HP machine that allows a whole range of control of the receiver. It includes such things as a graphic equalizer, various spatial enhancement programs, computer control of signal selection and volume, etc. Makes for an entertaining computer sound experience, for sure. I listened to a program on the web called "From the Top" using RealPlayer and was quite surprised at how good it sounded. Not CD quality but musically satisfying.

To get a better idea of how good the speakers could be, I fed the Yamaha receiver from my main reference system. The items in this setup consisted of a PS Audio Lambda Special CD transport feeding a Genesis Digital Lens. Output

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# NOTES

**Eminent Technology LFT-11 Linear Field Transducer Planar Magnetic Multimedia Loudspeaker**, \$499.00; with amp, \$599.00. Eminent Technology, 224 East Palmer St., Tallahassee, FL 32301; phone 850/575-5655, fax 850/224-5999, website [www.eminent-tech.com](http://www.eminent-tech.com), e-mail [info@eminent-tech.com](mailto:info@eminent-tech.com).

## Associated Equipment

PS Audio Lambda Special CD transport, Genesis Digital Lens, Perpetual Technologies P-1A/P-3A upsampler/D/A, Monolithic Sound P<sup>3</sup> Perpetual Power Plant, PS Audio Power Plant P300, Yamaha RP-U100 receiver, CII Centrasound amplifier, and HP 8590C Pavilion computer sound card.

of the Digital Lens fed a Perpetual Technologies P-1A/P-3A upsampler/D/A combination coupled with their i<sup>2</sup>S cable and powered with the new Monolithic Sound P<sup>3</sup> Perpetual Power Plant. A.c. power for this gear was supplied by a PS Audio Power Plant P300 running their new SS1 MultiWave program. The output of the P-3A D/A was taken from the location of this gear to the listening setup for the LFT-11

via long interconnect cables. Wow! This was amazingly good sound with this signal feed using the Yamaha amp. I then hooked up a CII Centrasound 12-watt tube power amplifier that was sent along with the speakers. This is the epitome of computer environment listening — to use a tube amp for the speakers! Almost as outrageous as having a tube power amp in one's car stereo. This little amp drove the speakers

quite competently, and while its sound was a bit more spacious, it was a little zippy for a tube amp and my tastes. In the end, I preferred the overall sound with the Yamaha amp

What I get in listening to this setup is that the overall sound quality and texture is very good but the size of the sound field is still relatively small and not as realistic as the soundfield produced by good stereo speakers properly positioned and listened to a greater distance than with the nearfield setup discussed here. It is somewhat like good headphone sound but taken out of one's head and presented in front.

Don't get me wrong though, I liked and enjoyed these speakers immensely. They bring a new dimension to PC listening and sound much better than any other PC sound system I have heard so far.

I would recommend giving this system an audition.



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"The I-5 is a high-quality integrated amplifier that will appeal to anyone looking for a taste of the best." **Doug Schneider - Soundstage! - May 1999.**

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# Audio Research LS16 Preamplifier

Joel Shumer



I'VE BEEN USING the LS16 as my primary preamplifier for the last four months and never once wished to replace it with something better. Fifteen years ago I purchased what was then ARC's flagship preamp, the SP11. Since then I've had four other Audio Research preamps in my system for extended stays. Each has shown a modest improvement over the preceding preamp in most of the parameters that audiophiles find important, but there has also been an evolutionary change in the company's concept of what constitutes good sound.

Like my 1985 SP11, the new LS16 has the phrase "High Definition" engraved on its faceplate, and a high level of resolution, which I equate with "high definition," has always been a hallmark of the Audio Research sound. Coupled with the ability of ARC's older preamplifiers to resolve detail was a less positive side. They were a bit forward, whitish, and at times, the

details seemed realer than real, as though slightly etched. The ARC sound has always been satisfying, but at times it could have been a little warmer, more liquid, and a little more laid back. The good news is that each time Audio Research has released a new preamplifier, it has sonically moved in just this direction.

The Audio Research preamps that followed the SP11 into my system, first an LS2B, an LS2B MkII, followed by an LS15, and now an LS16, have demonstrated this ongoing evolutionary change. The high resolution, excellent imaging, and neutral tonality have become a bit more natural sounding with each new preamp. There have also been improvements in upper and lower extension, particularly in the bass, which has become better defined and more rhythmically articulated. But for me, the most satisfying change has been the move toward a warmer more liquid sound. Each

succeeding preamp has either retained or improved on the virtues of its predecessor, while moving the listener a bit back from the front of the concert hall to a seat where the music is less in ones face, harmonics are enriched, and there is a subtle increase in musical warmth.

## Description of the LS16

The appearance of the LS16 is all but identical to the LS15 and LS2 that predate it. Rugged handles attach to a 5¼- by 19-inch faceplate which is available in a choice of natural brushed aluminum, titanium gray, or matt black. There are two large rotary knobs, one for volume and the other to select from five inputs. Three of the inputs, marked "AUX SE", "PHONO", and "TUNER" are single ended. The other two are balanced and marked "CD BAL and AUX BAL." Below and between the knobs are four toggle switches. One is for power, a second for muting, a third switches





to a sixth input, which is for single-ended tape recorder monitoring, and a fourth controls a processor loop via a seventh input which is also single-ended.

Audio Research has finally replaced the hard-wired power cord with one that is detachable and plugs into a receptacle on the rear panel. Also on the rear panel is a fuse holder, two sets of XLR-type balanced inputs, five sets of RCA-type inputs, an RCA-connected pass-through output for either a recorder or a processor, an RCA-style preamp output, and two sets of

XLR balanced preamp outputs.

A small hand-held remote with eight push-buttons duplicates all of the front panel controls and is included in the purchase price along with two AAA batteries.

Remove the top covers of the discontinued LS15 and LS16 preamps and the two stop looking like twins. The differences are great enough to make upgrading an LS15 to LS16 specifications not possible. A new Class-A circuit has been designed employing four Russian 6922 twin triodes. Each comes with ARC's proprietary damping rings. The power

supply has also been improved with the latest InfiniCaps. A new volume control uses the same microprocessor as used in the \$5,000.00 LS25 providing 104 individual steps. The maximum gain of 18 dB at the balanced output and 12 dB single-ended output should be more than enough to drive any amplifier to clipping.

### Using The LS16

Although the preamp uses four tubes, the protective cover never became more than warm to the touch, even when left on for several



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hours, so ventilation should not be a problem when planning installation. The cabinet extends only 9.75 inches behind the faceplate, and you should then leave another two to three inches for connections. It's shallow enough so that most audio component shelves can handle an LS16 easily. Switch on the preamp and three green LEDs light up indicating power is on, volume has automatically been set to zero, and the input previously used has been reselected. A fourth LED blinks informing the user that the preamp is in the process of warming up. Some 45 seconds later, the blinking stops. The preamp is now muted but ready. Click off the mute, ramp up the volume, and except for adjustments while listening, the preamp or its remote need not be touched again until shutdown.

Although the remote is a cinch to use with its eight clearly marked buttons, the controls on the preamp itself may require a bit of personal tactile adjustment. The rotary knobs aren't really rotary but are left/right spring-loaded switches. Turn the volume knob to the right and a green LED dot appears to race clockwise around the knob indicating and increase in volume. Turn the same knob left against its spring loading and the green dot reverses its circular journey as the volume recedes. There are 104 steps or level changes controlled by the LS16's microprocessor, but there are only 20 of these green dots in a circular grouping. So, we have an attractive analog graphic which gives a useful approximation of volume levels but

can also be frustrating when trying to return precisely to a previous setting.

The input selection knob performs in similar fashion with a green LED dot indicating the selected input. It is clear and can be read from 30 feet away, and there is none of the volume control's ambiguity since each input is assigned its own LED indicator.

ARC's older toggle switches were flicked up for the up position, down for the down position, the position of the switch informing the user which operational function had been selected. The LS16 has "bi-

---

**I strongly recommend  
ARC's LS16 preamp;  
it helps narrow the gap  
between recorded and live.**

---

directional" switches that are spring loaded; after they are moved, they revert to the middle position. The tactile confirmation of the selection is not as positive as with the older switches, but LEDs clearly indicate the toggled position from across the room. Again, the remote, which makes using the front panel controls completely unnecessary, will be preferred by most users.

### Listening: LS15 and LS16

When comparing the LS15 with the LS16, three sonic differences are most apparent. First, the highs and upper midrange have become more liquid. I thought that the LS15 had reduced grain about as far as could

be done, but I was wrong. In comparison the LS15 now seem slightly grainy. Verdi's *Rigoletto* (Deutsche Gramophone 447 064-2) is beautifully recorded, but at times I was aware of a little coarseness in the upper registers bordering on shrillness when using the LS15. Here the increased liquidity and tighter grain structure of the LS16 greatly help. Unlike a filter or equalizer, the LS16 retains the sense of openness and vital harmonic information while reducing electronic hash and harshness. This increased liquidity helps more than just recordings with problems. Every Compact Disc I listened to was sweeter and smoother from the upper mid-range on up, with a net result that recordings sounded a little more like live music.

The Audio Research tube preamps I've used approach the slam and bass extension of the best solid-state units, but with an added harmonic richness that I haven't heard in preamps without tubes. The LS16 pushes this envelope a little further by increasing extension and slam while retaining the rich harmonics. In the Branford Marsalis' CD, *Trio Jeepy*, (Columbia CK 44199) bassist Milton Hinton was having a fine day and was well served by the engineering of Ben Rizzi. (I heard on National Public Radio, while this review was being written, that Hinton, who just turned 90, is still playing his bass and documenting the jazz scene with his camera.) His bass is clean, deep, and rhythmically driving. The LS 15 does a good job in presenting Hinton's instrument; the LS16 does even better.

The CD recording of Dvorak's Ninth Symphony with the New York Philharmonic under Kurt Masur (Teldec 73244) illustrates a third area of evolutionary development. Listening with the LS16, the sound is a little more laid back and less up close in your face. The seating location is still in the front half of Avery Fisher Hall, but a little farther back. Here, one can more clearly hear the ambiance of the hall, the bass lines, and the fullness of the orchestra's harmonics, all with a slightly improved tonal balance. With the Audio Research LS16 the sound becomes more relaxed, but it is every bit as involving as with the LS15 preamp.

## NOTES

**Audio Research LS16 Line Stage Preamplifier**, \$2,995.00, including remote. Audio Research, Inc., 3900 Annapolis Lane North, Plymouth, Minnesota, 55447-5447. Phone 763/577 9700, fax 763/577 0323, website [www.audioresearch.com](http://www.audioresearch.com).

### Associated Equipment

Linn Karik/Numerik CD player; Audio Research LS15 preamplifier; G&G Discoveries custom passive preamp, Audio Research VT100MKII and Sunfire Signature amplifiers; Quad Pro 63 and Wilson WATT/Puppy 5.1 speakers; Linn and Music Metre RCA-type interconnects; Audio Research balanced interconnects, Tara RSC Master Generation 2 Speaker Cable, ASC Tube Traps, C&G Discoveries PonTunes, and Target stands.

## Listening: LS16 and G&G

Jim Glynn, an aerospace engineer with a passion for the ultimate in sound reproduction, designed and custom built a passive preamp for me. I asked him to include the option of switching between two single-ended inputs, primarily for comparison purposes. The front panel consists of two rotary knobs, one for each channel. And that's it. There are no other controls. Jim used Alps Black Beauty stereo pots wired in mono and housed his components in a heavy plastic vibration absorbing material which he says is "currently a company secret."

Using portions of CDs that were recorded at very low levels, so as not to overload amplifier, speakers, and ears, I soon discovered that there is very little difference between a direct feed to an amplifier from my CD player and routing the signal through Jim's preamp. When the Alps pots are used as attenuators and listening levels are decreased, there is very, very little loss in sound quality. In a comparison of this passive preamp with the LS16, the Audio Research wins hands down when long intercon-

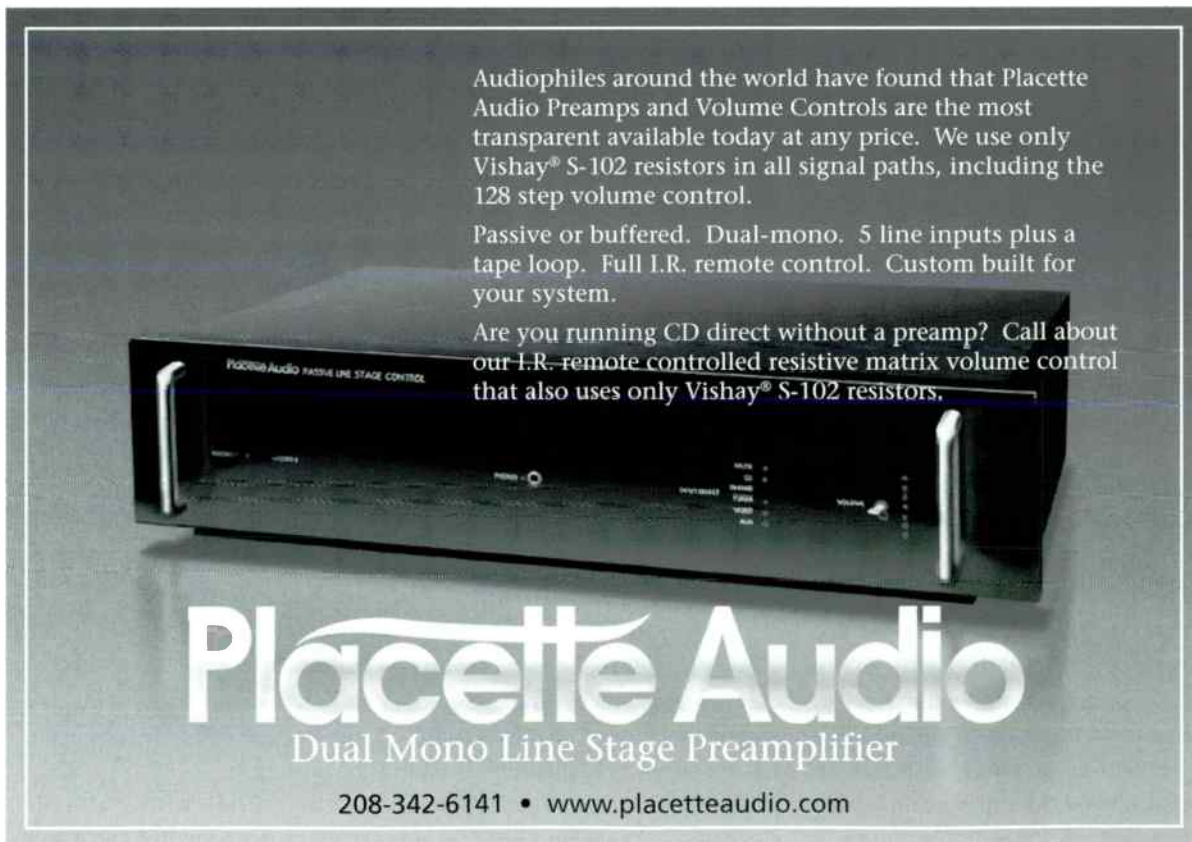
nects are used, but with one-meter cables, the passive preamp is cleaner and more open while maintaining similar staging. Tonal balances are very similar, with the passive preamp being slightly cooler, and the LS16 having harmonics with a bit more meat on them. The LS16 is slightly more dynamic, particularly in the bass, which is also better extended. The fact that Audio Research can build a preamp with 18 dB of gain and complex switching circuitry and have it sound about as transparent as running a stereo signal directly through quality attenuators is a credit to their design and production methods.

## Conclusions

The five Audio Research preamplifiers that I have heard for extended periods in my system during the past 15 years have each exhibited sonic improvements over earlier models. They have become better balanced tonally, have increased their dynamics, extended bass response, reduced grain, become more liquid, and have evolved toward a less upfront, more laid-back sonic image. As a result, each new preamp has been more musical

than the one it replaced and the LS16 is no exception. Audio Research has just released a Mark II version of the LS8, a four-tube preamp limited to five single-ended inputs. In their literature, ARC claims that the LS8MKII outperforms the LS15 which I find to be not far behind the LS16. At a thousand dollars less than the LS16, the LS8MKII appears to be a good buy for someone who does not need the LS16's flexibility and balanced connections. For the person looking for a line-level preamp in the \$3,000 price range with the features offered by the LS16, I can think of nothing better. Handsome and rugged construction, inputs and outputs that are both single-ended and balanced, a comprehensive remote, and behind the preamp, a major high-end company with an outstanding record for innovative design and customer support over more than two decades should help convince anyone as to the wisdom in purchasing an LS16.

But most importantly the preamp just sounds right helping to narrow the gap between recording and live performance. It all adds up to a strong recommendation.



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# *Anthem 2L Preamplifier, 1P Phono Preamp, and MCA 2 Power Amplifier*

Jim Frane



**Anthem 2L Preamplifier**

**A**T LAST, AN OPPORTUNITY to review modern equipment with those glowing glass bottles that have made such a resounding comeback. Well, not strictly tube gear, but hybrid — tubes and solid state. Sonic Frontiers sent me their Anthem Pre 2L preamp and Pre 1P phono preamp. They also included their MCA 2 solid-state power amplifier — it was the editor's idea to report on a complete set.

Right from the start, I was impressed with the packaging for these two preamps; both were suspended in flexible plastic foam. Each package came with a smaller box that contained the tubes, a screwdriver, a cotton glove to keep skin oils off the tubes as they were installed, and the rest of the cover

screws. Only a minimum number of screws were installed by Anthem to hold each unit's cover in place. The MCA 2 power amp had rigid Styrofoam shapes at each corner — not quite as cushioning as the foam.

Because I had to be able to identify which piece of equipment was causing which changes in the sound, I couldn't just put all three units into my system at once — so, I started with the Pre 2L.

## **Model 2L Preamplifier**

Anthem describes the Pre 2L's circuit as a three-stage, cathode-coupled amplifier driving a current-cathode follower. The power supply has six stages of regulation. Overall preamp gain is user-adjustable via switches on the main circuit board

to 8, 16 or 24 dB. This adjustment provides flexibility in matching the rest of any system. Reach rods extend from the front panel to switches mounted on circuit boards in order to shorten signal paths. Parts selection for the 2L was based on the Sonic Frontiers' experience with their more expensive components.

The Pre 2L has a tube headphone amp section that can drive the lowest impedance headphones. I think that output to drive headphones on a preamp is a nice idea, but one that has become rare. It allows you to listen with headphones to any selected component connected to the preamp.

The initial setup of the 2L requires removing the eight screws

holding the cover in place and installing two matched pairs of supplied Russian 6922 (6DJ8) tubes. Matched sets of ECC88/6DJ8 or E188CC/7308 tubes may also be used. (As an aside, the fall of the Iron Curtain made available a variety of tubes, as tubes were used in much of their electronic gear. The ready access to reasonably priced tubes has, I believe, played a part in the proliferation of new tube gear in the U.S.) With the cover off, I could see that the 2L parts, layout, and assembly quality were all very good. I left the factory's 8-dB gain settings and reinstalled the cover with all 18 screws. The 19 inches wide by 11 inches deep x 5¼ inches high Pre 2L weighs 22 pounds.

On the front panel (available in silver or black) of the 2L are an input selector, balance, and volume control knobs, as well as switches to engage a surround sound processor (called SSP loop), tape/external processor loop, mono or stereo



### Anthem 1P Phono Preamplifier

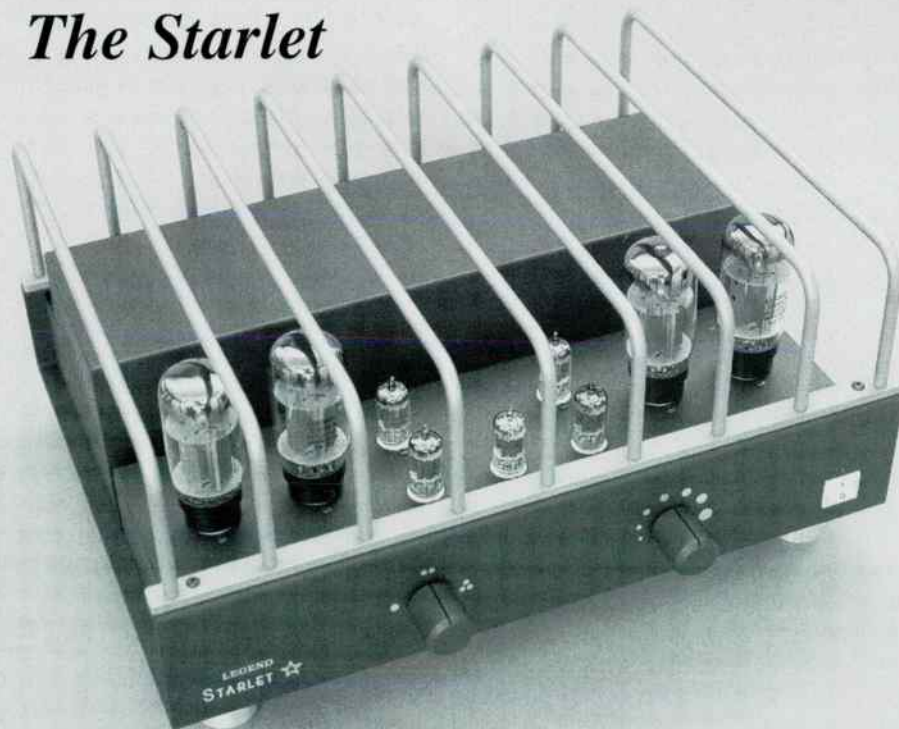
mode, and mute. The mono switch is seldom seen today, but such a circuit is a valuable tool for speaker setup (the sound in mono is directly centered between stereo speakers when they are properly set up). The mute switch completely silences the unit and can be accessed from the small remote control, as can volume and SSP.

The back of the 2L has gold-plated RCA-type jacks, including two pairs of pre out jacks — handy for driving multiple amps without having to resort to Y-connectors. The jacks are in widely spaced side-by-side pairs stacked vertically. I really liked the wide spacing. Sometimes jacks are so close together that mak-

ing connections is hard. The second column of jacks accommodates a tape deck or external processor and a surround sound processor. The final column is for CD, tuner, and two pairs of jacks labeled "Aux 1" and "Aux 2." There is no built-in phono preamp.

I installed the 2L with more than a foot of free space above and several feet in all horizontal directions to ensure proper cooling (a minimum of four inches of free space above the unit is recommended). At no time did any part of the preamp case get more than warm to the

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touch. Anthem states that 70 hours of signal is needed to break in the tubes, so this unit saw a lot of use before I began any sort of serious auditioning.

The 16-page owner's manual has basic instructions, addresses the use of the controls, has a troubleshooting section, information about the five-year warranty, and the specifications. I would have preferred more information about the unit, especially recommendations about choosing the correct gain setting for a system and how to tell when tubes need replacement.

## Listening

I switched between the 2L and my Carver preamp, matching the levels exactly using a Radio Shack digital sound level meter (SLM) and pink noise from a CD. I heard no evidence of crosstalk between sources with the 2L, but there was a low-level 60-Hz hum at the speakers, which measured 52 dB one inch directly in front of one speaker. Changing the volume setting had no effect, and there was no apparent

outside source, as the noise was there even with nothing connected to the 2L except the power amp. The 2L has a grounded (three-prong) plug, which I moved next to the grounded plug of my Parasound power amp in an attempt to minimize the chance of a differential ground current. In a final try to kill off the hum, I lifted the ground from the preamp just long enough to ensure the source was not a ground loop — still no change.

The 2L's performance in my system and sound in my room gave me many hours of pleasurable listening. However, with every disc and type of music the 2L sounded clearly different from my 10-year-old Carver, and these sonic differences were consistent. The Pre 2L was a really good sounding preamp, but presents the recorded space differently from my reference Carver. On every piece I played, the performance (with a good recording) had more spaciousness than reference Carver. I found the Pre 2L sound appealing, but I'm not sure which is the more accurate.

## Anthem MCA 2 Power Amplifier

I wondered if there was a slight bit of phase difference between the Pre 2L left and right channels that might account for the difference, but I had no way of measuring this. The following three cuts illustrated the differences very consistently: "Hello, It's Me" by Todd Rundgren Ultradisc II (MFSL SPCD 017); "World in Harmony" by Fleetwood Mac from *Greatest Hits Live* (Commander 2448217); and M. Ravel's *Piano Trio in A Minor IV* by the Ahn Trio on *The Classical Collection* (Chesky CD 135).

Here are some further details of the Pre 2L's performance:

I have had the good fortune to attend an average of one live performance per week in different locales over the past four months. One of the CDs I played contained the same music played by the same artist I recently heard live. That music through the Pre 2L seemed as real as I remembered the live performance. Now, this "live" is somewhat qualified since the real thing

was also through speakers, but that's the only way one can hear the Chapman Stick. For those of you who have not yet had this experience, the Stick has 10 or 12 strings (depending on model) over a fingerboard with frets. The Stick's pickups are so sensitive that the instrument is played by pressing strings to frets with the fingers, rather than strumming or striking the strings. It is an instrument with a wide frequency response and a mellow, detailed sound. Its dynamic range was very good, easily reproducing such works as Tchaikovsky's *Overture solonelle 1812* by L. Bernstein and the Israel Philharmonic (Time-Life CMD-01A) or the Mahler's *Symphony No. 1 Titan* by K. Masur and the New York Philharmonic (Teldec 9031-74868-2). There was never any evidence of congestion or difficulty with transients with the 2L.

Even the lowest level instruments and subtle details in the background were clearly identifiable, yet even with loud transients, the 2L gave no suggestion of overload. Music floated free of the speakers as performances were suspended in space between, beyond and behind them. The spread and spaciousness of large orchestral works were convincingly conveyed as were soloists.

Acoustic guitar seemed right in the room with all of the detail and warmth projected by the body of the instrument, as well as the finger slides on the strings. From initial pluck to the decay, the sound was there in front of me, as on Andres Segovia's *My Favorite Works — The Segovia Collection — Vol. 3* (MCAD-42069).

The wide and deep space portrayed by the various cuts on Simon and Garfunkel's *Greatest Hits* (Columbia Ck31350) grabbed my attention. Despite attempts to do other activities while it played, I had to stop and listen. The sound of this live recording was immediate and detailed, with rhythm, closeness

and presence that were right there in front of me. I had always enjoyed this album, both for its nostalgia and its musicality, but the 2L allowed the performers to break free of the recording. Instruments, whether reed, horn, string, or percussion all sounded super, as did male and female vocals.

As a last check on accuracy, I connected the variable output of the CD player directly to the power amp to bypass the Pre 2L. I set the levels on the CD player and the Pre 2L exactly the same using a 1-kHz CD test tone and the SLM. The same selections sounded slightly different without the preamp in the loop, and it seemed there was a bit of sonic change, of added ambiance and spaciousness beyond that present on the recording — just a small amount, but there nonetheless; there was also a slight softening of initial percussive strikes.

### **Anthem 1P Phono Preamp**

Anthem describes the 1P as a third-generation phono design. It's a refinement of basic circuitry developed for their original Sonic

Frontiers SFP-1 and Anthem 1 phono preamp designs. It also has new and advanced power supply technology. The latter is identified as using low-noise, low-impedance shunt-regulation techniques to effectively remove the power supply as a potential source of coloration and noise disturbances. Separate shunt regulators are used for each channel to minimize inter-channel crosstalk. A high-current series pass regulator is used for the vacuum-tube filament supplies to increase tube life. Anthem used name-brand, high-quality capacitors, resistors, and hook-up wire.

Getting the 1P phono preamp operational was pretty much a repeat of the 2L operation. I inserted the four Russian tubes (two 6922 and two 12AT7) and a fuse, then reinstalled the cover. Anthem provided two extra screws for the cover, as they did for the 2L — very handy for the situation where a screw falls on the floor and vanishes. The only control on the front panel is the on-off switch, which is accompanied by a green LED to indicate power on. Widely separated, gold-plated input and output

## **N O T E S**

**Anthem Pre 2L preamplifier**, \$1299.00; Pre 1P phono preamp, \$899.00; MCA 2, \$699.00. Source: Manufacturer loan. Sonic Frontiers International, 2790 Brighton Road, Oakville, Ontario, Canada L6H 5T4, phone 905/829-3838, fax 905/829-3033, e-mail ditomaso@sonicfrontiers.com, website www.sonicfrontiers.com.

### **Associated Equipment**

My system consisted of a Parasound HCA1000A power amp, Carver CT-17 preamp-tuner, Parasound P/PH-100 phono preamp, Thorens TD320, Mark III turntable with Grado Prestige Red cartridge, Sony XA20ES CD player, and Denon TU-767 tuner. Speakers were Mach 1 model M-Two 2-way speakers sometimes used with NHT SW3 subwoofers that were run in dual mono and separately driven by an NHT SA-3 power amplifier with integral electronic crossover. Interconnect cables were by Gotham, WireWorld, Mach 1, Dunlavy, and Monster Cable, and speaker cables were Mach 1 to the Mach Ones and Original Monster Cable to the NHTs.

jacks are located on the rear panel. The power cord is detachable, as with the other two Anthem units. The 1P is large for a phono preamp, having the same dimensions as the 2L preamp, and only slightly lighter at 17.5 pounds. The 12-page owner's manual was clear and included a trouble-shooting section, but again lacked sufficient information about how to tell when tubes need replacing.

## Listening

The 1P phono preamp made a small but identifiable improvement in the reproduction of music from records compared to my smaller and less expensive Parasound solid-state phono preamp. I matched levels exactly using pink noise from a test record and the sound level meter. I had to listen very carefully to identify the differences. They consisted mainly of a widening of the sound stage, but also slightly smoother, softer sound, yet without loss of detail. There is perhaps a lit-

tle more depth, but I couldn't be sure I could reliably identify that. I had just bought a new (old) record: Dinah Washington's *What a Diff'rence a Day Makes* (Mercury MG 20479). I'm very happy with the way it sounds with the Parasound P/PH-100. I'm even happier with it through the Anthem 1P phono preamp.

On Julie London's *Love Letters* (Liberty LST 7231), sibilance was a little softer on the 1P, stage width extended beyond the speakers an equal amount, and there was slightly more depth. Both had good presentations of the spaciousness of the recording and the vocal naturalness. Channel separation was very good with both phono preamps, as were dynamics and low-level detail. Differences were subtle. The biggest difference in the sound was that the 1P was a little smoother sounding and a bit softer, with no apparent loss of detail or accuracy.

Instrument tonality, placement and relative sizes were believable


with Paul Desmond and the Modern Jazz Quartet (Finesse FW 37487). All the performers were at eye level and the sound had both ambiance and depth. Everything from the music to the applause during this live performance sounded as it should. The 1P phono stage was completely silent, both mechanically and electronically.

## Anthem MCA 2 Power Amplifier

The MCA 2 is a new solid-state power amplifier rated at 200 watts per channel into 8 ohms and 350 into 4 ohms. This 36-pound amp is 17 inches wide x 5¼ inches high x 12 inches deep. Large heat sinks run front to back on both sides inside the case, and vent through slots. There are two balanced inputs and two gold-plated RCA phono-type input jacks. The dual binding posts had shrouded plastic nuts. The shrouds made connection of spade lugs a bit difficult, but banana plugs were readily accepted.

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## Listening

The sound with the MCA 2 was a bit harder than that of the Parasound HCA 1000A. The Parasound more closely matched the smooth sound of the Anthem 2L, although both power amps use solid-state circuitry. The MCA 2 has a turn-off delay, which caught me by surprise. The normal system shutdown process is to turn off the preamp last, which I thought I was doing. However, the amp was not yet off because of the delayed relay, resulting in a resounding thump through the speakers. From then on, I turned off the amp and waited for a second power-amp relay to click off before I turned off the preamp, though there was still a small thump through the speakers each time.

The sound of the MCA 2 was definitely, if slightly, on the forward side compared to the Parasound. While not exactly etched, the sound lacked the softer, but equally detailed sound of the Parasound. The MCA 2 not unpleasant, but I

thought it was not quite as easy to listen to.

The soft hum through the speakers present with the Pre 2L driving the Parasound was louder and included a slight buzz with the 2L preamp and MCA 2 power amp combination. I found it interesting (and unusual for a power amplifier) that the MCA 2 has a two-prong plug, rather than the usual three-prong, grounded plug.

When I paired the MCA 2 with the Carver, the speaker thump, the noise through the speakers, and much of the hardness disappeared. It may be that the hybrid Pre 2L was not as well suited to controlling this aspect of the MCA 2 as the Carver.

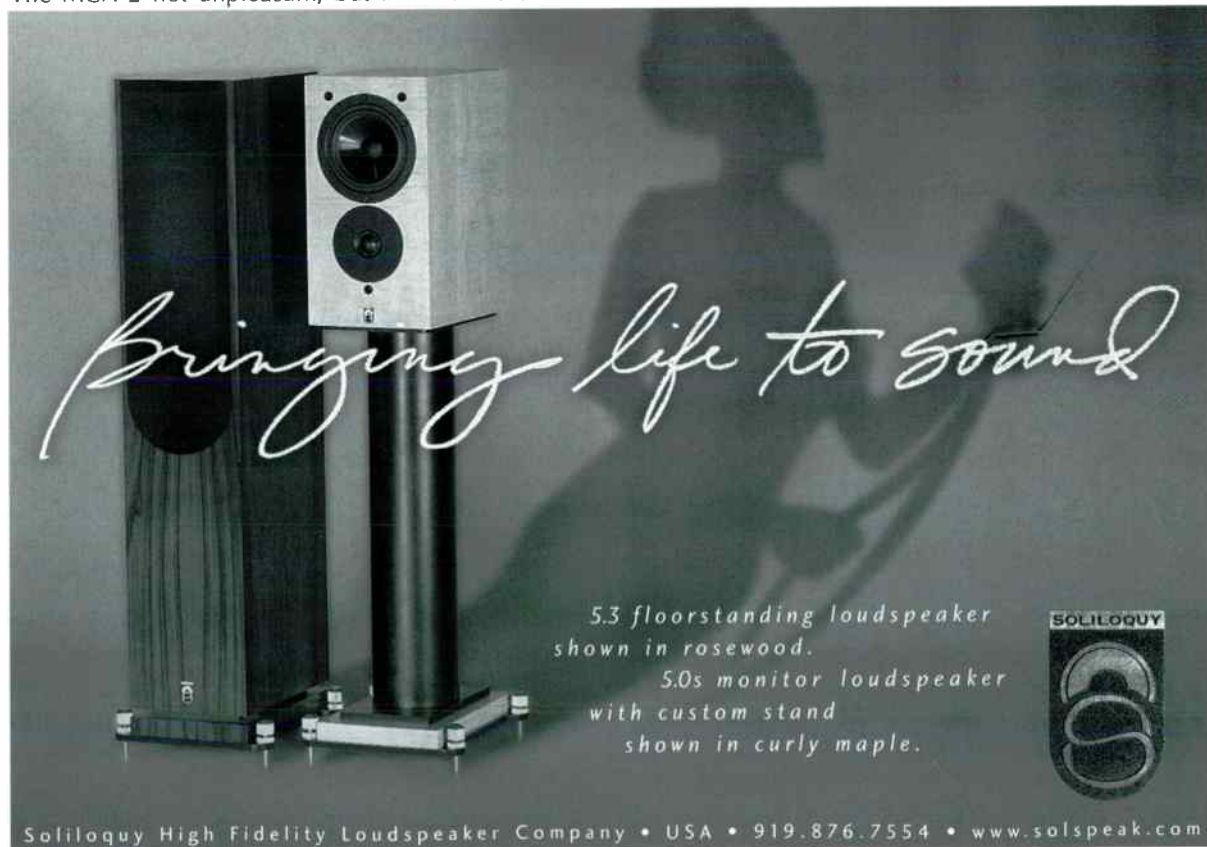
## Summary

The hybrid tube-solid state Anthem 2L preamp had good sound that added a bit of spaciousness beyond what was usual with my reference preamp, making it appear to me to be not totally accurate. It was very enjoyable to listen to, though,

and any changes it wrought were all on the pleasant side. It generated a low-level 60-Hz hum through the speakers, audible when one was fairly close to the speakers. It has adjustable output sensitivity to make matching it to a system easier. Build and parts quality appeared to be very good.

The hybrid Anthem 1P phono preamp was quiet, neutral, and very good. It comes in a rather large chassis for a phono preamp. Its performance was very good and parts were high quality. Its cover remained just slightly warmer than ambient temperature during use.

The MCA 2 solid-state power amp was not perfectly quiet through the speakers with the Pre 2L, adding a low-level buzz to the already present hum from the 2L preamp. It was totally quiet with my Carver preamp. Its sound was a bit harder than the Parasound using the 2L, but less so with the Carver. It had plenty of power and mated well with the speakers.



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# TacT RCS 2.0 Digital Room Correction Preamplifier

Anthony H. Cordesman



**I**T'S HARD TO BUY more high-end sound quality — or sheer innovation — in a single package than the TacT 2.0. This modular unit can be configured to act as a digital room-correction system, a D/A converter, an A/D converter, a parametric equalizer, and a full-fledged pre-amp. Few units at any price offer so many features or can do so much to improve the sound of your system.

## Room Correction

The core function of the TacT 2.0 is to correct the frequency and time responses of your entire system to produce a smooth flat response in spite of irregularities in your speakers or problems created by room-speaker interaction. The TacT 2.0 uses fast Fourier transformations (FFT) to make room-response measurements using your amplifier and speakers; it then applies automatic equalization circuitry to provide individual room and speaker correction for the left and right speakers.

The equalization system first makes an impulse-response measurement of your room. Filter algorithms in the TacT 2.0 then invert that response to provide a mirror image of the room's unwanted contribution. Adding in the inverted signal flattens your system's in-room response to match a target curve which you can select from a library

right in the TacT 2.0 or one that you can define.

The TacT 2.0 can perform this correction for the entire audible spectrum from the sub-bass to frequencies beyond the threshold of hearing — or over a narrower bandwidth that you select to match the performance limits of your speakers. The 2.0 simultaneously provides time correction for the left and right channels to within 6 millimeters of sound travel, and can also balance the output so that the left and right speakers produce precisely the same volume at the listening position.

## Real-World Results

TacT claims that this kind of digital room correction provides far more accuracy than you can get with traditional graphic and parametric equalizers, regardless of whether they are analog or digital, because such equalizers can offer only comparatively limited levels of correction amplitude. Furthermore, TacT says that many older equalizers impose time-domain artifacts that largely negate their gains, and even introduce more distortion than the equalization they provide is worth.

These claims are true in many cases, although there are some really excellent equalizers on the market today. To me, however, the

most serious problem in using an analog or digital equalizer without automatic room correction is that I have never found you can fully trust any given real time analyzer (RTA) or sound pressure level (SPL) meter or signal source to produce reliable results. Every device I have ever used in my room to perform frequency measurements below 200 Hz has produced at least slightly different results and usually dramatically different ones. Digital sources of pink noise, warble tones, or frequency sweeps also seem to differ at least slightly from one another, and matching one analog test record or reference tape to another is simply an exercise in frustration! My own experience with a pro third-octave analyzer is a case in point, as I found room measurements with the device were a purely subjective art form above 200 Hz. It appeared to me that the one-third-octave display did not come close to having the resolution below 200 Hz needed to provide good correction — and the problem grew steadily worse below 125 Hz! The making of such measurements was a practical nightmare, as there were radically different results with small changes in microphone placement and questionable measurements that did not track with what I heard. I've seen professional acoustics

engineers use such equipment to support their own subjective judgments with great success, but they have years of practical experience and they know when to ignore measurements as well as when to use them. The average high-end audiophile or dealer will, all too often, end up as the sonic equivalent of a self-inflicted wound.

The TacT 2.0, in contrast, performs all of the necessary measurements for you with far more accuracy than you can get from any normal RTA or SPL meter. The end result is also well worth it. You get correction of irregularities in the frequency response of each speaker and of room effects to better than 2 Hz at the listening position using the 2.0's 96-kHz sampling frequency. This resolution is also upgradeable to a 1-Hz resolution if the unit is upgraded to six DSPs. Getting this level of performance requires only minimal computer skills, and the software is good enough so that the specially calibrated TacT microphone is relatively easy to place. All you have to do to get most of the benefits of the TacT is to load the software on to your PC, connect the RS-232 cable from the computer to the TacT 2.0, put microphone in listening position (on a stand at ear height in the listening position and angled upwards and pointed between the two speakers), enter "Main Screen" in the software, click on "GO," and the system does the rest — automatically. Best of all, the TacT 2.0 does not use clumsy, complex, or awkward software. The instructions built into the software guide you smoothly and intuitively through most steps, without missing or confusing steps, or the kind of dead ends that leave you guessing what you should do next. Trust me on this, I'm a MAC person. I regard PCs and Windows as creatures of the devil, or the magazine's editor and even I find the interface to be simple and user-friendly.

## Advanced Features

Serious audiophiles will, however, spend considerably more time in set up because the TacT 2.0 can be used as something approaching the ultimate tool for tweaking. It can measure room and speaker response from several different room locations before correction is applied. This means your speakers can be placed in the positions with the best mix of timbre, transparency, and sound stage detail. After all, digital room correction cannot compensate for the mechanical limits on a speaker's woofer, determine the best mix of reflected and direct sound, or find the best location in terms of depth, imaging, and sound-stage width.

There is also no single definition of "flat response" that an audiophile can use as a reference, and the TacT does not attempt to create a flat response at the listening location; the end result would be far too much high frequency energy. Instead, it corrects to a smooth "target curve," producing a musically natural timbre. This target curve assumes a steep roll-off in very deep bass response and a gradual roll-off in the upper treble. In a perfect world, this target curve should be tailored to the -3 dB limits of a given speaker, and the level of correction should be adjusted to ensure that no driver will be driven into distortion by over-equalization. Many audiophiles will want to alter the treble frequency response according to how live or dead their room is. Relying on the reference target curve that the 2.0 uses as a reference works quite well in most cases, but the most dedicated audiophiles are probably going to want to create their own target curve. This means spending considerable listening time adapting the "target" or frequency correction curves to your taste, but few forms of "tweaking" can have more practical value or less incremental cost.

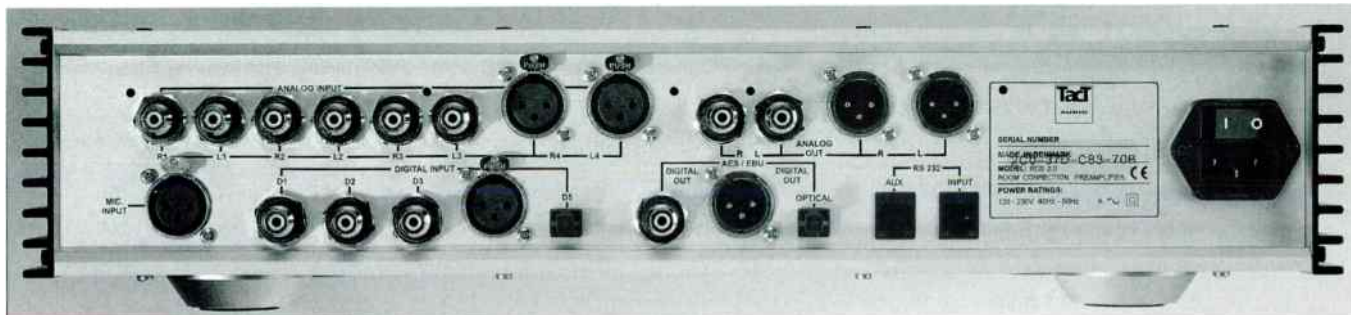
The TacT 2.0 also has separate parametric equalization that can be applied after you have set the unit up for room correction. You can store up to nine different equalization curves and you can tailor each curve precisely to your personal listening needs by using the on-screen equalizer. This allows you to use the exact frequency balance that you feel best suits a given kind of recording or to correct for problems in the timbre of your tape recorder or cartridge, or use older tape and record equalization curves if you're into collecting antique recordings. You can even use the bypass curve to listen without room correction or equalization.

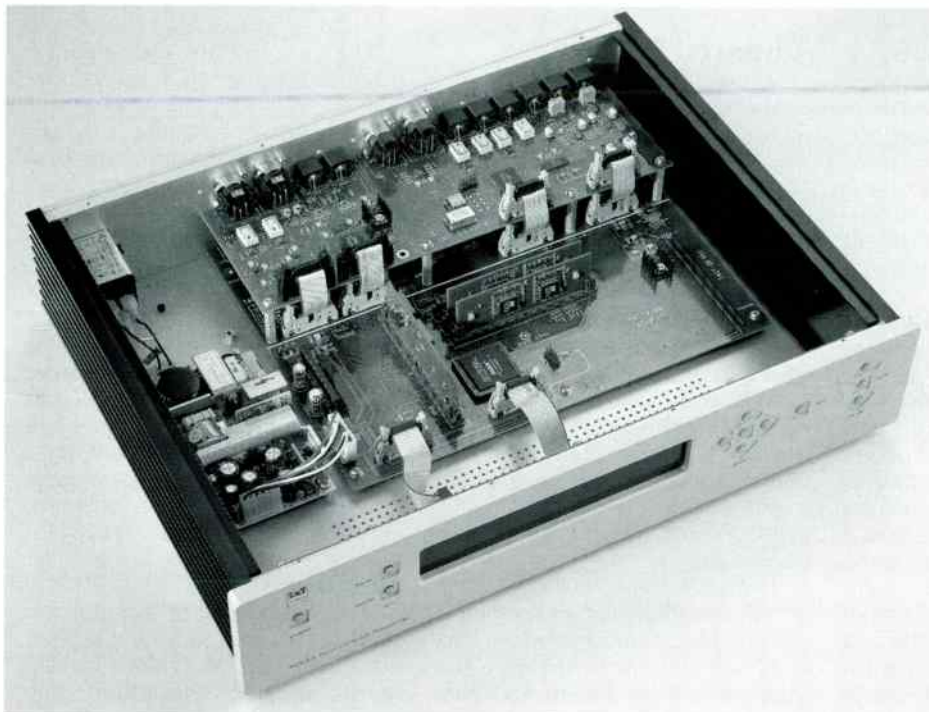
## Ease of Use

If this discussion of "tweaksmanship" sounds intimidating, it shouldn't. These are just options for the most dedicated audiophiles. The fully automatic basic setup allows you to get at least 90 per cent of the sonic benefits from the TacT 2.0, and will give most audiophiles far smoother frequency response than they have ever heard before. Furthermore, it only takes about 2½ minutes to calibrate and program the system for this operation, and you can then make it happen with a single click of your mouse. Equally important, there is a well-engineered and easy-to-operate remote control, which provides easy switching between inputs as well as a digital volume control and balance controls adjustable with 0.1-dB resolution, some of smoothest I have encountered. The remote's bypass feature allows you to switch back to no correction and compare a room or recording corrected versus equalized.

## Modular Features

The 2.0 is a modular system that can be bought in several configurations. The core is the TacT 2.0 DD, which provides two channels of





room correction using three ultra-fast Motorola DSPs. You have a choice of 96-kHz / 24-bit, 48-kHz / 16-bit, or 44-kHz / 16-bit formats, upgradeable to 192 kHz. This core unit has five digital inputs (three RCA coaxial, 1 balanced XLR, and 1 Toslink optical) and three digital outputs. It sells for \$2,950. All this is complex, so take time choosing.

TacT's 2.0 AD keeps all of the features of the core unit and adds a 96-kHz / 24-bit analog-to-digital (A / D) converter module with high performance AKM converters. It has with four relay-switched stereo inputs, one with balanced XLR and three with RCA connectors. The AD module sells for an additional \$690. It can be used as a full-fledged analog and digital preamp with the new generation of amplifiers that have a digital input like the TacT Millennium amplifier.

TacT 2.0 DA, Core + DA converter adds a digital-to-analog converter to the core unit. It uses a 96-kHz / 24-bit digital-to-analog (D / A) converter module with high performance AKM converters. If you do not have an analog front end and rely solely on CD, DAT, or DVD, it will provide digital-to-analog conversion; pre-amplification including input switching, and room correction. It has five digital inputs, three digital outputs, and two pairs of analog outputs — one set of balanced XLR connections and one set

of coaxial RCA jacks. The DA module sells for an additional \$590.

Finally, there is total package, the TacT 2.0 AA, Core + AD + DA converter. It is a complete digital preamplifier and digital-to-analog converter that can replace both the preamplifier and digital-to-analog converter in existing analog systems. It has five digital inputs, four stereo analog inputs, and three digital outputs plus two pairs analog outputs — one set of balanced XLR connections and one set of coaxial RCA jacks. This all-inclusive variation on the TacT 2.0 sells for \$4,230. Even with all possible bells and whistles, the TacT 2.0 is remarkably compact. It measures 450-mm (17.7 inches) wide x 89-mm (3.5 inches) high x 370 (14.5 inches) mm deep and only weighs 16 pounds. This is a good deal in two ways. First, you get a preamp, D/A converter, equalizer, and speaker/room correction system in one compact package, sharply cutting down on the number of different "black boxes" and interconnects you need. Second, the TacT 2.0 may not be cheap, but it certainly is highly competitive in price with many separate high-end preamps or D / A converters that provide far fewer features and capabilities.

### Sound Quality

The sound and features of the TacT 2.0 AA, Core + AD + DA con-

verter combination shows best—how the TacT's technology performs in a normal high-end system. (It is also hard for any reviewer to turn down a combination of an analog and digital preamp, a digital room measurement device, a digital room correction device, and digital equalizer.) Any audiophile interested in finding out the limits of his system is going to want it all!

Nevertheless, you may want to take a different and cheaper approach. For example, the TacT 2.0 DA could be used with any existing system that only has a digital source, and the 2.0 would provide both digital-to-analog conversion and room correc-

tion, leaving alone the analog paths between any existing preamp, tuner, and phono stage. The 2.0 DD might be used between an existing CD, DVD, or DAT transport and an existing D / A converter. In this latter configuration, you eliminate virtually all inherent sources of sonic coloration, since the TacT 2.0 has almost no distortion in its pure digital mode, regardless of how much room correction and parametric equalization is applied. You don't, however, get the clock correction and jitter reduction or digital up-sampling features of some stand-alone D / A processors.

If you do use the full-up TacT 2.0 (TacT 2.0 AA, Core + AD + DA converter), you will add some trace colorations of the kind that are inevitable with the use of any A / D and D / A converter. In the case of the TacT 2.0, however, these colorations have been reduced to the extremely low levels that make it competitive with some of the best reference preamps around.

Please note, the TacT 2.0 isn't perfect. The best high-end reference analog preamps still provide, at least for me, better performance in dealing with dynamic contrasts and better transparency. However, the TacT 2.0 is still really good in these respects: Dead quiet, without any hum or white noise-like hiss even with my ear right next to my speaker. Low-level detail and resolution

are very good, deep bass dynamics are excellent, and the upper octaves are very musical.

Even with both the A / D and D / A converters active, there is remarkably little added coloration when I used the 2.0 with my VPI TNT and HW Jr tonearm combination and reference cartridges. One clear sign of the quality here is that the minor sonic differences between the latest Wheaton and VPI HW Jr tonearms came through quite clearly. (The deep bass in the VPI is slightly better, the Wheaton has a slightly cleaner upper midrange).

I prefer my Mark Levinson 360S as a pure D / A converter; its harmonic textures on strings and woodwinds are a touch more refined and musically natural, but the TacT 2.0 does very well indeed, even on the most demanding string and percussion passages, complex orchestral sections, and most demanding soprano voices. If you ignore the fact that the TacT provides room and speaker correction, equalization, and pre-amp features, it is still directly comparable in sound quality to stand-alone D / A converters in its price range.

We may still be several sonic generations away from the point at which you can combine A / D, signal processing, and D / A into a unit that can compete in every respect with the most expensive analog but the TacT 2.0 is damn good! Upgrading to 192-kHz operation might remove several more sonic veils, while the capacity to add three more DSP chips, change soft-

much of this live, and I know how individual instruments and solo voice are supposed to sound. After several hundred CDs and records worth of listening, I cannot fault the TacT's room correction. It strips away most bass colorations caused by room-interaction problems, difficulties inevitable in every home set up that does not have room correction. No amount of one-third-octave equalization, wall and room treatment, or shifts in speaker placement can completely avoid the wide range of bass response irregularities normally present in any real-world listening room. These are realities that speaker designer Roy Allison measured and reported on over

two decades ago, ones physically impossible to avoid. These same room interaction problems explain why each uncorrected speaker in a stereo system sounds at least slightly different from the other, and why the same speakers sound different in different rooms. The different position in the same room means different interaction problems and colorations, which affects the sound of different instruments in different ways.

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**I'm impressed with the sound of the TacT 2.0 and I'm making it one of my reference units.**

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ware, and make modular improvements means easy upgrades to SACD and DVD-A and anything else that might come along.

### **Killing Room Interactions**

The key sonic advantage of the TacT 2.0 is that it provides full room- and speaker-response correction in a way that that sounds truly musically natural. Most of my music listening is to acoustic classical music and jazz. I have listened to

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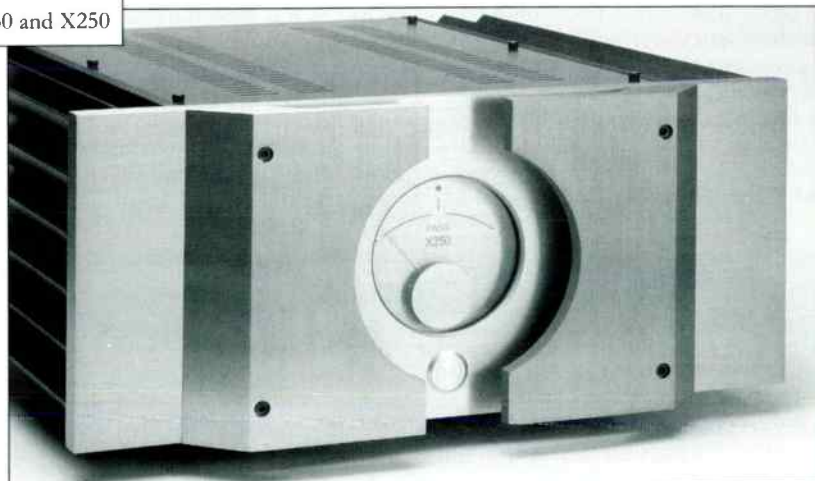
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The most significant improvements were in the bass timbre of percussion, strings, woodwinds, brass and voice. The improvement in the mid and upper bass is also far more striking than any improvements I have been able to get from optimizing speaker location, listening position, or room treatment. The TacT 2.0 provided these improvements with a wide range of speakers. It made the sound of my reference Dunlavy SC-Vs, Revel Salons, Thiel 7.2s more realistic with organ, bass, and cello, while drums sounded more natural, as did the lower register of both piano and woodwinds. The improvement was striking on bass guitar. The TacT 2.0 made it easy for me to set up my Revel Salons where the sound stage was best while ensuring that room interaction did not exaggerate the bass. It did a similar job of smoothing out minor room interaction problems in a pair of Wilson MAXxs I had under review.

Improving the timbre in the bass affects the overall timbre of instruments, and gave a smoothness and coherence to the overall timbre of most instruments and voice sound more natural. The sound of the Harpsichord was notably more realistic. So was the overall timbre of the violin, guitar and piano. The timbre of the brass and woodwind instruments "locked in," and this improvement in timbre was quite audible on complex mixes of instruments like the Capella - Istropolitana recording of Vivaldi's "Wind and Brass Concerti" (Naxos 8.550386).

Things got even better when I used the memories of the TacT 2.0 to create and store a range of different frequency correction curves. I could correct for bright and warm recordings, add or subtract a touch of mid bass, and create a library of "target curves" to correct the problems in many recordings. For example, the strings in the Larchibudeli &

Smithsonian Chamber Players recording of Mendelssohn's Octets for Strings (Sony SK 48 307) are normally a bit too bright, which is typical of many of today's otherwise good recordings. A little experimenting, and I'd shaped a smooth roll-off that made all the instruments into ones from the Stradivarius workshops but did cut the hint of glare. Another adjustment put a dip in the bass to correct for the excessive warmth of old Atlantic Jazz recordings. I created a special setting to boost the deep bass to compensate for the bass loss typical in many British organ recordings and so on. Let me note, that these differences are the kind any non-audiophile can easily hear and appreciate. In one test in a friend's home, I ended up producing different equalization curves for the husband and wife.

To improve the ease of set up of my system, I used the TacT 2.0 to measure the actual frequency response of my speakers so I could adjust their location and my listening position, thus reducing the need for bass reinforcement by moving the speakers some arbitrary distance toward the rear wall. I could then use the 2.0's frequency correction features to get flat frequency response. As a result, the frequency correction used was increasingly subtractive, requiring less amplifier power and producing less distortion. I also found that getting the best uncorrected frequency measurements in positions where there was the best sound staging, and then applying the TacT's automatic frequency correction, allowed me to widen the sound stage slightly without losing the important center-fill imaging or adding excessive room reflections.

I did find that the TacT 2.0 worked best in normally damped rather than over-damped listening rooms. Under fairly standard conditions, the time- and frequency-

response corrections of the 2.0 produced a very neutral sound stage, with really excellent imaging, and a fine sense of depth and width. It allows the natural sound stage of a recording to come through with minimal coloration and a great deal of detail. The precise control of frequency balance and time of the left and right speaker makes the soundstage more coherent, while the reduction of coloration from room modes and reflections will usually makes the imaging less blurred and provides more detailed and coherent information about the depth of the stage.

The TacT 2.0, incidentally, sometimes provided a cleaner midrange than even the best reference quality digital-to-analog converters. This came through quite clearly on cello, guitar, piano, and baritone voice. While some competing electronics are more transparent, all of the benefits of this transparency cannot come through as long as the speaker-room interaction colors the lower midrange response. The end result was an interesting trade-off. The 2.0 is usually noticeably better in the warmth that communicates much of the emotional impact of music; its reference-quality analog competition is usually slightly more transparent in the rest of the midrange and treble frequencies which I find shape much of the intellectual and analytic content of music. At the same time, recordings that lack a natural or realistic sound stage sound a bit flat and dead, but the TacT should not be faulted for not adding reverberation to such recordings. A room that is over-damped or filled with passive sound-correction devices to do a much worse job of doing what the TacT does well. Perhaps in some future version, equipment like the TacT may be able to add reverberation or some musically satisfactory sound processing so that dead recordings can be made to sound more natural.

## Serious Problems

I also tried out the 2.0 with second-rate speakers, and in both boomy and dry sounding rooms, to see how much really bad stuff it could fix. In these cases, the benefits of the automated room-correction and time alignment functions of the unit were always beneficial and the improvements were far more

## NOTES

**TacT RCS 2.0**, DD, \$2950.00; AD Module, \$699.00; DA Module, \$599.00. TacT Audio, 201 Gates Rd., #G, Little Ferry, NJ 07643; vox 201/440-9300, fax 201/440-5580, website [www.tactaudio.com](http://www.tactaudio.com), e-mail [info@tactaudio.com](mailto:info@tactaudio.com).

obvious although the end result was not as good. The TacT 2.0 cannot perform miracles. It can't make a bad or mediocre speaker or listening room into a very good or great sounding system. Equalizing a bad speaker to flat response might make it distort in the bass if it lacks sufficient dynamic range. You can't push the power and extension of the bass beyond the physical limits of the speaker, and I would be very careful in using the TacT 2.0 with electrostatic or other speakers with limited dynamic range.

The TacT 2.0 will, however, get rid of many problems in the frequency response of mediocre speakers, and it will correct for either "boom" or "suck outs." It will get rid of spikes and peaks in overall frequency response, and improve imaging and clarity when speakers are badly placed or lack time alignment. The sound is almost always cleaner and transients and dynamic changes are more natural.

### Summing Up

Don't get me wrong. I am not giving up the mix of Krell, Mark Levinson, Meridian, Pass, and Theta digital-to-analog converters and analog preamps I now use as refer-

ences. There are still hard choices to be made in the search for the best reference system.

The TacT 2.0 is a delight to use, to put it simply, and I believe that the superior frequency response that it produces compensates for whatever minor residual colorations it possesses. (Remember, too, things may get even better when the maximum frequency of the digital processing in the unit is raised from 96 kHz to 192 kHz.)

In short, I am very impressed with the sound of the TacT 2.0 and I am making it one of my reference units. It represents an evolution, not a revolution, but it does prove that any audiophile looking for the best real-world sound should at least consider automated room correction. Against reference units, this still has to be done at the cost of audible trade-offs, but this may not be the case in a few months. If the 2.0 is further improved or perhaps some other manufacturer's product reaches such a level of performance, it will be very hard to argue for today's preamps and separate D/A processors.

The TacT 2.0 should also make it through the coming format wars with minimal pain. No one can now

say what conversion to SACD or DVD-A really means. The 2.0's ability to add three more DSPs does, however, give it considerably processing flexibility. The worst case would be a need to swap out the mother board but all of the expensive components are on plug-in modules. TacT is also working on new software upgrades, including several "fun" features like knob functions and programmable displays.

One ought not forget that the same kind of technology in the 2.0 is likely to be even more important in solving the problems in home theater systems. TacT already has a prototype of a 10-channel audio-video processor called the TacT TCS Theater Correction System with room correction for virtually any combination of speakers and subwoofers, and decoding for DTS, AC-3, M-PEG, Dolby Pro-Logic, and Dolby Stereo. Having not forgotten analog, TacT is talking about cutting a test record that would allow correction for all the frequency problems in a phono stage from the tip of the stylus onwards.

Take a good hard look at your stereo or audio-video source unit; it may be turning into a dinosaur.

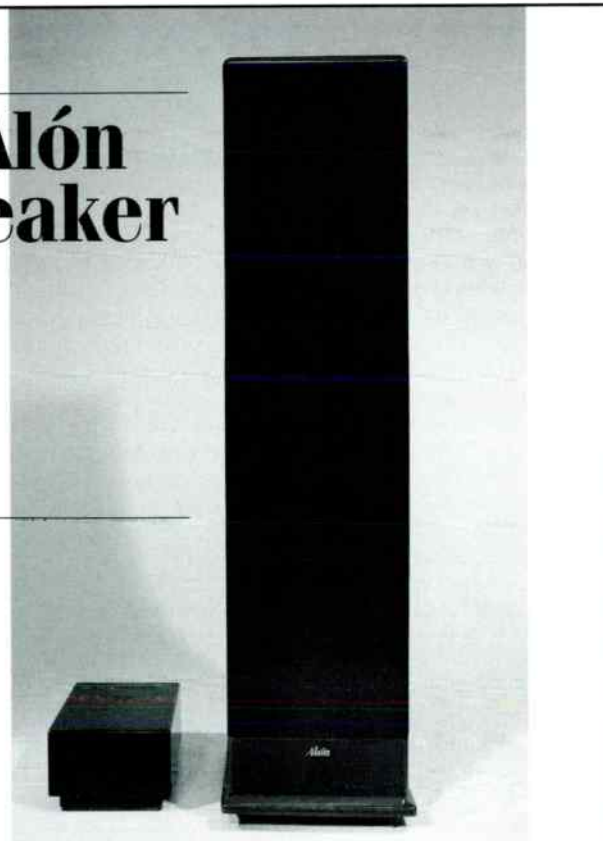
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# Yamaha RP-U100 Personal Computer Receiver

Bascom H. King



**T**HE YAMAHA RP-U100 Personal Receiver was designed to bring high-quality audio to the PC environment. Among its many fascinating and useful features are an USB interface allowing remote control of the RP-U100 through a supplied program running on one's PC, an AM/FM tuner with 40 programmable presets, Yamaha's Near-Field Cinema DSP (Digital Sound Field Processing) technology, and Virtual Dolby Digital processing.

Designed to be vertically oriented and placed next to a monitor, speaker, or CPU unit in a PC setup, the RP-U100 is an attractive and appealing piece of gear. Located at the top right of the front panel is a vertical array of four push-button selector switches for external "PC," "Aux 1," and "Aux 2" inputs, and "Tuner" for the internal tuner. To the left of each of these push-but-

tons is the identifying nomenclature and an illuminated strip to indicate what been selected. Two of these switches, for the "PC" and "Tuner," have multiple actions depending on how many times they're pushed. The PC switch, for example, alternates between analog, digital, and USB inputs, while the "Tuner" switch alternates between the present tuner frequency and the current preset number.

Next down is a LCD display screen for showing various settings such as "Selected" input source, volume, sound-field program, and various other information. Placed below the display screen is a square array of four push-buttons. The top left of the group, labeled "DSP," activates the sound field programs, the top right, labeled "P-SET," selects alternately between the modes of "Frequency Display" for

the tuner or tuner preset select. The bottom two are "Up/Down" keys used to select sound-field programs, preset stations, and tune the AM/FM tuner. Near the bottom is a large volume control knob. At the very bottom of the front panel, to the left, is a headphone jack and the power on/off button to the right.

Connections on the rear panel are arranged in four groups: Speaker outputs, analog inputs and outputs (I/O), digital I/O, and tuner antenna inputs. The analog group has a pair of outputs that bridges the "Aux 2" inputs and a single subwoofer output. Present in the digital I/O group are the USB connector, a coax S/P DIF input connector, two Toslink optical inputs, and a Toslink optical output. One of the optical inputs is paired with the coax digital input with the optical input taking priority if both sources are connected to



both. The other optical input is paired with the "Aux 2" analog input. Again, the optical input has priority if both input sources are present. The digital optical, "Aux 2" analog, and USB outputs have record output signals present depending on what input source is selected.

When the supplied control program is installed on a PC connected to the RP-U100 via a USB cable, control of the RP-U100 is now possible from the PC. This mode of operation enables four control functions not available in the standalone mode. These include a nine-band octave equalizer, a set of controls affecting the apparent room size, degree of DSP effect, and one's apparent seat position, a set of controls for balancing level and positioning apparent rear speaker location, and a dynamic range control. Figures 1 through 3 illustrate these functions as they appear on the PC screen. Figure 1 is an expansion of the basic DSP pull-down at the left from the RP-U100 icon above when the "Virtual" and "D-Range" items at the bottom are clicked. Figure 2 is what appears when the edit item is clicked. When the "Advanced" item is pressed, Figure 2 expands into Figure 3 with more yet things to adjust!

Needless to say, all of this gives one plenty to play around with. My basic setup for evaluating the RP-U100 was using a pair of Eminent Technology LFT-11 speakers disposed about plus and minus 45 degrees to either side of my computer monitor and spaced about 4½ feet apart and tilted up to aim at my ears. A HP 8590C computer was connected to the RP-U100 via USB and was running the control application. In playing a number of CDs and DVD videos, I found the nine-band equalizer handy for reducing the edginess and harshness of some program material and adjusting tonal balance. While I experimented quite a bit with the surround effects, I wasn't really able to get the sense of any surround behind me or way off to the sides. However, I was able to get good, involving placement in a frontal arc. I was generally quite favorably impressed with the overall sound quality of the Yamaha. In this near-field listening setup, it would drive the ET speak-

ers to levels beyond what I could tolerate. For comparison purposes, I tried a Centrasound CII 12W tube amp and an AMC 3020 integrated amp in the setup. Overall, I preferred the RP-U100.

At one point in the review process, I hooked up the RP-U100 in my main sound system driving my B&W 801 speakers. In this service, it drove the relatively inefficient 801s to quite satisfactory




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**Yamaha's RP-U100 is a terrific little receiver. I recommend its use in a computer listening setup.**

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levels for most of the music I play. Further, it sounded pretty damned good and I happily used it for a number of days in this arrangement.

Generally, operating the RP-U100 was reasonably easy. It does take some concentrated poring over the manual and experimentation to get all the features to work, though. I did have some considerable trouble trying to learn to set up the tuner presets. I finally got it though, and the presets faithfully stayed put over the whole review period.

One disappointing aspect of using the RP-U100 was that I couldn't get my HP computer to put out CD sound over the USB buss. The regular computer Windows sound

**Computer screen captures are not the best way to show the Yamaha RP-U100's versatility.**

files would go through just fine. It turns out that not every, and perhaps not a few, computers won't permit this CD sound playback operation via USB. Checking with Yamaha and HP verified that CD wouldn't work over the USB buss with the particular HP computer I have. I also found out that a recent Sony

laptop that I use wouldn't permit CD sound over the USB. One also has to be sure, because of hardware and software compatibility difficulties, so that the application runs properly, that the Windows software in your computer is Windows 98 and was installed at the factory. Mac OS 9.0.4 can be downloaded from the Apple website, [www.apple.com/macos](http://www.apple.com/macos).

In conclusion, the RP-U100 is a terrific little receiver, especially considering its sound quality, features, and price. I heartily recommend it to enhance listening pleasure in the computer environment that so many of us spend time in these days.

## NOTES

**Yamaha RP-U100 Personal Receiver, \$499.00.** Yamaha, 6660 Orangethorpe, Buena Park, CA 90620. vox 714/522-9105, fax 714/228-3343, website [www.yamaha.com](http://www.yamaha.com), e-mail [sales@yamaha.com](mailto:sales@yamaha.com).

### Associated Equipment

Eminent Technology LFT-11 Multimedia Speaker System, HP 8590C computer; 600 MHz PIII, 128 MB RAM 27 GB HDD, B&W 801 Series 3 speakers, PS Audio Lambda Special CD transport, Perpetual Technologies P-1A DSP-based Digital Correction Engine, Perpetual Technologies P-3A D/A converter, Monolithic Sound P^3 Perpetual Power Plant, Centrasound CII 12 Watt tube power amp, AMC 3020 Stereo Integrated Amplifier.

# Sony TAE-9000ES A/V Stereo Surround Preamplifier

John Gatski



**S**ONY'S PREMIUM ES LINE of products never fail to impress me. From the CDP-XA7ES high-end CD player of a couple years ago to its latest line of DSD and DVD players, these products have always been able to compete with the best in their respective audiophile classes.

Sony's TAE-9000ES digital surround preamp fits right into the ES pedigree with a combination of user features, controls, state-of-the-art sound, and connection flexibility. It includes the ability to decode Dolby Digital (AC-3), DTS and up to 24-bit, 96 kHz PCM audio from DVD audio. Besides the normal surround fields, Sony's own digital soundfields give the listener even more choices. For the pure audiophile, the TAE-9000ES ain't no slouch either. Its top-grade power supply and output devices are engineered for transparent stereo listening, especially with the ability to decode 24-bit 96 kHz DVDs when they become available. (Or how about Sony's own DSD players through the the analog jacks?)

## Features

The TAE-9000ES exudes *premium* as soon as you pull it out of the box, despite its moderate \$1,799.00 price. The substantial, attractive preamp is adorned with plenty of desirable features, the gamut of connection options, and a future-facing "remote commander" touch-pad. Because of the wealth of features and the remote, the learning curve is a bit steeper than usual, but the effort is worth it.

The front panel looks like a typical Sony receiver or preamp, exemplifying the trend toward fewer knobs as full-featured remotes and digital processing gain further foothold in audio electronics. Controls include On/Off switch, input selector knob (for DVD, laserdisc, CD, tuner, phono, tuner, MiniDisc/DAT, TV/DBS, Tape Deck and VCR (Video 1-3); master volume, main menu (for selection of speaker set up), EQ, surround level and preamp customization parameters) and "+/-," which changes the main functions' designated param-

eters. The front panel also contains buttons for the EQ bank, auto digital format for the incoming digital signals, soundfield mode, two channel mode, audio split — a function that enables another audio source to be played along with the video source — and digital/analog input.

The main center display shows all the functions and various setup and surround parameters. Another set of indicators lights shows optical/coaxial digital connection: *Dolby Digital*, *Dolby Pro Logic AC-3*, *DTS*, *MPEG* or *Dolby Digital RF* decoding. Speaker indicators show which channels are active in the decoding, and whether the *LFE* (low frequency effects) channel is engaged. The dynamic range indicator displays whether the dynamic range compression function is on.

Around back are a host of audio and video connectors, both digital and analog. For audio, the analog options include RCA jacks for phono (yes, a bona fide phono preamp), tuner, CD, MD/DAT in / record out, tape in / record out, TV,

DVD, and three separate video in/record out jacks.

Digital connections include: CD (TOSlink optical and coax), MD/DAT (TOSlink optical input/output) TV (TOSlink optical in) DVD (TOSlink optical and coaxial) and laserdisc (PCM TOSlink optical/coaxial and Dolby Digital RF coaxial).

For the surround or stereo operation, the preamp analog outputs include left, right center, left rear, right rear and subwoofer. There are no analog channel inputs, however, to accommodate DVD players that have their own D/A converter.

Video I/Os include S-video and composite video for TV (in only), DVD, laserdisc, the three auxiliary video options and monitor. Lacking, however, are any component video connectors for the HDTV or EDTV sets now on the market. A video processor I/O is available for this who wish to manipulate the video (titler, effects generator, etc.)

I noticed a few other jacks on the back including a microphone input and RS-232 port; both of these are said to be for future upgrades — the later perhaps for new software upgrades as they emerge. The microphone input would enable the TAE-9000ES to also function as a room analyzer which would be useful for speaker setup.

S-link connections allow for direct wired control of Sony amplifiers or other Sony audio/video products.

Inside, Sony packs a lot of hardware including some big-time DSP power with three 32-bit processors for the Dolby, DTS surround and other decoding functions. Audio specifications, as you would expect from the Sony ES line, are truly exemplary.

## Setup

I used the Sony TAE-9000ES mainly in my home theater, but also swapped speakers when using it for audiophile stereo listening. For the home theater, I installed the preamp in line with a Carver three-channel amp for the front speakers and a Carver two-channel amp for the rear. An Audio Control Bijou multi-channel EQ linked the Sony / Carvers. Components included a Panasonic DVD player, RCA Dolby

Digital DSS receiver, A Denon LA-3500 laserdisc player and a stereo VCR.

A Toshiba 30-inch direct-view TV was used as a monitor, fed via the S-video cable from the TAE-9000ES. Speakers included Westlake LC8.1 left- and right-fronts,

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## In music mode, using CDs, this digitally based preamp acquits itself pretty well.

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Westlake LC2.65 center, NHT surrounds and a Paradigm 15-inch subwoofer. I also used a set of Legacy Studio speakers (my personal favorite small monitors) during dedicated stereo music listening.

Before I set the TAE-9000ES' various parameters, I studied the manual for the remote control (RM-TP501E). The touch pad-design takes a bit of time to learn, but eventually it opens up a whole new world of remote control. It includes selection of sources, setting the soundfields, adjusting speaker levels, adjusting speaker parameters and setting the EQ. From the remote, you can even download and read info from a Sony CD or MD player (song title, time, etc.).

After familiarizing myself with the remote, I jumped right into the setup. I have handled a lot of surround receivers and preamps from various manufacturers; the Sony was one of the easy ones. First, I engaged the surround speaker setup mode, it includes setting the preamp to match each speaker's size — large or small in order to adequately reproduce bass. Large speakers can reproduce bass under 80 Hz, thus the speaker size should

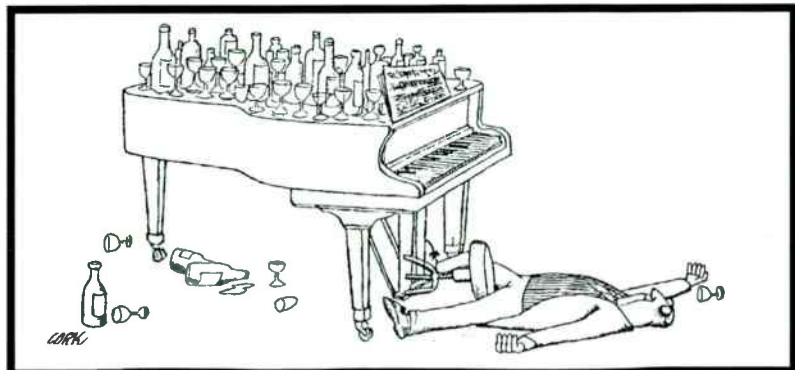
be set to "large." If your speakers are small, selecting the "small" designation will route the bass to the subwoofer. If you have no subwoofer, better set the size to "large."

Other speaker selection functions include: Subwoofer "yes/no" and front, center, rear and subwoofer speaker distances. If you don't have a subwoofer, selecting "no" routes all bass, including the LFE channel, to the front speakers. The speaker-distance adjustment helps to adjust the delay so that the sound from each speaker reaches the listener at the same time. The user can also adjust subwoofer

phase and the front and center speaker bass roll-off frequency, which is set at the default 80 Hz. This applies to speakers set to "small." Two other speaker setup parameters, "rear speaker position" and "rear speaker height," are designed to enhance the effectiveness of Sony's Digital Cinema Sound feature.

I adjusted the speaker levels to get a relative equal output from all the speakers, including the subwoofer. Using the manual test signal mode from the remote, I measured and adjusted each channel's output using an Audio Control Real Time Analyzer (RTA). I also adjusted the EQ for a response through my speakers similar to what I get from my normal home theater set up. With the TAE-9000ES EQ, you can adjust the adjust bass, midrange and treble for the five main channels. The EQ is very effective. In my room I get a null in the front channel from 90 Hz to 130 Hz; about 3-dB boost in those frequencies fattens up voices. By the way, all the user EQ settings can be stored in memory.

A few other adjustments worth mentioning are: "Dynamic Range



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Compression," useful for low volume listening; "Digital Dialog Trim Adjustment" for improving dialog intelligibility, "Digital Surround Trim Adjustment" to increase the subtle surround effects' magnitude, and "LFE Mix Level," which allows the LFE effect to be

adjusted without affecting the bass routed to the subwoofer from the main channels. Nice feature. Those engineers at Sony think of everything.

### The Audition

After my set up, I grabbed a pile of DVDs, CDs and laserdiscs and kicked back with the remote to do some listening and viewing. The touch-pad remote took a little getting used to, but I got the hang of it pretty quickly. I though the remote's display was bit too dim, but, hey, my eyes have suffered years of VDT wear and tear.

I first tried out the DVD *Lost in Space*. It contains great spatial sound effects and deep bass within the soundtrack. Sony's 32-bit processing certainly enhanced the smoothness and accuracy. The disc never sounded better. The aggressive and relentless action soundtrack of the *The Fugitive* also stood out.

On some movie soundtrack music from DVDs, orchestras can often sound harsh at higher levels. I never know if it is the production or compression artifacts from Dolby Digital; the Sony TAE-9000ES showed me that the harshness existed in the gear I was listening to previously. Dolby Digital music was clean. With movie after movie, the sound was almost always smooth. (I did not try DTS titles since I had no software at the time. DTS DVDs are not as plentiful yet as Dolby Digital, but I have sampled DTS laserdiscs in the past and found them quite good quality. Maybe just a touch cleaner on movies than Dolby Digital; DTS uses less compression.)

I did try Sony Digital Theater Sound modes (there are 28). Several were convincing for music listening, such as "jazz club and "church.

Some of the movie modes were good, but others were a bit too exaggerated. An adjustment of the effect can make it more is tenable. Other listeners may have a different

opinion, but I prefer the discrete multi-channel of Dolby Digital (or DTS) over the added

## My problem is that I always want every ES product that comes out.

ambient effects many audio manufacturers have added to processors. Still, Sony's DSP soundfields are about as good as I have heard.

In the music mode with CDs. The Sony acquitted itself pretty well. It does not sound quite as detailed or transparent as my high-end dedicated preamps (Legacy's High Current solid state preamp, Rogue Audio's Model 99 tube preamp, Pass Labs Aleph P), but it is reasonably smooth and about as sonically good as you can get out of a box that contains so many functions.

On the Carlos Heredia "Gypsy Flamenco" (Chesky CD WO126), the Sony TAE-9000ES did a nice job of reproducing the subtle finger noise of the guitar playing as well as the sound of the room. And I liked the sound of the McCoy Tyner Quartet's "New York Reunion" (Chesky JD 51). The piano's percussive quality came through quite clear. In listening to a variety of CDs from different music formats, my notes were all positive. As good as CDs are at their 16-bit limit, Sony's line of high bandwidth DSD players should sound much better through the TAE-9000ES.

### Summary

If a full-featured A/V preamp with state-of-the-art processing power and built-in upgradability is on your roster of potential purchases, put the Sony TAE-9000ES on your list. As I stated in the intro, the ES line of products are hard to beat. My problem with the ES line is that I always want one of every ES product that comes out. Now how about one those ES DSD players....

JOHN GATSKI is group publisher with IMAS Publishing's professional audio magazine group, which includes Pro Audio Review and Audio Media.

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Stereo Review, Dec. 96

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