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—Robert Deutsch, Stereophile, Vol. 23 No.6, on the Studio/100



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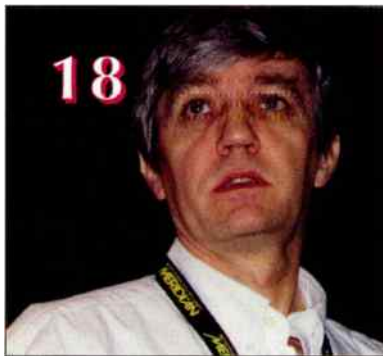
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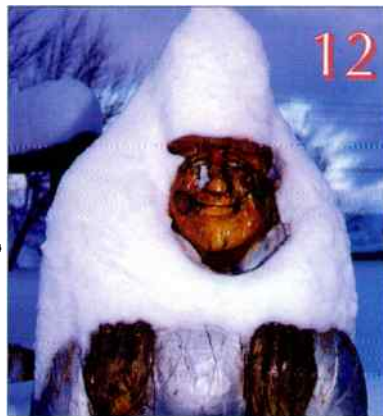
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Photo: David Gahr

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Senior Editors Mark Block
Russ Novak
Cover Artist George Angelini

CONTRIBUTING EDITORS

Frank Alles, Bill Brassington, Chuck Bruce, Hector Crest, Howard Terzler, Jim Franc, John Hellow, Benjamin Irvy, Lewis Lanece, Karl Lutzier, Ron Nagle, David Nemzer, Christopher Noblet, Arthur Paxton, Clement Perry, Robert Perry, Joel Shuman, Michael Tearson, Jon Tiven, Les Turoczy, Ross Wagner, Jerry Walsh, and Bill Wells.

ADVERTISING DIRECTOR

Alan Keister, 800.671-1030
FAX, 9-3, Eastern Time: 973/535-3210

THE AUDIOPHILE SOCIETY OFFICERS

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Vice President	Bill Brassington
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PRODUCTION OFFICES

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

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New Products

The Meridian 596 DVD Player

will handle DVD-Video, CD-Audio, Video CD, Super VCD, and even MP3-enclosed CD-ROMs which can store up to eight hours of MP3 music. For the present, DVD-Audio remains a "future upgrade." Meridian's Chairman and Technical Director Bob Stuart developed the Meridian lossless compression system (MLP), the mandatory coding system for DVD-Audio and DVD-AR, and the firm generally has used its own proprietary disc-navigation firmware. The 596 is a departure from this practice in that it can handle all optical-disc modes in a flexible, fast and reliable manner. What hasn't changed is the firm's commitment to the best possible signal handling and reproduction. For example, bitstream integrity is maintained by triple buffering through memory, Meridian's unique "FIFO" de-jittering circuitry, and output re-clocking. The unit's digital output is capable of data rates up to 96 kHz and is compatible with PCM, Dolby Digital, and DTS. Similar attention has been paid to the video signals and include an extensively optimized MPEG decoder, minimized frame-rate and line jitter, phase-matched video filters, and extended bandwidth and video dynamic range.



Prices: \$4,250.00.

Data: www.meridian-audio.com

The Adcom GTP-506 Tuner/Preamplifier

offers two independent AM/FM tuner sections with completely separate remote control for each of three zones. The user can control each zone independently or use the "party all" feature to control all three zones from any one of the three. The 18 tuner presets can be either AM or FM, while there are independent "Bass" and "Treble" controls for each zone. The GTP-506 accepts almost any keypad or IR termination, while independent 12-volt triggers can control other products that use such triggers. Quality construction details include Class-A audio circuitry, toroidal power transformers, 1% metal-film resistors, low-noise film caps, and gold-plated jacks.



Price: \$999.95 per pair.

Data: www.adcom.com

The Panasonic SV-SD75 e-wear Audio Player

launches a new playback format that is literally small enough to be worn as a fashion accessory. It uses a postage stamp memory card that will hold up to 129 minutes of music in the Long Play mode of the 64 MB memory chip. Playtime is six hours on a single AAA battery. The format is SDMI compliant and uses a compression system dubbed Advanced Audio Coding, but it does have an MP3 decoder and a CD-ROM with RealJukebox software is included.

Price: \$399.95.

Data: 800/211-PANA or www.panasonic.com



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Editor's Choice Award 2000
Sound and Vision, December 2000

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SGHT, February 1999

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Richard Hardesty, Subwoofers Buyer Guide 2000

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Paul Seydor, TAS, #118

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Steve Guttenberg, Audio, November 1999

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Don Keele, Audio, August 1998

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LETTERS

Vinyl Via The 'Net

Dear Editor:

Thanks for a nice piece by Arnie Goodman on places to find vinyl. The only improvement I might suggest is the inclusion of Red Trumpet! Founded eight years ago Quality Vinyl & CD Outlet, Red Trumpet is one of the largest dealers of premium-quality recordings in the US. We stock over 12,000 titles on CD and LP (both new and used). Our prices are usually lower than those of our competitors, and our customer service has earned us accolades from, literally, around the world. In addition, we offer pre-order discounts on most new releases of interest to audiophiles.

As of this writing, we are the only audiophile dealer with a fully searchable, full-service Web site (www.redtrumpet.com). Of course, U.S. customers may also call us toll-free at 1-877/REDTRUMPET (877/733-8786); international folks may use 717/843-5562.

I hope that your readers might find this information useful. Thanks again for remembering all of us vinyl lovers out here!

Peter Braverman

Partner, Red Trumpet, Ltd.

Editor's Note: At this point in time, less than two weeks after publication of Arnie Goodman's article, we've received several pieces of correspondence telling us that we should publish an addenda to the article; we plan to do this and only the "how often?" is up in the air. We've also received two other endorsements of Red Trumpet from guys who appear to be hard-core vinyl junkies. We hasten to note that there are many more good places, including Red Trumpet, that have their primary "location" on the 'net. The difficulty is that some of us, particularly the 'boomer-and-older audiophiles, don't surf, even if we do use e-mail. Maybe this is a reason to do so. Maybe it's a reason for us to put links in TAV's website.

Vinyl Primer

Dear Editor:

I enjoyed your article on record stores manufacturers and look for-

ward to checking out some of the stores I didn't know about. I thought I'd e-mail you a message you about three places I've been buying vinyl and CDs the last few years with great success:

1) Audiophile International: Primarily new LPs and CDs and used LPs, I'd say their strength is the quality of their used vinyl which is so good they don't even grade the records. I've never seen such clean stuff. The most recent thing I bought from them was a brown vinyl (!) LP copy of CSNY's *Deja Vu* (Holland) for \$25, which looks unplayed (I like colored vinyl). <http://www.the.folks@audiophileusa.com/>

2) Recordorium: Michael Shaffran's one-man show has used vinyl, and is very reasonable. Good for psychedelic, US and UK folk and folk-rock. The last thing I bought from him was a UK Mick Abrams (J. Tull) LP from 1972 with an interesting folding cover (don't recall the title, haven't really checked it out yet). I think that was \$40 (EX condition.) <http://www.recordorium.com/>

3) Red Trumpet (formerly Quality Vinyl): I knew Rick Flynn from when he was in the DC area; he's a great guy. They offer new and used LPs and CDs. They're especially good for new vinyl, with excellent prices (the recent purple Hendrix box was under \$60, the lowest I saw it for anywhere. I'm about to buy the George Harrison *All Things Must Pass* LP reissue, Neil Young's *Road Rock* (German LP) and Classic's reissue of Genesis' *Foxtrot*. <http://www.redtrumpet.com/>

Paul Boudreau

Via e-mail

Thank You

Dear Editor:

Could you please pass along to Mr. Alfred Fredel my thanks for introducing Savina Yannatou to those of us who were not familiar with this wonderful artist? After reading the review in your magazine, I immediately obtained a copy. *Mediterranea* has to rank as one of the best World-Beat recordings to date.

Mike Pageau

via e-mail

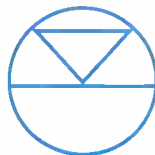


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Tooling Violins

Dear Editor:

Had a very weird visit yesterday with a violin maker and repairer. I was in his basement where this guy had full-on industrial Bridgeport machines and lathes for metal working. He gave me bunches of horse-hair (which came from special horses in Mongolia and China, no less) for my fly-tying hobby, which is why I came. Then he found out that I was also interested in violins. I proceed to get the tour of my life, on violin making, on the special tools which he makes on the metal working machine, etc. Well, at the end he tells me that he has a way of testing the carvings for the right thickness, before you assemble the violin. He proceed to uncover this Healthkit frequency generator from under a pile of junk. It was, hooked up to a regular amp from a receiver which fed an old speaker. The speaker is facing up, he puts the violin down on it, turns on the frequency generator, and sprinkles glitter all over the violin. Soon the vibration from the speaker causes the glitter to arrange itself in patterns, like magnets do to iron filings! And you are supposed to read the glitter patterns, which tell you if

your carving is thin enough in this area or thick enough in that one. Wow! All this instead of tapping the inside of the back with your finger. Well, it would all be really scientific if I wasn't looking at a home-made Heathkit and piles of junk all over the basement. What an interesting guy!

Craig Schiff

Via e-mail

Dear Friend Craig

I saw that "glittering violin" technique in an article several years ago, and it fascinated me then. I can't judge if it's good for thickness but it seems good for timbre of the violin or other work in progress. Various loudspeaker designers have also used the technique, both on the cabinet and on the drivers themselves.

Gene Pitts, Editor

Whose DVD-As?

Dear Editor:

In Ralph Glasgal's review of the Technics DVD-A10 (TAV, Vol. 7, No. 1), your sidebar incorrectly listed our DVD-Audio titles SBE 1001-9, Willie Nelson: *Night and Day*; SBE 1002-9, *Surrounded by Debussy — Piano Preludes Books I & II*, and SBE 1003-9, *Bobby Short*:

Piano, as being available from Warner Bros. and 5.1 Entertainment. For the record, these DVD-Audio titles are available from Surrounded by Entertainment.

Jim Mageras President

Surrounded by Entertainment

www.surroundedby.com

Richter Discography

Dear Editor:

In his review of Arcadi Volodos' recording of the Rachmaninoff Piano Concerto No. 3 for Sony, Benjamin Ivry implies that Sviatoslav Richter may have recorded this work, saying "... no Richter performance is currently available." I have compiled a comprehensive discography of the work (over 135 different recordings have been made since 1930) and can say with confidence and regret that no Richter recording was ever made.

Scott Colebank

Administrator,

North American Chapter,

The Rachmaninoff Society

Editor's Response: Thanks for the input. I just wish there was a way to keep up with what's *actually* available for purchase, i.e. subtracting what was issued but is now out of the maker's catalog.

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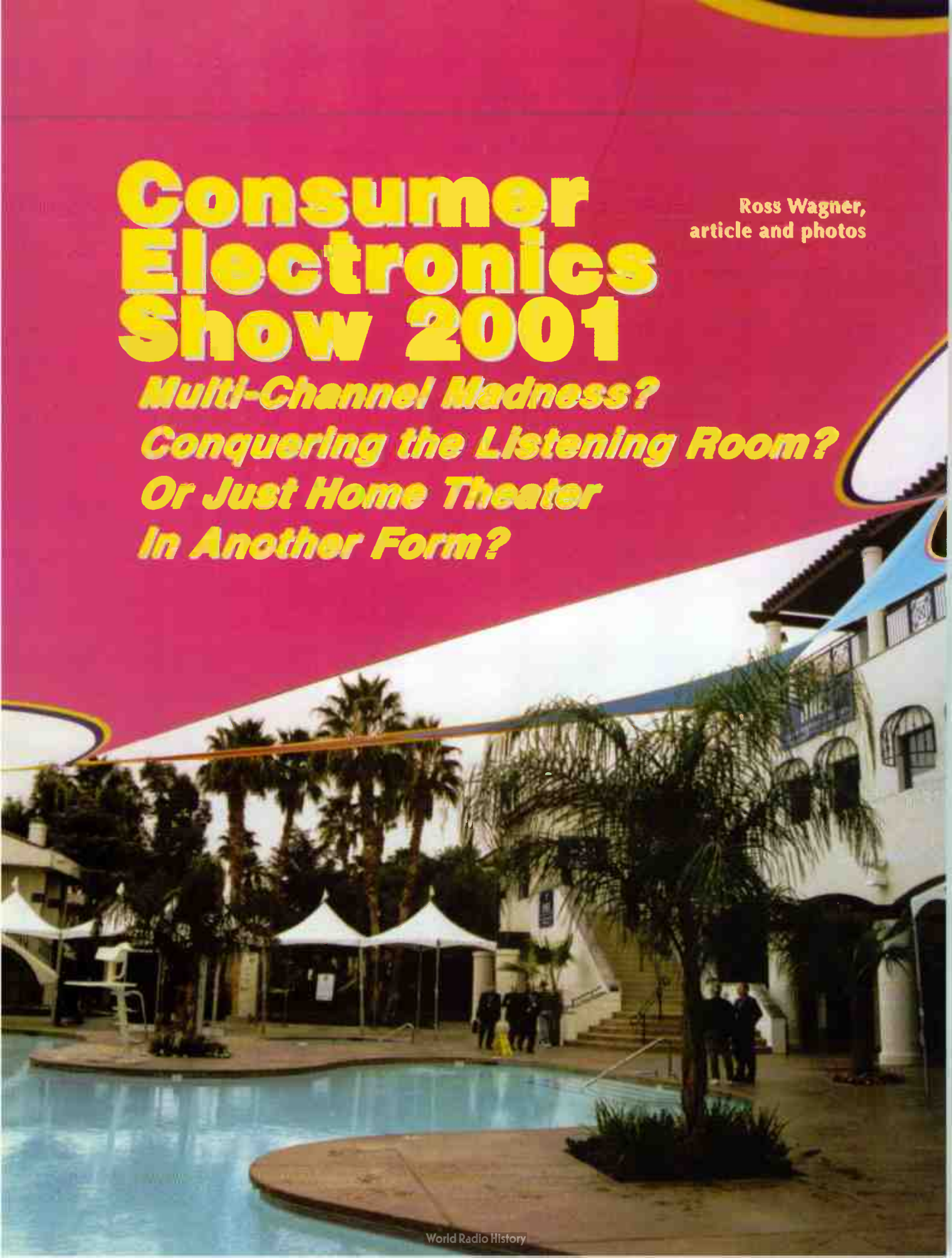
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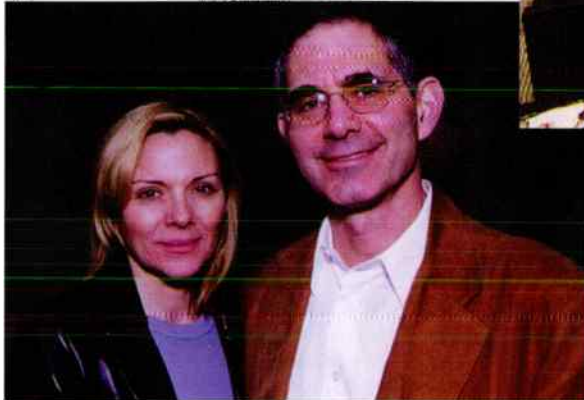
Consumer Electronics Show 2001

Ross Wagner,
article and photos

*Multi-Channel Madness?
Conquering the Listening Room?
Or Just Home Theater
In Another Form?*



Jeff Joseph of Joseph Audio and David Chesky of Chesky Records achieved a spacious and convincing multi-channel DVD-Audio sound.



Mark Levinson (Mark Levinson Audio, Cello, Red Rose Music) with his TV star-actress wife, Kim Cattrall ("Sex in the City," "15 Minutes").

MAYBE WE SHOULD TITLE this year's Consumer Electronics Show, "The Battle of the Sixes."

The movers and shakers of high-end audio continue to tinker with mega-channel music formats. No one seems to know yet if a standard format will emerge to dominate the market. How will it be recorded? How will it be played back in the home?

Even here in Las Vegas, the odds-makers have no clear line on the outcome. No one knows who will control the mega-channel marketplace, but I can report that skirmishing among the contenders at this 2001 CES show was very lively. (More about this later.)

The CES show itself drew over 120,000 participants to this city boasting 125,000 hotel rooms. Adding the usual complement of gamblers, honeymooners, and the now-omnipresent family vacationers made accommodations scarce and, no surprise, forced room rates into a range consistent with the ever-rising prices asked for electronics, speakers, and especially interconnects.

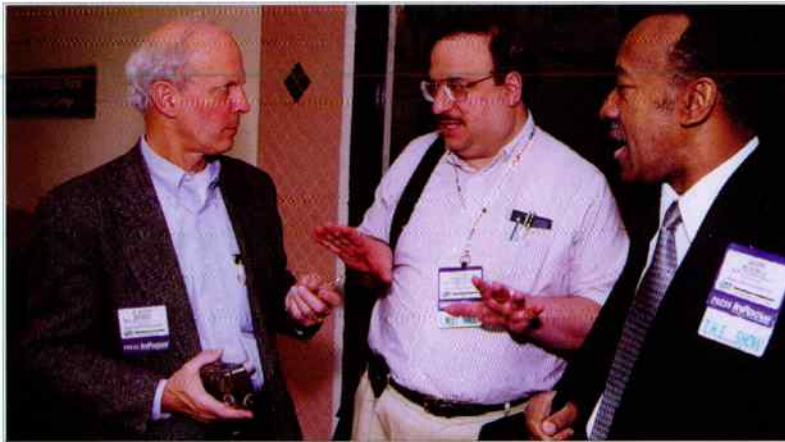
As I walked the corridors of the two main exhibit sites for high-end

equipment, CES at Alexis Park and T.H.E. (The High End) Show at St. Tropez (both resorts are a collection of luxury motel units set among lush palms and limpid turquoise pools), I was once again impressed with the multitude of would-be players in the high-end sweepstakes. New electronics were everywhere. Small- to medium-sized box speakers abounded, no doubt with hopes of capturing their share of the surround-sound music and home-theater market. Rounding a corner, an exhibitor, not willing to wait passively for press people to wander into his room, collared us (the "hook" technique) and a moment later we were listening to Amphion speakers and admiring the sound of these promising newcomers from Finland.

Keep in mind that this is an international show. Maybe not too much action from Africa or Antarctica yet, but the other five continents are well represented, both in terms of buyers and sellers. Product is made and sold everywhere. Those who would compete in this market had better be willing to travel and keep their computers up to date on daily

fluctuations in currencies, not to mention monitoring the economic fortunes of world economies. A few years ago, when the Asian economies tanked, manufacturers who depended on those markets took a mortal hit. Sophisticated marketers diversify sales effort and look for niches of opportunity. One player confided to us that he will visit Siberia (in February, would you believe) to follow up on what might be an emerging "hot" market. Will chilly Siberians sell their huskies and use big class-A amplifiers instead of sled dogs to warm their frigid buns during the long arctic winters?

Back to the mega-channel frontier. David Kawakami of Sony and Andrew Demery of Philips co-demo'ed an impressive production six-channel pre-amp, as a follow-up to the prototype version shown last year. But newly recorded discrete six-channel SACD (Super Audio Compact Disc) recordings are even rarer than Hi-Def TV broadcasts. Generous quantities of high-quality software need to be on the market, or so it seems to me, for six-channel SACD to establish itself. (Likewise,



BAS TRIO: Brad Meyer, Steven Owades, and Alvin Foster of the Boston Audio Society.

Hi-Def TV will languish until programming becomes common.) Set-up of six-channel discrete is demanding and prime seating positions limited.

But here's some positive two-channel SACD fallout: Sony has issued SACD versions of Vanguard's best early-sixties recordings as personally selected by the legendary producer, Seymour Solomon. Look for Netania Davrath singing "Songs of the Auvergne" and three other classic Vanguard titles as well.

Six-channel need not be SACD. As demonstrated in the small Joseph Audio room, and working with new DVD-A recordings from Chesky Records, a spacious and pleasing effect was achieved with six full-range channels, four of which carried ambient information. Set-up seemed to be relatively forgiving, keeping in mind that for optimum results the listener wants to be equidistant from all six speakers. David Chesky sat, a serene cross-legged observer, as Jeff Joseph turned the four-channel ambience amplifier on and off. *On*, we were treated to a convincing musical experience; *off*,

the image collapsed to the front of the room. (David is reported to have listened carefully to Ralph Glasgal's Ambiophonics set-up recently. Are these recordings influenced by what he heard there?) Look for several Chesky Records titles including David's own hauntingly beautiful composition "Agnostic." Chuck Mangione and Christy Baron are featured on other six-channel Chesky recordings. Each release includes clear set-up instructions to convert your 5.1 to 6.0.

Fair warning: In connection with the marketing thrust towards six-channel formats, you will likely come across two new sonic descriptors, "immersion" and "envelopment." Will these words become the new mantras of the high-end? Will stereo go the way of the 8-track and mono? Stay tuned.

As you may have inferred, SACD, as a two-channel format, moves inexorably forward. A carefully orchestrated Sony marketing plan is in place, with the price of SACD players dropping below \$1000, and they have a good player with CD, DVD and SACD capability at a mere \$1500, their highly-regarded DVP-S9000ES. Sony reasons that the market will broaden as equipment prices drop further.

Additionally, an enlightened Sony Corporation has licensed at least 20 manufacturers—who now offer SACD-capable players. (Sony apparently learned something from the Beta VCR exclusivity fiasco.) By the time you read this, more than 200 SACD titles will be available. (Most of these are re-renderings of carefully chosen older recordings.)

No coincidence that Mark Levinson's (Levinson, the man) Red Rose Music shared the Grand Pavilion with Sony, as Mark is a passionate exponent of SACD. With his trademark sotto-voce delivery, Mark declared his disdain for anything recorded via PCM (Pulse Code Modulation). Recordings, he says, should be marked with warning notices if PCM was used anywhere in the processing chain. (Is PCM dangerous to one's health? Should the standard for size and style of type for the warning notice be borrowed from cigarette packs? Can we enlist Everett Koop to edit the final wording?). Levinson maintains that only SACD (free of PCM) can be mentioned in the same breath with analog. He contends that "the conventional CD disconnected us from music, and we need to be reconnected to the love of music." Mark also reminded us that the red rose is a symbol of love and passion.

And speaking of Red Rose Music, look for more manufacturers, like Red Rose, to direct-market their gear in boutique stores. Big name folks will get into this new game by broadening their lines to include both speakers and electronics. Krell is already showing their new speakers (which have impressive low-resonance aluminum cabinetry) along with the firm's latest electronics. Rumors of the introduction of "factory" stores or boutiques, sponsored by manufacturers and featuring their full line of products, persisted through the show.

High-end audio companies continue to be watchful of the surge of interest in home theater. Last year, sales of affordable "home theaters in a box" were the fastest-growing single item in the industry. High-end firms would like to snag some of those first-time sales for themselves. Failing that, they wish to be positioned favorably when emerging video enthusiasts want to upgrade to the ultimate in home theater.

This year, Aerial Acoustics blew us all out of the water, quite literal-



ly, with their home-theater demo of the U-Boat thriller, "U-571." No fewer than four subwoofers plus numerous Aerial speakers were sprinkled about the room, and Theta Dreadnaught amps were everywhere, producing heart-stopping verisimilitude. Sony's popular VPL-VW10HT front-projector provided the visuals. The depth-charge scene literally shook the concrete floor. As Arnie Balgalvis and I left the room, sweat pouring from our brows, we were grateful that the hull withstood the unmerciful pounding, sparing us a watery death.

Industry News

If you blinked last year, you may not have realized that Wadia was briefly out of business. One could almost hear the collective sigh of relief from the thousands of Wadia owners when operations resumed last December. Wadia was alive and well at the CES, not having skipped a beat. With a great-sounding new player, the Model 831, priced under \$4000, they are poised to move ahead smartly. Additionally, Wadia announced an improved version of the esteemed 27ix DAC, which will feature two listener-selectable algorithms. Mods to 27ix units previously manufactured will be available from Wadia by the time you read this. (No mention from Wadia, however, of SACD, DVD-A — or "immersion" or "envelopment" for that matter. Recall that Wadia is the company that snubbed HDCD, convinced that their own decoding software was superior to Pacific Microsonic's HDCD algorithm. The new gear was demonstrated with Jeff Rowland's fine Model 12 amps and Pipe Dreams speakers. And speaking of Pipe Dreams, we heard them sounding better than ever this year in the Wadia room as well as with VAC and Plinius electronics.

A mere 10-minute demonstration by Denmark's Lars Kristensen of Nordost convinced us that their new Valhalla line of interconnects and speaker cable is very special indeed, clearly outstripping their previous top-of-the-line product. Pricey, but excellent. Apparently the extrusion process for Valhalla wire is painfully slow with over 70 per cent spoilage going onto the scrap pile. Thus, some justification for the high cost. Next time I am in Massachusetts, I have made a note

to comb through the Nordost dumpster for rejects. The stuff is so good that irregulars would likely make me a happy man.

The many long-suffering Melos owners received good news with the commencement of operations at "Melos Restorations." I visited their Las Vegas operations and found Will, Brant and Jerry pumping life back into a small forest of amplifiers and pre-amps. I saw buckets full of the highest quality caps, gold-plated tube sockets, and new tubed circuit boards ready to replace the MOS-FETs of the original designs. Melos owners can choose the extent of upgrade they wish or can arrange for repairs that do not include upgrades. Price lists should be available by the time you read this. Although not financially involved in Melos Restorations, Mark Porzilli serves as design consultant.

In Las Vegas itself, the Strip welcomed the new Aladdin resort and casino this year, nestled next to Paris and offering (from its south wing) some of the best views of the *faux* Eiffel Tower and the Belaggio fountains. Inside, Arabian themes prevail, and in the "Merchant Harbor" area of the Bazaar, thunderstorms (complete with lightning, bone-rattling thunder, and drenching rains) erupt hourly. (Bring your umbrella.) Belly dancers and musicians circulate through the promenades. And good news, no teenagers throwing rocks.

Growth plans for Las Vegas include quadrupling the one-mile length of the monorail southwards. This ultra-modern transportation link will rush players from casino to casino, to cash in on the best action. Inevitably more and more



lavish resorts and casinos will transform the path of the monorail extension into Gambler's Gauntlet. One cannot help but imagine a relief map of the Western Hemisphere 50 years hence with a spine of casinos, centered at Las Vegas, running north and south through two continents, rivaling the Rockies in grandeur.



RANDOM NOTES

SALT runs freely in dry desert air. Exercise care.

YOU could lose a grand or two at a craps table in the time it takes for a traffic light to change in Las Vegas.

THAT black speck on top of your eggs benedict in the Sahara buffet is black olive, not a truffle.

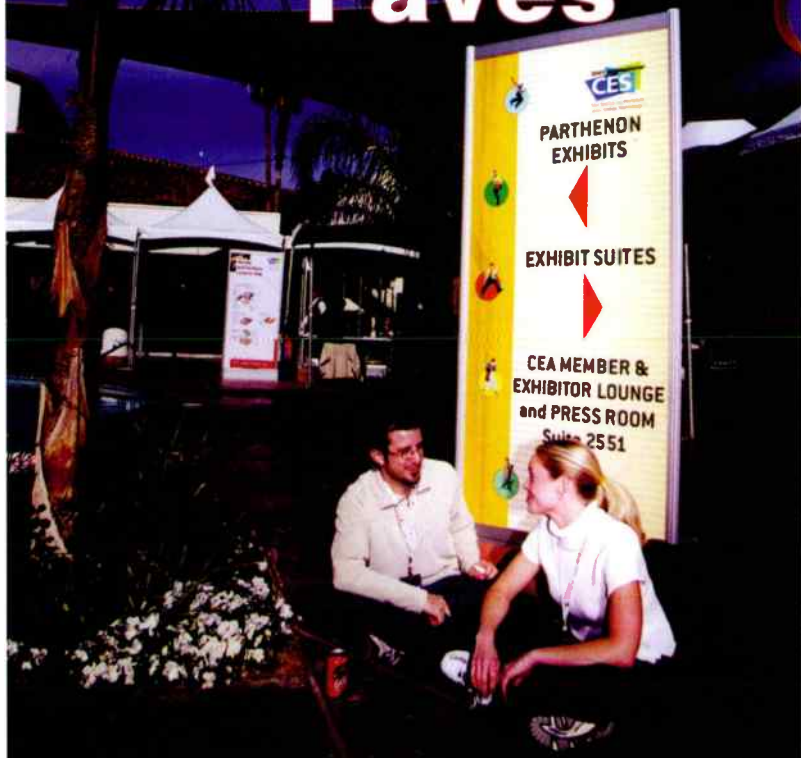
TRAFFIC jams (30 minutes to go a mile) are now routine at the southern end of the strip where the new casinos now hold sway. Consider alternate routes.

SIGN in a local (non-tourist) coffee shop, "Caution! Our waitresses can go from zero to bitch in 4.1 seconds."

TO those who would explore the vast and virtually uninhabited desert areas of southern Nevada by car — don't speed 15 minutes either side of a coffee shop. I speak from experience.

The Chuckster's CES 2001 Faves

Chuck Bruce



THE SONY MULTI-CHANNEL SACD demonstration, that alternately featured various models of players by Philips and Marantz comprised six channels of pure audio supported a fleet of B&W 801 loudspeakers and Pass Labs X-250 power amps. Considering all the demonstrations I have experienced over the years, this one of a handful that truly held listeners in rapt attention throughout the session. The envelopment was as complete as one might find in a fine concert hall, with all sonic elements in balance. Attention was focused forward, yet we were aware of a larger enveloping ambient soundfield. Remembering the original LP of Netania Davrath's *Songs of the Auvergne* on Vanguard, while sitting within the new multi-channel SACD recreation, I was transported to the dreamy, spiritual time and place of these ancient folk songs. Many wow's were uttered by my group of listeners. I was triggered by the audition to wish resounding suc-

cess to SACD, and I quickly began dreaming of many more software releases in two or more channels. Spokesmen for the format told us that \$500 two-channel SACD players will soon be on the way with affordable multi-channel units not far behind from a variety of licensed and familiar namebrand manufacturers. For example, Sharp is on-board with some first-rate SACD players, featuring stunning, sexy design and companion "direct-digital" power amps.

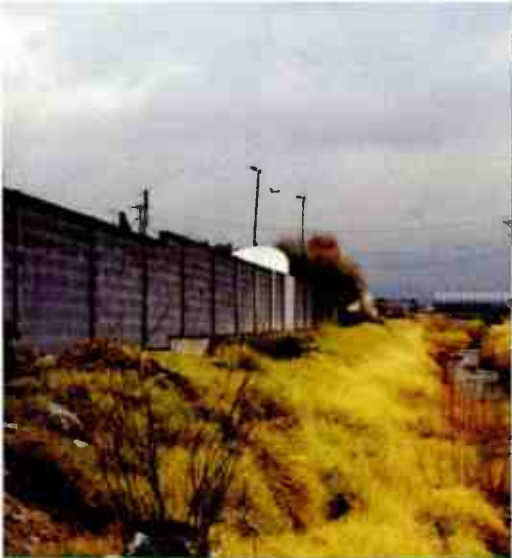
Of course, DVD-Audio is fast on the heels of SACD, and there is talk of an even broader variety of music titles for release as DVD-As, yet few of these have been launched so far. One particular Pioneer player in the \$2,000 range will handle both SACD and DVD-A in two or more channels, thus covering both formats. I gathered from staff that Pioneer is serious about DVD-A.

One of the good-sounding and intriguing loudspeaker lines at the

show came from Buggtussel, with designs by Dr. Kevin Blair of Portage, MI, and I was most attracted by their satellite and subwoofer system. A rather new-name in the high-end sector, yet offering cost-effective loudspeaker ensembles in a finely finished transmission-line based designs, the Buggtussel line even pleased the grumpy ol' editor. The "Buggs" were especially well-mated to the de Havilland tube electronics, which shared the room at the St. Tropez. The \$3,500 per pair satellite towers, which perform fine on their own, really take off when paired with the firm's robust and well-integrated, separately powered subwoofer, thus adding another \$2,500 to system cost.

Silverline Grandeur speakers, operated by Pass X-1 Preamp, with Pass Labs X-250 power amps, and signal from a Wadia 850 CD player, produced an enormous and articulate soundstage, with bass dynamics that pushed me back to the wall.

Photo: Ross Wagner



This is **NOT** the gulf between the SACD and DVD-A systems, but rather the DMZ between the CES, part of which goes on in the Alexis Park on the right, and T.H.E. Show, which takes place in the St. Tropez Hotel, to the left.

The Grandeur's grabbed my attention and then some, while squeezing my itty-bitty wallet at \$34,999 per pair. But, oh wow, how they could play!

The Art Audio PX-25 (six wpc, single-ended) amp has remarkable gain, and thus will handle much tougher loads than one might expect. Its performance with the equally remarkable Soliloquy 6.3 loudspeakers (89-dB SPL sensitivity) exhibited a synergy that was second to none. Employing a Gill Audio preamp and coupled with Acoustic Zen cabling, listeners were drawn in like moths to a flame. The session was further spiced by engaging conversation and thoughts on sound by ART Audio founder Joe Fratus, a loquacious audio aficionado of the first rank.

A pair of Vandersteen Model 5s with integral subwoofer were sounding excellent in several show rooms of dissimilar size and shape. The Model 5s appear at home with either solid-state or tube electronics, and this was confirmed by their effectiveness in the Audio Research and Cary rooms. Kudos to Richard Vandersteen, who is one of the longest running and innovative loudspeaker designers around.

Jim Thiel's press launch of his new integrally powered subwoofer with electronic contour control that is designed to acclimate the woofer to most any room dimension. Possibly the best technical presenter

3 Photos Chuck Bruce



Cary Audio's new V-12 power amplifier.

in the business, Jim Thiel has the ability to describe and demonstrate complex audio design and manufacturing concepts with ease. His presentations are appreciated by professional and laypersons alike. Jim also gets the most stars for the best Press Breakfast, organized by the equally capable Kathy Gornic and staff. No runny eggs or watery coffee here; no toned-down tech either.

Home theater surround sound featuring Avantgarde Duo loudspeakers with Balanced Audio Technology electronics was a real eye and ear pleaser. The demonstration offered a totally mesmerizing presentation, likely the most refined of the A/V genre at the show. The integration of sound and cinema was as nearly seamless as one could wish for, while the visuals were supported by top-of-the-line, fully tweaked Runco projectors and Stewart Filmscreen. All elements were locked in, and the entire presentation was as good as it gets. The Theta and Thiel demonstrations were impressive too, yet I feel Avantgarde's topped them all in the end.



Western Electric's 91-C amp.

Sonority's Randolph D. Hedgebeth with his Golden Gate Reference tonearm and the Audio Advancement's Phono Max phono stage in the St. Tropez.



CES 2001: The Dirty Dozen?

Len Schneider



THE MOVIES have dragged us willy-nilly into the post-stereo world of multi-channel music — and some of us don't want to be there at all.

I'm not just talking about a simple reactionary tendency, either. Although some audio Luddites (see sidebar II) are still uncomfortable with stereo, most of us have long enjoyed two-channel's more accurate portrayal of the spatial qualities we (perhaps wishfully) associate with live music. In fact, every audiophile I know talks about those "magic moments" when a particular system set-up, a special interaction between speaker and room, or just an outright freak of nature produces such a clear aural pathway to an artist's soul that the event becomes enshrined in memory.

Savor those moments, friends, 'cause those nasty multi-channel demons want to take 'em away. And, if CES 2001 is any indication, we might actually welcome the loss.

It's not some sort of insidious plot, mind you. No, these demons,

most of them serious scientists and musicians, look at traditional two-channel stereo as more ephemeral than solid. Indeed, they say that two speakers will not — *cannot* — truly liberate artists and listeners from conventional stereo's limitations.

The Promise of DVD-A

Indeed, one of the promises made by the DVD-A camp is the freedom 5.1 channels gives artists and producers to bring an entirely new kind of listening experience to music lovers. There are certainly plenty of DVD-A players already available. Some are even very affordable: One recent Sunday *New York Times* ad from a prominent New York retailer featured a first-generation Panasonic DVD-A player for \$299 and its Technics up-market cousin for just \$100 more!

DVD-A software remains an issue even though partisans have been touting the imminent arrival of a substantial library of surround titles. So far (mid-March, 2001),

there are only about 20 available, mostly from Warner. Yes, more are expected but the groundswell of support we heard so much about has been — for legal rather than aesthetic reasons — far less than exciting.

SACD Gets Surrounded

There's little doubt that Sony and Philips have succeeded in positioning SACD (Super Audio Compact Disc) as the newest "format of choice" for audiophiles. But SACD's critics have long pointed to the lack of multi-channel players and software as a major format flaw. Can those comments, folks, SACD isn't just stereo any longer. Last September, Philips showed the first multi-channel player at the CEDIA Expo. While pricey at \$2000, new players due shortly from Sony will hit the sub-\$500 price point with room to spare. Software? There are approximately 10 SACD multi-channel titles available now with more in the pipeline.

Photo: Ross Wagner

Is "5.1" Enough?

In short, 5.1 surround is happening now. For some of us, it will be more than enough. We'll need to add a center channel speaker, two surrounds, and a subwoofer to our stereo rigs just to evaluate the differences.

But some prophets of this new aural age suggest that even the 5.1 format that so dominates home theater sound reproduction today is insufficient to meet real musical demands.

Who are these prophets? What are they saying? More importantly, did anything we heard at CES 2001 give these views any legitimacy?

The Big S-h-e-e-e-w!

Without a doubt, the biggest music-oriented event at CES 2001 was a press conference and presentation by Tom Holman (the "TH" of THX), Herbie Hancock (the . . . well, if Hancock needs an introduction, maybe you'd be better off reading *Better Homes and Gardens*), Bob Ludwig (one of the industry's most accomplished and influential mastering engineers), and Bjorn Dybdahl (owner of Bjorn's Audio/Video, an enthusiastically innovative retailer in San Antonio, TX).

There were two main themes: (1) Holman's underlying belief that the bandwidth required for 5.1 channels of "24/96" digital audio (96,000 24-bit words per second per channel) is wasteful overkill — we can't hear the benefits — and would be far better used for even more channels), and (2) Hancock's aesthetic and philosophical observation that music in the real world involves us precisely because it is "immersive" and that replicating those emotions demands more even 5.1 channels.

To demonstrate this, Hancock and guitarist Steven DiStefano played musical selections on a Holman-designed 10.2 (yes, a dozen!) channel system. Lest you think this is merely two "stacked" 5.1 systems, be aware that Holman's approach is very different.

His 10.2 configuration begins with three speakers across the front, the main Left and Right speakers at $\pm 30^\circ$ with a center-channel speaker between them. This frontal arc broadens with the addition of "wide" speakers at $\pm 60^\circ$ and ends with "surround" speakers at $\pm 90^\circ$.



Photo: © 2001 Mark Langford

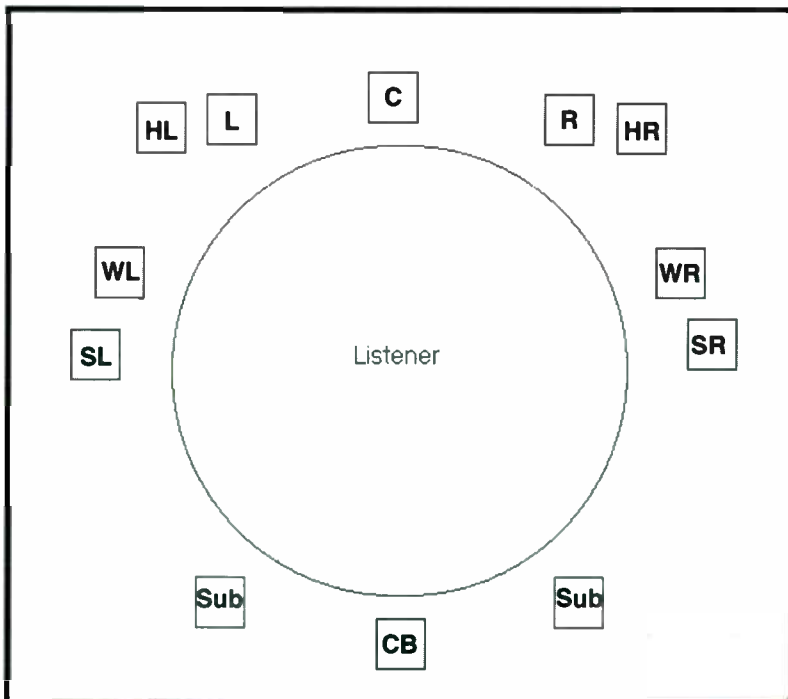
"Height" speakers come next and are located at $\pm 45^\circ$ horizontally and elevated 45° vertically. Then there's a center back speaker directly behind the listener and two subwoofers placed to complement room characteristics.

For the CES presentation, the configuration was implemented with Bryston amplifiers and loudspeakers from British manufacturer PMC (Professional Monitor Company Ltd.), Whise, and Tesseract.

Without judging the musical merits of what we heard, I can state

unequivocally that the Holman/Hancock alliance is anything but devilish. Hancock played a selection from his "Dis Is Da Drum," first in stereo and then through the full 10.2 system. The difference was startling. The computer-generated 10.2 data stream provided, as you might well expect, far more spatial information than did the two-channel mix. Was it distracting? No. In fact, there was an easy naturalness to the 10.2 rendition.

A top-down view of Tom Holman's 10.2 system.





“The gentleman in the back, please?” Bob Stuart, whose Meridian Lossless Packing is used for DVD-A, fields a question after his demonstration.

tion that involved me precisely because it was simply “there” in a most relaxed way.

I was also struck by the contribution made by the main speaker array supplied by little-known PMC. These were not the brittle, fatiguing “ear fryers” I’ve heard at some studios. The PMC’s transmission-line

bass output was substantial and extended, yet not musically intrusive. It was simply a strong yet restrained foundation for the clearly defined midrange and surprisingly glare-free high end. (How much of this was due to the Rane equalizers used in this most complex system I can’t say. But a subsequent listening

to some different — and un-equalized — PMC models in the Bryston/PMC exhibition room revealed many of these same fine qualities.)

Something More Restrained

On the last day of the show, I again faced the knee-killer challenge of the Alexis Park to find another unusual multi-channel demonstration in the Joseph Audio room. Although proprietor Jeff Joseph was out of his signature M&Ms, he was playing some very interesting software from Chesky Records. His system, while not as outrageous as the one used by Holman, et al., was surprisingly engaging nonetheless.

The Chesky software was (and is) a variant on the DVD-A 5.1 format. Instead of five full range channels supplemented by a limited bandwidth LFE track, the Chesky approach uses DVD-A’s data capac-

Photo: Gene Pitts

EVEN EARLIER

SO, YOU THINK that movie soundtracks have provided all the impetus for music’s multi-channel metamorphosis? Wrong! Back in the very early ‘70s, two very influential organizations were delving into multi-channel’s promise. The first was the then-preeminent acoustical consulting firm Bolt, Beranek and Newman (BBN). The second was Acoustic Research, the then-equally-preeminent loudspeaker manufacturer.

In order to facilitate its research into the acoustic characteristics of large concert venues, BBN developed an “acoustic simulator,” a system with 12 very small speakers (Acoustic Research 4x two-way designs) placed in a 12- to 14-inch wide hemispherical arc around a two-person “sweet spot.” A large subwoofer handled the bass. (Sound familiar?) Although the simulator’s purpose was to convince architects that visually appealing details like barrel ceilings were the death of good sound, it soon found other uses.

In order to get a handle on the acoustical characteristics of good concert halls, BBN researchers analyzed decay and reflection characteristics of Boston’s Symphony Hall and New York’s Philharmonic Hall by popping balloons and noting the reverberation times.

They then created an innovative time delay device by using a highly modified tape transport with multiple playback heads, some of which were connected to reverberation units. By changing the relative position of the playback heads to produce “arrival times” coincident with the measurements they had taken in each hall, BBN was able to recreate the effects of reflections from proscenium, side walls, ceiling, and rear wall through the speaker array.

This effort was so successful that a recording of the New York Philharmonic, for example, could be played back through the simulator so that listeners thought they were in whatever hall the technicians adjusted the playback device to emulate!

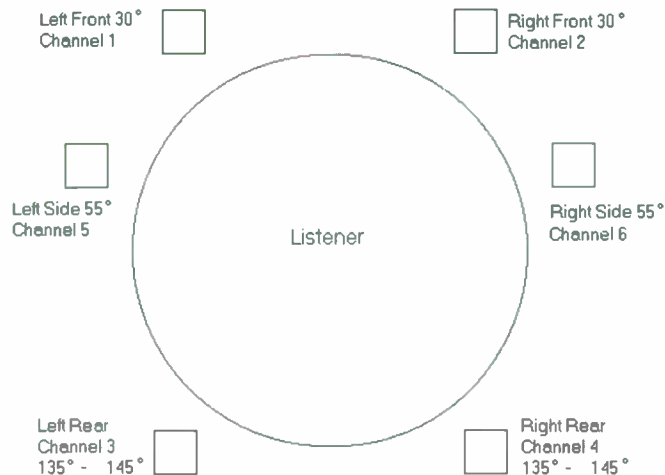
Listeners were very impressed. In fact, the results detailed by many press accounts at the time noted the phenomenally convincing presentation of acoustic space around the music.

If stereo, during its commercial childhood, was the equivalent of Lewis and Clark’s exploration of the Louisiana Purchase, then you could easily say that the “acoustic simulator” simply blasted off in search of Mars.

It is interesting to note that Tom Holman was one of those listeners. Sort of brings things full circle, doesn’t it?

ity to store six full range tracks. The goal? More accurate reproduction of the spatial characteristics you'd find in a concert hall. (Is there a theme here?)

Speaker placement, while not as demanding — or intrusive — as Holman's, is surprisingly similar. Rather than three speakers across the front (as in a conventional 5.1 array), the Chesky system calls for two front speakers at +/- 30° and two flanking "wide" speakers at +/- 55°. Chesky also recommends a bit of experimentation to determine the best height of these "wide" speakers for accurate reproduction of the ambience created by proscenium reflections in a concert hall. (Their literature suggests 3 to 7 feet as a starting point.) Two surround speakers at +/-135-145° complete the "6.0" array. (Editor's Note: Some of these same unusual and innovative DVD-A recordings were also played at the Meridian press conference by Bob Stuart, the inventor of the Meridian Loss Packing (MLP) system which allows all that data to find its way onto the DVD. Two of the most intriguing were, I think, both from Chesky. First, the Neville Brothers were spread in four rock-solid positions across the front of the soundstage, with Aaron at the far left, and second, a "New Age meets jungle



Chesky speaker placement.

ambience" recording where the two side speakers were supposed to be "UP," above the listener's ear height. On the second one, I swear I heard an "up" component in the mix, despite having the side speakers on the floor. —Gene Pitts)

So, how did this system sound? Excellent. Considering the differ-

ence in room size (from the "e-freekin-normous" Holman venue to the downright cramped Joseph room), there were more similarities than you might expect.

That was somewhat surprising, particularly when you consider that Joseph's approach was "audiophile" all the way with Pioneer's DX-AX10 "universal" disc spinner feeding a YBA-designed Pre 5 multi-channel

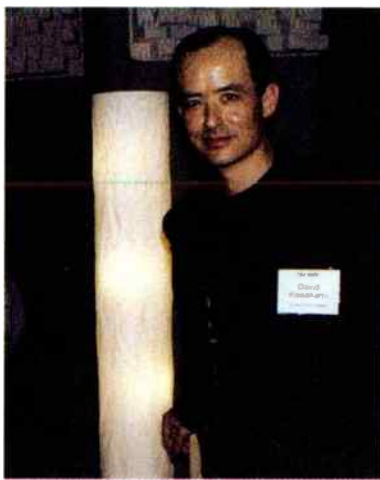
LUDDITE?

Gene Pitts

I rarely agree with William Safire, as my political views are somewhat to the left of his. Nonetheless, under the "credit when due" provisions of the writer-versus-editor or pen-versus-blue pencil wars, I have to give him a hearty public pat on the back for his wonderful Dec. 6, 1998 column in *The New York Times Magazine*, "Return of the Luddites." The occasion was the anti-trust trial of software giant Microsoft, one of whose lawyers Safire quotes as accusing the U.S. Government of changing the trial into "a return of the Luddites." Safire went on to give a very interesting thumbnail history of Ned Ludd who in 1779, "in a fit of insane rage," broke into a home in Leicestershire, in central England, and destroyed two frames (or machines) for knitting hosiery. Such bashing of textile machines had been going on for nearly a century, writes Safire, but "Ludd, however, did it with such gusto and flair that, subsequently, whenever machines of any sort were found smashed, the excuse was given that "King Ludd must have been here." (I will have to think about the griffiti possibilities.)

Safire writes that "revisionist historians say the Ludd and other frame-wreckers were protesting poor working conditions and low wages at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution." He quotes *The Nottingham (England) Review*: "If the workmen dislike certain machines, it was because of the use to which they were being put, not because they were machines or because they were new." Safire goes on to say "That living-condition claim was swept aside by commercial interests and officialdom, which hung the label *Luddite* on protesters not for demanding a living wage but for obstructing the march of technological progress."

No matter, Mr. Safire, words change their meaning with use over time and certainly take on additional facets. And if King Ludd were around today, I have no doubt he'd be listening to some sort of computer-based music system. It seems absurd to me to think that he'd be bashing CD players and touting the LP system. And didn't I read just in the first section of Len's article, that there were still people who thought mono the more accurate system and that cylinders were more accurate sounding than discs?



Don't you hate it when the camera's flash doesn't work properly? David Kawakami of Sony, who was manning the SACD demo at the St. Tropez, didn't seem to mind.

line stage and the VTL/Theta amp combination through Cardas cable. (By way of contrast, no less than 39 channels of Bryston amplifiers drove Holman's PMC/Whise/Tesseract array!)

The main speakers were Joseph's new RM-33ri "mini-Pearls," three-way designs with a (surprise, surprise!) non-Infinite Slope crossover supplemented by a pair of "The Surround" prototypes (inspiration

had taken a vacation that day, Jeff?) and wall mount versions of the RM7si. If the Joseph speakers were a bit "softer" than the PMCs, the overall spatial impression created by these two systems was very close.

A comparison of the Chesky diagram with Holman's 10.2 placement shows some very good reasons why. First, notice the similar "spread" between front speakers: Both approaches significantly widen the image we've come to expect with two-channel stereo. Both add height information totally impossible with stereo. Both make use of surround channels to more accurately reproduce ambience information.

Are there differences? Of course. Holman's system demands specially recorded software that's subjected to extensive DSP manipulation. Chesky simply reassigns the channel allocations already inherent in the DVD-A format and records appropriate information. Holman's array has a WAF (Wife Acceptance Factor) of close to 0 while the Chesky approach is far less intrusive. You'll have to ask Holman's TMH Corporation for appropriate software and, understandably enough, you're not likely to walk

away with any. Chesky has commercially available 6.0 discs now and, if you have a DVD-A player, you can be listening as soon as you rig the speakers.

"Two is not enough . . . ?"

Do these systems symbolize the death of two-channel? Hardly. We'll have more than enough conventional stereo sources to keep up happily glued to a pair of speakers for years to come.

But if you fancy yourself an acute observer and listener, pay attention to what's happening at the far end of the pipeline. Experiment. Spend a few bucks on additional speakers (hell, you can always use 'em in a different room if you hate the results!) and listen to what surround can do for your musical sensibilities.

Or, if you're still a traditionalist, cringe. That's right — *cringe!* There's more multi-channel music building up in record company vaults and mastering studios than you can imagine. When the lawyers finally push that "go" button, you're gonna be amazed at how quickly the flood will inundate your neighborhood music shop.

Don't say we didn't warn you!

Photo: Gene Pitts

What they're all talking about



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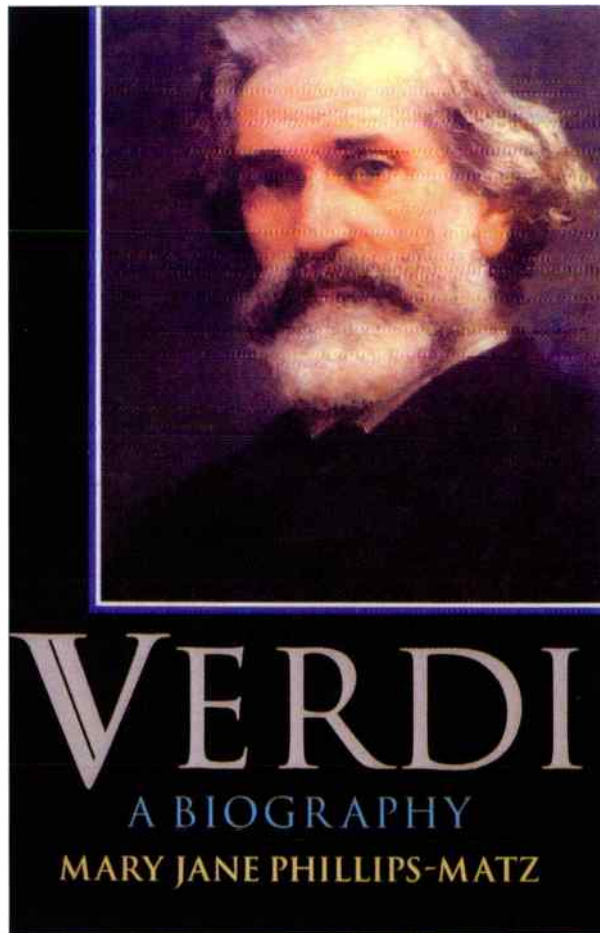
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Verdi Year: A Circus or Not?

Benjamin Ivry



COMPOSER ANNIVERSARIES come and go, but Verdi year in 2001 (the 100th anniversary of the great opera composer's death) looks likely to be one of the happiest of the genre. Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901) expressed through his works a kind of passion, nobility, and heroism that is hard to find nowadays, to put it mildly. Whether in his late works like "Otello" and "Falstaff," or middle period masterpieces like "La Traviata," "Rigoletto," or "Il Trovatore," Verdi looks likely to be the mainstay of world opera houses. Verdi expert and NYU professor

Martin Chusid explains that "more of Verdi's operas are in the active repertory of opera companies throughout the world than either Mozart or Wagner (or Puccini or Strauss). For sheer number of performances, he is also the leading composer in operatic history." However, Chusid stresses, it is not merely quantity but also quality that makes Verdi matchless: "His true achievement is, I believe, that he identifies with all his characters, the villains as well as the heroes. He has sympathy for them all—and once said he cries for the characters in his

operas. As a result, we too can feel deeply for them. They are of his world and ours, never of some mythological past, or of some imaginary fairy-tale world. For me, only Mozart's comic operas (the Italian ones) have the same capacity to reflect both human frailties and strengths."

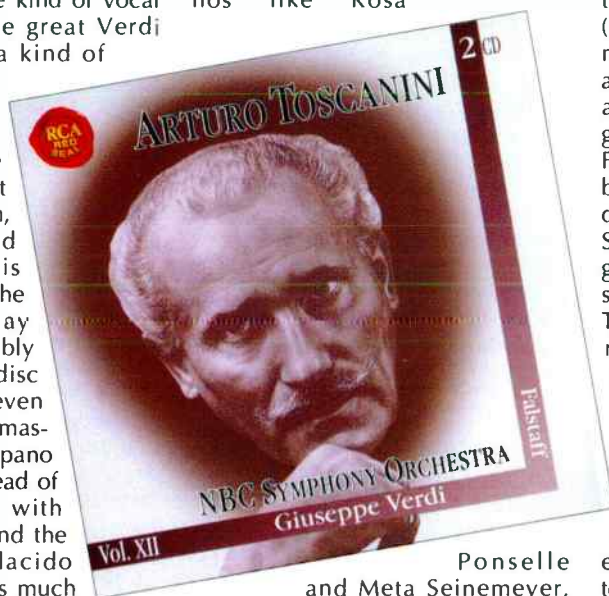
A recent rash of new Verdi CDs suggests as much. Unlike Wagner, where it is universally admitted that the voices are lacking in today's opera houses to do justice to his works, there are a multitude of fine Verdi interpreters around today.

This is quite paradoxical, as a century ago, George Bernard Shaw, still the English language's finest professional music critic, claimed that Verdi was much more difficult and taxing for the voice than Wagner. Recent CD releases would argue otherwise.

We have the Argentinean tenor Jose Cura, widely called the heir to Placido Domingo, in a program of Verdi arias (on Erato 8573-80232-2). Cura is a plausibly passionate protagonist, with the kind of vocal heft needed for the great Verdi roles. True, with a kind of stratospheric tenorial ego and nerve, Cura chose not simply to sing these challenging arias but also to conduct them, using the splendid Philharmonia as his guinea pigs. While the orchestra could play these works acceptably in their sleep, the disc would have been even better with a Verdi master like Antonio Pappano on the podium, instead of a tenor concerned with hitting high notes and the like. Indeed, Placido Domingo affirmed as much when he reportedly refused an offer by Cura to share an opera evening of the time-honored double bill *Cavalleria Rusticana* / *Pagliacci* in which one tenor would conduct the other as singer. Domingo reportedly demurred, until such time as Cura had more opera house experience as a conductor. The current state of the classical music industry is that stunts play extremely well in executive brainstorming sessions, and so Cura was permitted to conduct himself. It should not happen again. His voice deserves a better, more attentive conductor.

The Romanian-born soprano Angela Gheorghiu is featured in a disc of Verdi heroines (on Decca 289 466 952-2), with the wiry intelligence of a sweeter-sounding Maria Callas. A helpful sampler of excerpts from many different operas, "Viva Verdi: A 100th Anniversary Celebration" has been intelligently produced by Universal Classics (467 245-2, more info at www.viva-verdi.com) Teldec has produced a disc of highlights of a recent televised production of "La

Traviata" featuring Jose Cura, and the 76-year-old baritone Rolando Panerai in remarkably decent vocal form (on Teldec 8573-83452-2). These recent performances in modern-day sound may be complemented by useful historical material on "Verdi: the Supreme Operatic Recordings" (on Pearl GEM 0072, distributed in the USA by Koch). Here we may sample great tenors of the past like Tito Schipa, Beniamino Gigli and Antonio Cortis, and sopranos like Rosa



Ponselle and Meta Seinemeyer, whose greatness are not dimmed by the primitive recording conditions of the 1920s.

Still, Verdi worship is very much a thing of the present. So, from February to June, possibly today's greatest Verdi conductor, Antonio Pappano, will be performing the composer's "Requiem," "Otello," and "Macbeth" at the Theatre de la Monnaie in Brussels. Americans will have many homages to attend, of which the most distinguished will probably be the San Francisco Opera's June stagings of "La Traviata," "Simon Boccanegra," and "Aida." In terms of opera houses worldwide, 17 have announced commemorative productions of "Il Trovatore," 20 will stage "La Traviata," and 14 will each stage respectively, "Aida" and "Falstaff." The latter includes a high-profile televised performance from the Salzburg Easter Festival of "Falstaff" starring Welsh baritone Bryn Terfel in the title role.

Other events extend beyond the musical domain: The fierce national bicycle race, the Giro d'Italia, will

pay homage to the composer in June by a stopover in his native province of Parma, near his hometown of Busseto. Academics are in on the act: A thousand-object museum exhibit will be running through February 23 at Milan's Palazzo Reale, with 26 rooms of exhibition space devoted to "Verdi: The Man, the Operas, The Legend." Verdi's home region of Parma is getting into the act with a charmingly unabashed bid for tourist dollars on the official centenary website (www.giuseppeverdi.it). There one may find promos for Verdi's region as "the land of tastes," with encouragements to buy and eat "parmigiano cheese, prosciutto hams, Felino salami, Val Taro mushrooms, black truffles of Fragnò, and shoulder ham of San Secondo." Supposedly indulging in all these goodies will bring us closer to the spirit of the great musical maestro. The website implies that any music researcher who visits the region and omits a stop at the "Historical Archives of Barilla Pasta" would be somehow remiss.

On a more musical plane, at La Scala last December, Verdi year got off to a stormy start when conductor Riccardo Muti, ever the purist, refused to allow the tenor in "Il Trovatore" to sing a high C that Verdi did not originally write at the end of the heroic aria "Di Quella Pira." The La Scala crowd, which makes most soccer hooligans seem polite by comparison, erupted into violence at the deprivation of the high C, even though maestro Muti admonished them loudly, "Do not turn Verdi Year into a circus!" That said, Muti's own esthetic goals sometimes seem slightly offbase: He has praised "Il Trovatore" as "the most Mozartian of Verdi's operas," an odd description for the old barnstorming piece that features the Anvil Chorus and is still remembered for the 1935 Marx Brothers parody in "A Night at the Opera." If one is seeking Mozartian aspects in Verdi's art, they are more likely to be found in super-refined works like "Falstaff" than in "Trovatore."

But no matter, circus or not, Verdi Year looks to be highly diverting. Last December the English National Opera offered an original staging of Verdi's "Requiem." The British stage director Phyllida Lloyd, including other unusual stage effects, a naked and very pregnant

woman wandering around the stage during the "Agnus Dei" section of the "Requiem." This was ostensibly meant as part of a depiction of the different ages of man, but one woman critic for London's "Independent" newspaper treated the notion comically, stating that she too had recently been pregnant, but her last thought was to strip down and parade in the buff to Verdi's music in front of three thousand spectators at the London Coliseum.

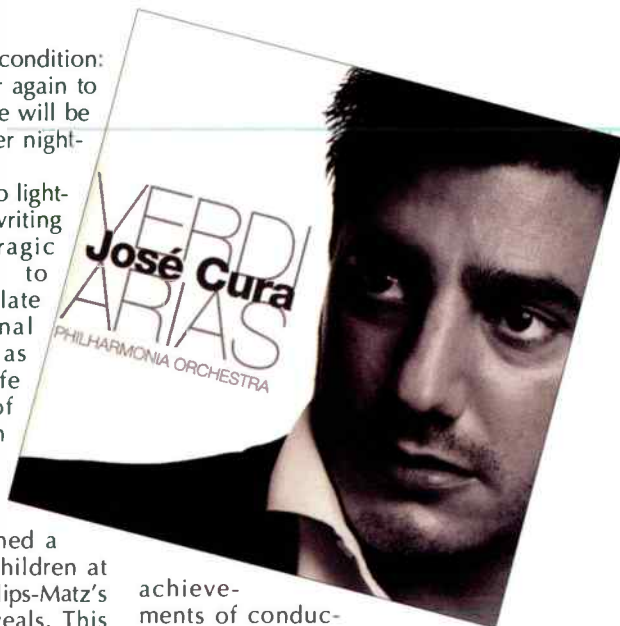
This may all seem like pretty wild stuff, but as we learn more about Verdi himself, one has the feeling he would have been amused or at least bemused by it all. A landmark recent biography of Verdi by researcher Mary Jane Phillips-Matz has been reissued in paperback by Oxford University Press, and given its length and completeness, its cover price of \$22.50 is a steal for anyone who

man "agree to one little condition: to promise not to go ever again to hear my operas, so that he will be spared the threat of further nightmares...."

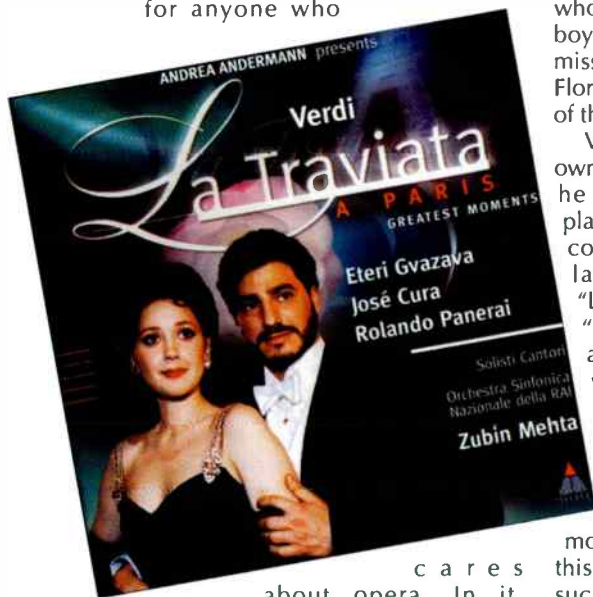
Verdi showed a need to lighten up even the task of writing his most demanding tragic operas: He referred to "Otello" as "the chocolate project" and its original author Shakespeare as "Papa." His personal life was often a farrago of scandal, as he lived in an unmarried state for many years with a singer, Giuseppina Strepponi, and apparently abandoned a number of illegitimate children at local orphanages, as Phillips-Matz's painstaking research reveals. This did not prevent Verdi from having affairs on the side, such as one with a soprano named Teresa Stolz, to whom the composer "acted like a boy who asks his teacher for permission to urinate," according to a Florentine scandal sheet newspaper of the day.

Verdi was not universal in his own personal taste. When at age 52 he first heard Wagner's music played, he declared of his German contemporary, "He is mad!" He later annotated a score of "Lohengrin" with these reactions: "Mediocre impression.... The action runs slowly, as do the words. From that, boredom.... Abuse of notes held too long, and that makes it heavy. Execution mediocre. Much verve, but lacking in poetry and finesse. In the crucial moments, bad all the time." But by this time, around 1865, Verdi was such a masterful opera composer that he did not need to learn from Wagner's musical virtues. In more serious passages quoted by Phillips-Matz, Verdi shows the kind of nobility and emotion that made his operatic masterpieces possible, such as when he writes, "In 'La Forza del Destino' you certainly don't have to know how to sing fancy passages, but you have to have a soul and understand the word and express it."

This soulfulness, so difficult to quantify and describe, yet indubitably present in Verdi's greatest works, requires interpreters on this level, both on musical and humane levels. Since the astonishing



achievements of conductor Arturo Toscanini, few conductors have proven themselves up to this level. In the current industry disarray and BMG's abandonment of its classical catalog, apparently a number of Toscanini's Verdi opera recordings are unavailable. Nevertheless, Toscanini's CDs like "La Traviata," "Aida," "Un Ballo in Maschera," "Falstaff," "Requiem" "Act IV of Rigoletto," and "Otello" or the video of a concert performance of "Aida," should be learned by heart by anyone who cares the least bit about Italian opera. It is not just that Toscanini had close ties to Verdi, who greatly admired his podium genius. It is immediately noticeable that there are strong emotional ties between these two Italians, combative instincts and masculine forthrightness, combined with a quasi-erotic delicacy. Listeners may be distressed at the poor sound quality of many of Toscanini's recordings, but some of the Verdi operas are happily being reissued by BMG's engineers in cleaned-up versions that are dramatically better sonically than anything heard before of the Verdi-Toscanini legacy. Try the recently reissued "Falstaff" (on BMG/RCA Victor 72372) and sense the theatrical vivacity, rambunctious good humor, and bewitching musical mastery. When we hear such sublime past performances in acceptable sound for audiophiles alongside the solid quality of current efforts, we understand why audiences around the world are still yelling, as they did a century and more ago, "Viva Verdi!"



cares about opera. In it, Phillips-Matz makes no bones about the composer's earthy sense of humor, such as his numerous letters to his librettist Piave in which he calls his colleague by various Italian obscene nicknames for the female genitalia. Showing an even more wry wit, as Phillips-Matz recounts, once a disappointed audience member at a Parma performance of "Aida" wrote to Verdi saying he had disliked the opera and demanding reimbursement for his "ticket, train travel, and supper." Verdi ordered his publisher to pay the bill, but not for the supper which he "could very well have eaten at home." The composer only stipulated that the gentle-

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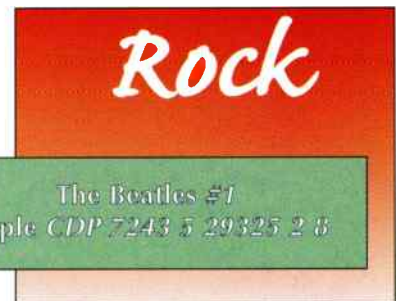
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Michael Tearson



HERE IT IS 2001 and the Beatles are still making history! Their new #1 album collects all 27 Beatles singles that reached the top of either British or American charts. The album itself has already topped album charts in 34 countries around the world establishing, pardon the expression, a new record.

Simply put, the Beatles are hotter than ever.

The songs were recorded between September 11, 1962 and January 31, 1969. Their dates at #1 go from December 2, 1963 to June 20, 1970. Both are brief stretches in historical terms, but the cultural impact this music wrought is deep and indelible.

From our vantage point in 2001, it is impossible to imagine any music or artist ever becoming as important again. The marketplace is so much bigger and so much more

fragmented that the kind of dominance The Beatles achieved is unthinkable. The world is a totally different place.

To ask whether the Beatles music still holds up is idiotic.

Of course, it holds up. Their records are still played on radio and by fans all the time. The Beatles are still inescapable.

More to the point, their songs still sound as fresh and daring and involving as they did when new. As Beatles producer Sir George Martin says in his notes to #1, "The Beatles' work was always impeccable." May I add that Sir George's work behind the glass was, too?

As a song-by-song listening experience, #1 is nothing special. The songs are great from beginning to end, but there really is no programming thread or sense of musical continuity. This might, in the end,

be appropriate because when The Beatles' era began, singles were king and albums came along as afterthoughts.

Indeed, The Beatles had a lot to do with confirming the album as an artistic form of its own, one at least as viable and important as that small vinyl disc with the large hole in the middle. *Rubber Soul*, *Revolver* and *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* rewrote the book. The American *Rubber Soul* had no single released from it. ("Yesterday" appeared Stateside on the cobbled-together *Yesterday and Today*.) *Revolver* had only one single.

So mighty were the Beatles at getting play on Top 40 radio stations that on three of their singles, both sides charted #1. All six of those are here: "Day Tripper"/"We Can Work It Out," "Yellow Submarine"/"Eleanor Rigby" and

"Something"/"Come Together."

The most impressive thing about #1 is its mastered sound which bursts out of the speakers. Doing A-B tests between #1 and earlier CDs was a remarkable experience. The sound here is far more revealing than ever before. I really could hear subtle touches and flourishes that were surely there before, but were never really audible, at least to me. The album is worth the price of admission for the sound alone.

Listen to #1 and it will encapsulate a whole lot of things:

Evolution of The Beatles over their remarkably brief career, how their sound changed, how they grew as songwriters and musicians from brash young hit-making rockers to true artists who redefined the world around them. The booklet's profuse

illustrations of sleeves from the singles' releases around the world offers a fascinating look at how graphics evolved during the period. I think there might be a lesson here. It might not be much, but it's the best I can do.

The Beatles really are eternal.

#1's unprecedented global success is final proof. But it's not as if anybody really needed it. New generations now — and more to come — are going to love The Beatles. Can you doubt it?



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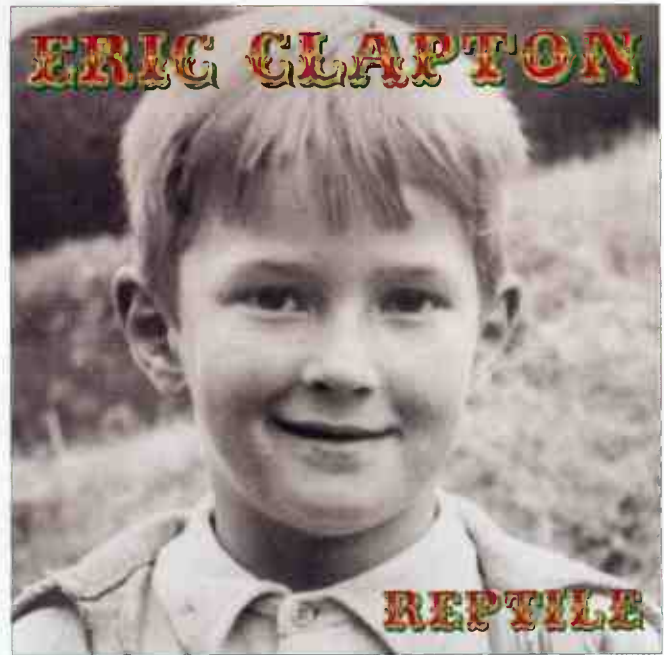
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Rock

Jeff Beck *You Had It Comin'*
Epic EK 61625
Eric Clapton *Reptile*
Reprise 947966-2



TWO OF THE BEST GUITARISTS ever to emerge from the British blues boom are still making records, but very different ones from each other. Eric Clapton gets all the Grammys primarily because he sings as well as plays, while Jeff Beck labors as a musician's musician, out of the intense spotlight but getting his fair share of attention as well. Coincidentally enough, each has issued a new album recently, and they are very different illustrations of the paths they've chosen. Eric Clapton is still steeped in his blues roots, tempered by some recent ventures into bossa nova territory, while Jeff Beck is into more of a contemporary electronica vein. It is

interesting to note that while they both started in pretty much the same place — Beck replaced Clapton in the Yardbirds, and they were rivals for the same audiences through the Sixties and Seventies — these two albums could not be more different.

Jeff Beck, first and foremost, must be acknowledged as the premier guitarist left alive. His dexterity and musicality are superhuman, and his sense of humor rules his playing. He is a thoughtful guitarist with a great visceral ability to wring notes out of his instrument that more resemble a singer or a horn player than a stringed instrument. Although his attention to his technique always

demonstrates discipline, he likes to just cut loose and wail most of all, which makes for albums that seem at times a little short on compositional skills. When first out of the box as a no-vocals kind of guy with *Blow By Blow*, he managed to create a genre that was fascinating in and of itself, and his guitar layers added interest (not to mention his soloing). Since then his albums have been more or less excuses for him to noodle, and since there is no better noodler, there is nothing wrong with that. *You Had It Comin'* has short bursts of focused melodies and songs, and even one Muddy Waters' blues standard turned on its head — "Rollin' and Tumblin'," covered by

Clapton's Cream over 30 years ago — but is mostly heavily synthesized rhythmic patterns for Beck to make funny noises over with his axe. The opening track "Earthquake" is probably the best example of this, but the other tracks on the album have merit as well. A little more un-treated guitar would have been welcome, and a couple of structured songs would have lifted the record, but if you accept the approach (which isn't that different from his last album, *Who Else?*) you know what you're in for. He is entertaining and great and his guitar playing is aggressive and brilliant — that, for some, is enough.

Clapton has taken a much more subdued approach to music, as if to say that since he can't compete with the hottest guitar players, you must accept him as a singer-songwriter-guitar player-stylist. This would be completely acceptable if he wrote or chose better songs or if he surrounded himself with musicians who would challenge him. But on *Reptile* he once again is stuck with the most laid-back crew available, singing songs that don't push his range or inspire him to cut loose with his fingers. His last solo album, *Pilgrim*, was almost universally

panned, but at least it had his partner Simon Climie bringing Clapton into some new territory that Climie had a good feel for. (Climie is a talented British songwriter whose main claim to fame was being responsible for the Aretha Franklin-George Michael hit "I Knew You Were Waiting.") This diluted *Pilgrim* version of the blues doesn't serve Clapton any better than the spate of records he made during the late '70s and early '80s, with no musical electricity to speak of, corny background vocals, and too much emphasis on acoustic guitars and mediocre grooves. Although reviews always point to the fact that his singing is his strong point, Clapton's vocals have always been a hidden strength, even going back to Cream. His excursions into a jazz or Latin territory are interesting, but don't have a particularly distinctive character, and most disappointing on them is the guitar work. Whereas Clapton's tone was once breathtaking, here he goes through a multitude of onboard effects to come up with a boxy, distorted murk that doesn't serve his playing. If this was a new, no-name guy he would barely get noticed. There's only one song on the entire album that works


on all levels, Stevie Wonder's "Ain't Gonna Stand For It", and on this singular track the vocal, the groove, and the guitar all click. But the remakes of standards, the obligatory J.J. Cale cover, and the new songs do little to keep the listener's interest.

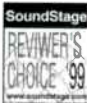
Of course, the recent Clapton collaboration with B.B. King was a big-selling record, and this might do similarly well. Clapton himself is a little better on this record, but he is so ill-served by his material and choice of players, for the most part, that one wonders what was on his mind and in his heart? If he's trying to be a blues cum soul man, why not go to Memphis or Muscle Shoals and get with rhythm sections which can feel this kind of music. If pop is his thing, then Simon Climie should play a more predominant role in the songwriting and show his considerable talents in this genre.

But straddling these two worlds is not doing Eric Clapton, a very gifted natural musician and singer, one lick of good. Beck, despite all the inherent limitations of his electro-format, summons all the power of his musicianship and lands on his feet, whereas Clapton is smothered in dross. Stay tuned for the rematch.

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Rock

Santana *Supernatural*
Classic Records 1980

Carlos Santana has done more to bring Latin music into the U.S. musical mainstream than has any other artist. Last year, turbocharged by the multi-Grammy winning *Supernatural*, Santana himself vaulted into the ranks of *fin de siècle* pop stars. He and his band have now achieved total sales of 50 million albums — nearly half of them resulting from *Supernatural*'s phenomenal success in the U.S. and internationally.

Contrarians, with whom our ranks are rife, may have been put off as much by the extraordinary commercial success of *Supernatural* as by the CD's reputation for seriously compressed dynamics. As a musical experience, however, this album is not to be missed — hits and all, and with a blazing guitar-meister finale from Santana and Eric Clapton as a finale. The two-record Classic LP set is clearer-sounding than the CD and improves on it in dynamics. Carlos and cohorts, old and new, are revealed in fine form.

Whence came this unique hybrid of Santana album cum tribute-guest artist-marketing project? Those fans familiar with Carlos Santana's career are more likely to see it as a normal outgrowth of his inclusive musical vision than a cunning

career move. The Santana Blues Band vaulted out of San Francisco among the second wave of Bay Area bands during a fertile period of musical hybridization and creativity in the late Sixties. Those bands were not just influenced by British rockers, psychedelics and Haight-Ashbury idealism, but also by thriving scenes in poetry, jazz and folk music, and a vibrant ethnic and sociological mix.

Santana's first three albums wove extraordinary percussive capabilities with Latin rhythms, soulful vocals, growling organ and Carlos's soaring, heart-felt guitar playing. How many rock guitarists have been compared to B.B. King — not many, I'd venture, and most not favorably — but in Carlos's case the comparison is apt. Yet, despite the breakthrough success of numbers like the late Tito Puente's "Oye Como Va," Michael Olatunji's "Jingo" and a cover version of Fleetwood Mac's "Black Magic Woman" that Santana made totally its own (and despite numerous great songs penned by Carlos and other band members over those and many other records) — the Santana band never had a number one album. Indeed, the band was eclipsed somewhat in the 1980s and '0s, even as Carlos pur-

sued admirable humanitarian projects and founded the nonprofit Milagro Foundation.

It wasn't until 2000 that Santana finally topped the U.S. charts with *Supernatural*. Not only has the album sold 23 million copies worldwide, it has reached Number One in 23 countries. It scorched last year's Grammy awards, taking best record, best album, best rock album, best song, best pop instrumental and best rock instrumental of the year — among others. More remarkable, no fewer than five numbers from the album won Grammys: "Smooth," "El Farol," "Put Your Lights On," "The Calling" and "Maria Maria."

The two-LP Classic Records set is sumptuous, with artwork and printing of the highest order (remember, if you can, when you first opened the Sgt. Pepper album?). The album includes an insert prepared by Santana's "graphics team."

Highlights include "Love of My Life," co-authored by Carlos with Dave Matthews. It features a sweet Matthews vocal over a hip-hop beat that bridges into a salsa-flavored guitar and drum fest. Singer/songwriter Lauren Hill contributes "Do You Like the Way" with vocals by herself and Cee-Lo. A pleasant sur-

prise on that cut is the appearance Al Anderson, late of NRBQ and currently a Nashville cat, on rhythm guitar.

"Put Your Lights On" features a smoky vocal and rhythm guitar by Everlast, who also wrote the song. Known these days nearly as well for his running feud with Eminem as for his music, Everlast provides an engaging melody and even an somewhat spiritual conclusion: "There's a monster living under my bed, whispering in my ear. There's an angel with a hand on my head, she says I've got nothing to fear."

Rob Thomas's "Smooth" won a VHS-1 award in the "Your Song Kicked Ass but Was Played Too Much" category. After several repeats of the tough-guy chorus that includes the line "give me your heart, make it real, or else forget about it," it closes with the delightful lyric "let's don't forget about it." Highly infectious and if, like me, you don't listen to top-40 radio much, you'll have the opportunity to overplay it for yourself.

Instrumental "El Farol" is a gorgeous, slow cha-cha with guest keyboard work by K.C. Porter, who co-authored with Carlos and also helped out on "Primavera." Several

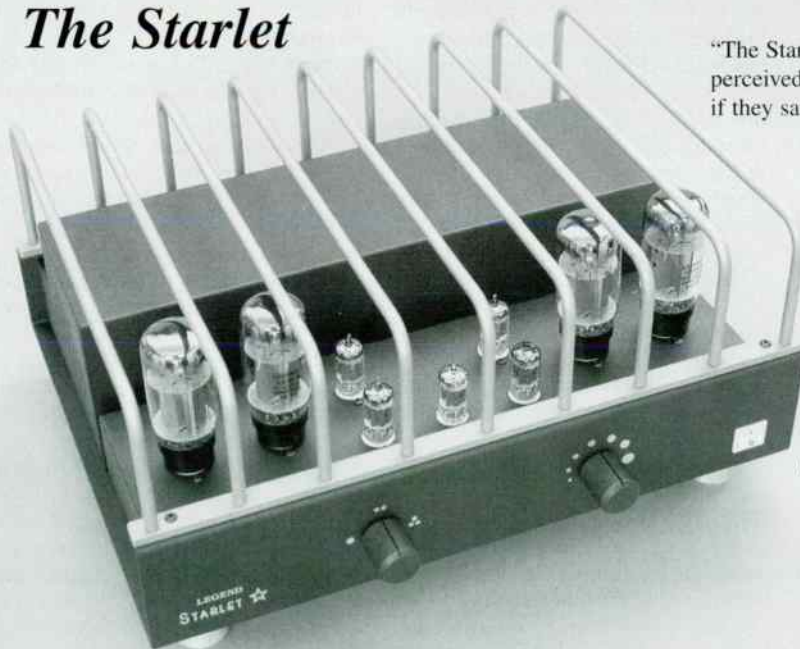
other "traditional" Santana numbers enrich the mix and provide ample material for Santana purists to enjoy. "Migra" starts off with a Bo Diddley "shave and a haircut" beat, then shifts to a shuffle with a wah-wah guitar break and is graced with inspired horn playing by trumpeters Jose Abel Figueroa, Marvin McFadden, Mic Gillette and trombonist Ramon Flores. Santana keyboardist Chester Thompson, bassist Benny Rietveld, percussionists Raul Rekow, Karl Perazzo and Rodney Holmes, and vocalist Tony Lindsay are in typical form — which is to say tight. For those who haven't seen and heard Santana in concert, these guys are the very definition a rhythm section. How something so lively and soulful can simultaneously seem like the world's loudest Swiss chronograph is a conundrum that must be experienced.

Actually, there are several more gems in *Supernatural*, but I'll leave you to discover them and instead focus on ... the sound. The CD has rightly been criticized for a restricted dynamic range. The LP is more dynamic than the CD from the mids through the highs, though perhaps slightly less so in the bass region. On the other hand, it seems "made

loud to be played loud" and at high volumes one can easily appreciate the excellent pressing, free of vinyl noise, pops or ticks, which enables the dynamic energy that is on the recording to be shown off to best use. The CD sounds darker and grainier, with a pronounced upper bass, a squashed midrange and rolled-off highs. The LP carries more upper midrange detail, revealing more of the soul in vocals, providing a fuller rendition of Santana's searing guitar work, clarifying percussive effects that are (comparatively) buried in the CD mix, and offering both more sting from brass instruments and more shimmer from cymbals. LP mastering is by Bernie Grundman. About half of the source tapes are analogue masters, and the rest are original DAT masters decoded using the dB Technologies MkII D/A converter. The surfaces of the 180-gram platters are flat and pristine.

I found the LP altogether more conducive to foot-tapping, air guitar and the general leaping about that comes from musical engagement than the CD was. Indeed, if you've only listened to the CD, you've yet to hear everything Santana's *Supernatural* has to offer.

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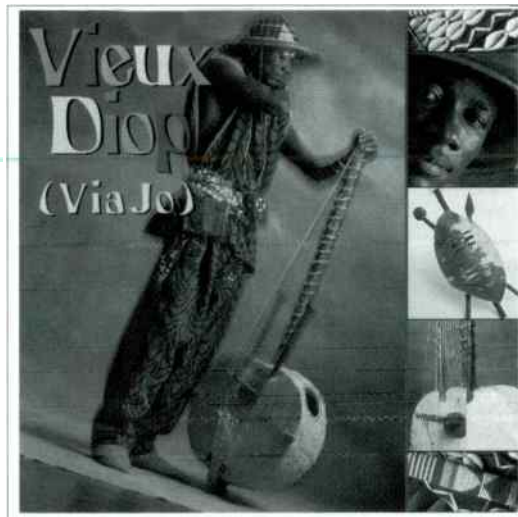
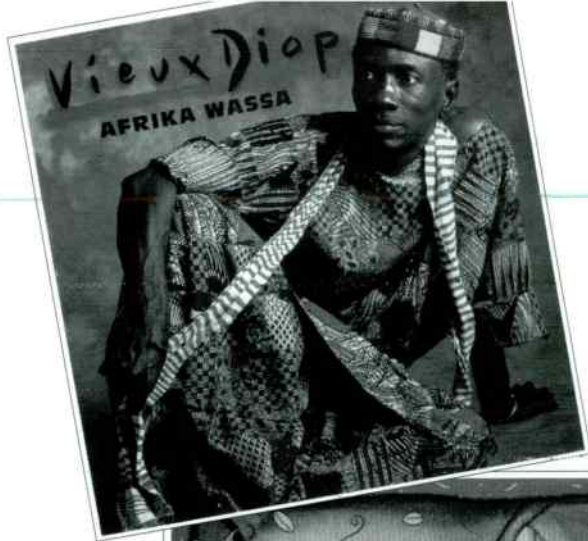
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Jim Clemons

World

Vieux Diop: A Triple Play
Afrika Wass Triloka 8069-2
(Via Jo) Triloka 7209-2
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IT WAS JUST a lucky pick. While in New Orleans for the 1996 Jazz Festival, I went on a shopping spree in the town's Tower Records store. This particular Tower Records, at the time, had a better-than-average selection of world beat, and I was determined to trade a hundred bucks for the cream of their crop. That would be about six CDs.

I had picked only five when my friends starting tugging on my sleeve to leave. So I reached down and grabbed the most interesting looking cover of those in front of me. It happened to be Vieux Diop's *(Via Jo)*.

I didn't even play it for at least a week, thinking it would fall into the same-ol' so-what category of so many other blind picks of my life. And when I finally broke the seal and slid the disc into my player, I didn't even bother to stay in the room with the music. I'd check it out from the comfortable distance of the kitchen, I thought, and do something productive like have a drink and tend to dinner preparations. By cut five, dinner be damned, I was squarely in the sweet spot of my listening room. And that's where I stayed until I had heard the entire CD a second time.

Vieux Diop is pronounced *Via Jo*, like the title of his second release. I didn't learn the pronunciation of his name until I got into my research for this review. There's not much information out there, by the way. I now have three of his CDs and none of them have good liner notes. So this article might very well be the most comprehensive and in-depth ever written about Vieux Diop. But that doesn't mean it's entirely accurate, as I cannot find places to double-check "facts."

While I read on a web site that Diop is a former member of Youssou N'Dour's band, I cannot find him credited on any N'Dour recording—and there have been plenty. N'Dour is the prolific Afropop star from Senegal. On the same web site, I read that Diop toured with Babatunde Olatunji, the famed Nigerian drummer. I don't doubt these bits of information; I just have no way of confirming them.

Diop plays several instruments, but he's a master of the kora, a 21-string bridged harp of West African origin. Like N'Dour, Diop is from Senegal, a tiny country on the western coast of Africa. Based on the content of his first two albums,

Deeso and *(Via Jo)*, released in 1993 and 1995 respectively, I was surprised to learn that Diop has lived in New York City since 1984. He may have moved his body, but he certainly didn't move his musical soul. I'll grant you that his recent CD *Afrika Wass* (released in 2000) is very slightly more pop-American, but still, the heart of this man's music is African through and through. It's not music you just listen to; it's music that embraces you.

The kora, for those unfamiliar, isn't quite like a conventional upright harp. It has a long neck and a fat, hollow body. So, to me, it more closely resembles a guitar in appearance, and you might mistake the sound as guitar on certain passages, but it doesn't take long before the uniqueness of the kora shines through. The kora's strings, instead of laying parallel to the body and neck as on a guitar, are aligned perpendicularly and held in position by a bridge that extends outward about six inches from the body. There are two sets of strings paralleling each other—a set of 10 and set of 11—one on each side of the bridge. The strings are plucked or strummed as on a harp. The kora has no frets,

and the strings are attached at various positions along the neck. Still, (and I'm not yet sure exactly how) it sounds as if tuning can occur in the midst of play, allowing any one string to serve a greater purpose than just one note. I say this because, when Diop plays, I'm certain I hear a wider range of tones than the couple of octaves 21 "fixed" strings might produce.

Like a conventional harp, the kora "weaves" its sound in layers that are quite lyrical, even intoxicating. But the kora is without a doubt more *organic* in tone and in the way it involves me. As Diop plays, I feel like I'm on a continuing journey to places far away — places refreshingly primitive, yet spiritually advanced.

To the weaving layers of the kora, add vivid and catching grooves of rhythm, then Diop's voice as he sings in various languages (especially the African Wolof), then big chorals answering him in a call-and-response style. On all three of my Vieux Diop CDs, that's his basic recipe. And it's mighty tasty.

My favourite Diop CD is (*Via Jo*), his second release and the first I owned. I think it's a masterpiece, a collection of musical magic. It's extremely musical from end to the other, and its energy level, while it varies from cut to cut, stays well within my comfort groove — never so fast as to be hard-edged, never so slow as to be lazy or sentimental. Along with the kora, Diop plays the *dusunguni* (a seven-string bass kora). Other interesting instruments on the CD include the *dejembe* (a vessel-shaped drum with a deep center note and high edge note), the *ney* (an end-blown flute made of reed), the *shekere* (a "shaking" percussion instrument), and the talking drum. This CD has tremendous "staying power." It has been one of my favorites, receiving frequent play since that Spring evening I first heard it in 1996.

Diop's first CD, *Deeso*, is very worthy, but I don't think it has quite the overall groove of the others. That is to say, the musical relationship of one track to the next isn't as close. You will hear the influence of Babatunde Olatunji, and some tracks remind me of the *juju* style made popular by African artists Ebenezer Obey and King Sunny Ade. If you can find this CD, get it.

But it may be out of print, as I no longer see it listed at the big cyber stores I visit.

Diop's most recent CD, *Afrika Wassa*, is the biggest production and the best recorded of the three. The translation of the term, *Afrika Wassa*, means new Africa, and this CD represents a new sound for Diop. His Senegalese signature with the kora, the chorals, and the rhythm is definitely here — and surprisingly, so are the instruments of

American pop music, accordion, violin, clavinet, organ, mandolin, and synthesizer. This works a lot better than you might imagine. Time will define this CD's staying power, but I suspect it will be quite good.

I have acquainted many people with Vieux Diop's music. It has become a favourite for each of them — even those with no previous inclination toward African music. I give the work of this artist my highest recommendation.

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Bluegrass

Dolly Parton *Little Sparrow*
Sugar Hill SUG-CD 3927

LITTLE SPARROW IS DOLLY Parton's second bluegrass album for Sugar Hill. Last year's *The Grass Is Blue*, the first, was a breathtaking album I raved about in *TAV* Vol. 6, No. 5. Since those words *Grass* took a Grammy as the year's best bluegrass album, *Little Sparrow* is even better.

Again, Dolly brings unprecedented conviction and abandon to her performance. Her bluegrass albums are easily among her very best work ever. The band is essentially the same: Barry Bales on bass, Stuart Duncan on fiddle, Jerry Douglas on dobro, Bryan Sutton on guitar and Jim Mills on banjo. Nickel Creek's Chris Thile takes the mandolin duties from Sam Bush. Their picking is absolutely excellent, often thrilling. Again, perfect angel harmonies play a key role. Returning voices include the teams of Alison Krauss and Dan Tyminski, Claire Lynch and Keith Little, and Rhonda and Darrin Vincent. New voices heard here are Maura O'Connell, the Isaacs sisters and Rebecca Lynn

Howard and Carl Jackson. The superb Celtic band Altan comes on the traditional "In the Sweet By and By."

Song choices as on *Grass* are split between covers and Parton originals. Like Billy Joel's "Traveling Prayer" on *Grass*, there is an unlikely rock to bluegrass piece in Collective Soul's "Shine." Steve Young's great "Seven Bridges Road," best known for the versions by the Eagles and Iain Matthews, receives a rousing upbeat version, and Cole Porter's "I Get A Kick Out Of You" works surprisingly well as it gives the players a showcase for their considerable chops on some jazz. The Louvin Brothers' classic "I Don't Believe You've Met My Baby" and Randy Scruggs' "A Tender Lie" are also notable.

Among the Parton originals are her personal take of the traditional "Little Sparrow," the sweet and mournful "My Blue Tears," "Bluer Pastures" and the giddy "Marry Me." "Mountain Angel" and "Down

from Dover" are a pair of traditional-sounding story-songs about mountain folk, both disarmingly frank about their subjects. "Angel" is the saga of a woman gone horribly wrong from the treatment at the hands of her monstrous husband and the ghost story of her wandering spirit. "Down from Dover" is the tale of a trusting young woman left pregnant, abandoned and humiliated by her man and his false promises. Each of these ballads is a landmark piece of songwriting.

Little Sparrow is absolutely sensational from end to end as it celebrates the bluegrass tradition even as it pushes the limits of the genre through audacious song choices and performances. Steve Buckingham's production and the album's technical sound are outstanding.

And for more good news, Dolly Parton is calling *Little Sparrow* the second part of a projected trilogy of albums of mountain music, so apparently there's one more to come.

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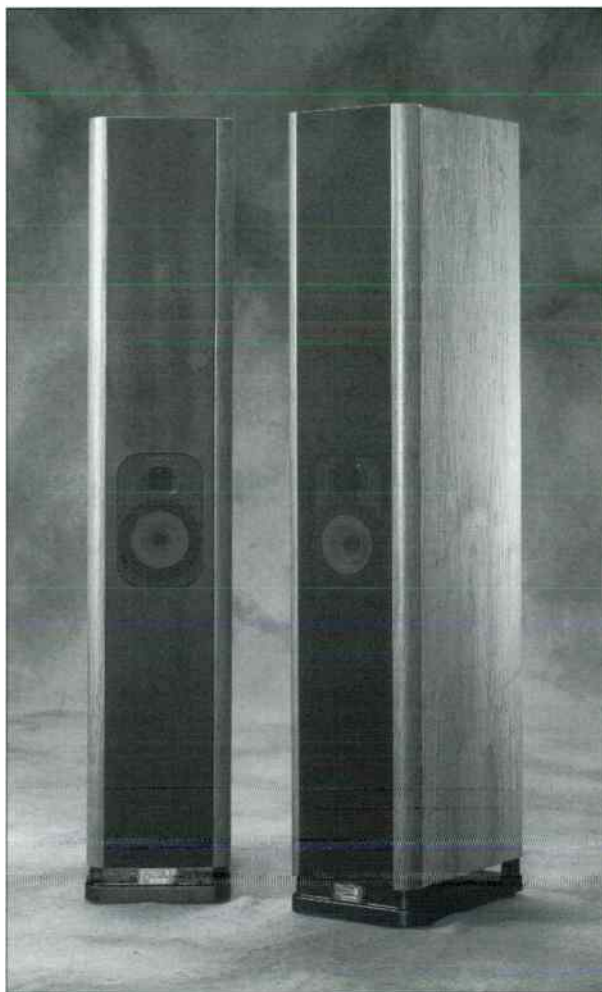
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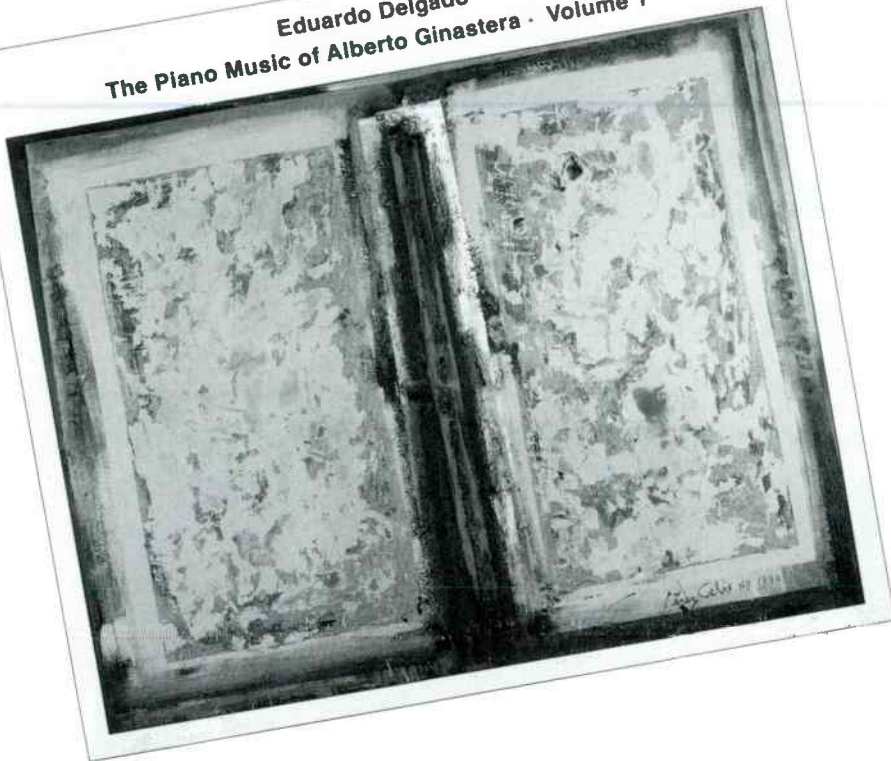
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The Piano Music of Alberto Ginastera - Volume 1



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The Piano Music of Alberto Ginastera, Vol. 1
Eduardo Delgado
MA Recordings M038A

SOMETIMES IT ALL comes together quite unexpectedly. Someone familiar with MA recordings might well expect audiophile sound and refined production values. The surprise would be the appearance of a 20th century "classical" composer amongst the improvised and folk-based world music releases. Yet the folk music of his native Argentina was a frequent source of inspiration for Alberto Ginastera, both in his feisty rhythmic pieces and the openly lyrical works. Often regarded as South America's answer to Hungary's Bartok, Spain's Falla or Russia's Stravinsky, Ginastera opens doors to the sensual world of the gato, malambo and zamba.

In the course of 24 short pieces belonging to five larger works, this collection of piano music presents a succession of richly varied miniatures. A composer's piano music, as an extension of his own fingers, often affords a direct link to the creative process. In Ginastera's case this is reinforced by the fact that his first and last works were for piano.

Here, with his earlier keyboard works, we encounter some of his most personal, and approachable statements.

This disc dives in with one of Ginastera's best-known works, *Danzas Argentinas* Opus 2. All three movements exploit the 6/8 meter's potential for invigorating cross-rhythms. The first movement features an insistent rhythm with echoing phrases. The dolorously romantic middle movement maintains a fluid lyricism as it traverses a classic arc through a climax to a quite ending. Touches of polytonality bring us into the modern world. The outer movements go further into polytonality as the printed music shows different key signatures to be played simultaneously. The last movement is a rhythmic tidal wave swept along by seething activity in the bass. Pungent chords jab the middle register, and across the upper spectrum a tune is splattered in clusters. Suddenly, major triads herald a passage reminiscent of a Keith Jarrett gospel groove. The ear-

lier seething ostinato and splattered tune return, and the piece ends with an exuberant glissando and fierce punctuation.

Tres piezas para chicos, written in 1934, are deft, witty and brief. They show the 18-year-old composer bringing genuinely popular tunes into the sonic realm of Ravel and Stravinsky.

Milonga is a seductive melody draped over an undulating habanera. Delgado's nuanced phrasing is a delight. The texture of *Malambo* initially suggests a toccata, but is soon heard to be an ostinato with teeth. A rising three-note scale fragment repeats above the bounding left hand, gaining in intensity, moving higher, getting wilder by the moment. The dash to the finish line sounds like fifty fingers.

Tres piezas (Opus 6 of 1940) depict regional dances of Ginastera's homeland. These three works, all between 3½ and 4½ minutes, are the longest on this disc, and that is good. In *Cuyana* the

rhapsodic melodic invention and jazzy chords recall the collaborations of Ellington and Strayhorn. One of this listener's favorite pieces is the atmospheric dirge-like northern dance. The stark open fifths call forth a simple melodic answer, which gives way to dramatic upheaval. The primitive fifths return, and with it the simple melody. It all slowly dies away like an ancient procession fading into the mists. The rich, rhythmic chords of the third piece unmistakably mimic the strumming of guitars. This Creole dance has a sweetly festive quality all of its own. One melodic passage bears an uncanny resemblance to music by the Crescent City Creole composer Louis Moreau Gottschalk. The upper register of the keyboard sparkles on this one.

The *Twelve American Preludes* are a succession of brief contrasting works. In the manner of etudes, some explore technical questions. Four are homages (including one to Aaron Copland) while others are stylized folk songs or dances. In the context of the whole disc, the two that stand out both explore pentatonic scales. The first is gentle, with a distinct Asian character. The other evokes the work of the European

composer known for bringing Asian music to the West. Debussy's *Cathedral* shimmers before us, yet in its pillars of bass sound in and pungent interjections up high, it is pure Ginastera. The disc rounds off with the *Rondo sobre temas infantiles Argentinos*.

Throughout, the warmly inviting sonics keep piquant note clusters from ever becoming harsh. The piano sings even at its most ram-bunctious. This would seem to be the goal of Todd Garfinkle founder and chief recording engineer for MA recordings. Garfinkle was a composer and pianist who moved to Japan in the eighties, and went on to hone an aesthetic and technique for recording acoustic music. MA derives from a Chinese character that has to do with space, be it inner space, as in as in the soul of a person, or the large acoustical spaces Garfinkle seeks out as recording venues. Cathedrals, abbeys and concert halls are used for their sonic properties and because Garfinkle believes the natural reverberations of such musical arenas bring out the best from the artist. Eduardo Delgado's sensitive and exuberant performance is indeed, a delight to the senses. He has the chops to rol-

lick easily through virtuosic tumults, while maintaining the tango's mix of passion and poise.

The three-fold paper package is friendly to the touch, as well as the environment, and the boldly colored paintings are handsomely reproduced. Through a documentary photograph, we peer down upon a Hamburg Steinway, its lid removed. Kirara Hall (Akiruno City, Japan) must have a high ceiling because the camera also depicts the top of a ladder on which rests a custom-built microphone amplifier accepting the balanced meter-long cable outputs from the two omnidirectional microphones placed at the very end of the piano. I'll surrender no more trade secrets, but suffice it to say, the microphones placement must have been fine-tuned, for the rich textures that pervade this disc are consistently detailed. A comparison with a Reference Recordings solo piano disc reveals (as might be expected) the MA transients are more pronounced, the instrument's pearly attack releasing more partials.

Jazz pianists may well find this disc a revelation. Spicy, nostalgic, openhearted but smart, this music is highly recommended.

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WHEN THEY SAY, "they don't make 'em like they used to," this is the "'em" they're referring to. Hodges was one of two leading alto saxophonists before Charlie Parker (Benny Carter was the other). He spent most of his career as Duke Ellington's premier soloist, but recorded many dates under his own name. (Mosaic previously released his solo recordings from 1951 to 1955, the only period during which he had a brief hiatus from the Ellington band.) Why did Ellington so value Hodges? He was possessed of a tone to die for. At once creamy and sharp, it could cut through an ensemble or solo with power and finesse. He was never one to try to fill all the spaces up with notes; he just found the right ones.

His solo outings were heavily influenced at this point by Ellington

(Duke's alter ego Billy Strayhorn appears on piano on most of the early dates), but he also had a strong attraction to pretty standards, and, particularly, to blues of any hue. In fact, one listens to this set and is amazed by how many different permutations of the blues can be found within very tight parameters.

The first CD has him in a Dukish mode, with moderately large groups (eight to 11 pieces), and Strayhorn and other Ellingtonians in tow. Highlights include "Snibor," very much in this vein, with a sophisticated, elegant medium-tempo theme and arrangement, and a just as elegant solo statement from Hodges. "Texas Blues" features a gully-low trombone and baritone sax riff theme, and Hodges' impassioned blues playing (also low down 'bone by Lawrence Brown,

tasty Jimmy Hamilton clarinet, and gentle baritone sax by Harry Carney). Ellington's 1927 "Black and Tan Fantasy" is nicely updated, with an arrangement that uses "I Let A Song Go Out Of my Heart" as a backing riff to Ray Nance's trumpet solo, a growling Quentin Jackson trombone, and Hodges riding and bending a few notes for maximum blues effect. Other highlights include the laid back blues of "Blues-Aplenty," with solos by Hodges and Ben Webster (tenor sax) that are anything BUT laid back. "Big Shoe" is a bouncy blues, with bouncy Hodges and soaring Roy Eldridge trumpet. "M.H.R." is a medium-tempo "I Got Rhythm" based tune, with Eldridge in the stratosphere, Webster flexing his muscles, fine Brown and Hamilton, and a melodic Hodges dancing over

the changes. "First Klass (C'mon Home)" has a different, mainstream groove, and Hodges simultaneously floats on and drives the rhythm. On CD 4 "Starting With You (I'm Through)" is lovely Ellingtonia, Hodges soaring above the band. "The Peaches Are Better Down The Road" is a down and dirty blues (over the "Blueberry Hill" bass riff), with Booty Wood's muted trombone solo from the gutter and Hodges pretty, soulful playing.

In truth, the track-by-track analysis is beside the point. Some artists start out with their styles partially formed, and evolve over the time, integrating influences into a personal whole (Ben Webster is classic in this mold). Hodges arrived fully formed. He sounds here pretty much like he sounded in the forties, and while each solo is newly improvised, they are of such consistent quality that it's difficult to chose favorites from between them.

Aside from the artistry of the Rabbit (Hodges' nickname), this set features many other instrumentalists of enormous talent extensively. I've previously noted Ben Webster, who seems to play with more fire opposite Hodges than on his own dates. Lawrence Brown's trombone is another wonder; he has a tone that is sooo smooooth he sometimes recalls a cello. Jimmy Hamilton's clarinet was another staple of Ellington's band, and it's a treat to hear it featured as prominently as it is here. Roy Eldridge, Ray Nance, and Harry Carney (who plays the most delicate sounding baritone sax I've heard) are other swing era stars with extended exposure.

Sound is fabulous. Of the 13 sessions included, three are mono, the rest fabulously spread over a wide soundstage, lusciously recorded. Occasional evidence of tape wear can be heard, but for the most part, they're in very good shape. Early on the imaging is too sharply left-right, but becomes better, with more center, later on. Hodges' sound, the key to his style, is served well. Packaging is up to Mosaic's usual fine standards.

Great set, all in all. Non-initiates may wish to begin with something smaller, like Classic Records' *Back To Back*. Completists may be miffed that one Hodges session was found after the set was issued. Still, I loved listening to this box by one of the jazz masters.

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I WAS SITTING AROUND the shanty a few weeks ago, when the realization came over me that the magic had gone out of my listening sessions. No longer did relaxing in the “string chair” and listening to my four audiophile approved CDs through my multi-million dollar system fill my heart with the kind of ecstasy I had become used to. Clearly, something had to be done, and quickly. I did what any golden-eared audio critic would have done, if put into the same situation. I called every one of my high-end manufacturer buddies (read “admirers”), and told them to send over to my place ASAP the newest, coolest, and, most importantly, most-expensive new audio toys they make. The resulting traffic jam, which snared cars fully 12 blocks from my house, tied up traffic for three hours, as all

the gurus of the high-end brought me their latest and greatest. The local police were called, as two amplifier manufacturers came to blows at the end of my street. The authorities had been called, as the two could be heard for blocks, arguing in Russian and Mandarin Chinese over which of their products would function better in the aftermath of a 100 megaton nuclear blast. One witness also reported hearing something that sounded like “Moose and squirrel must die!”

None of the new toys offered to me tickled my fancy; after all, when you have USDA-certified golden ears, a new piece of gear has to be really special to earn my rave or at least be offered on a “free lifetime loan” program. I did, however, sit down with the aforementioned battling amp makers, and found that

they actually agreed on one thing. They both said that their equipment sounded its best when used with a new interconnect from Loof-Lirpa labs, The Fire Cable. Lirpa labs was noted, over the years, not only for producing some of the most, uh, innovative audio equipment extant, but also for their never having had a review of Lirpa gear published in any magazine but one. That one mag, noted for having let go of the best editor-in-chief in publishing (shameless pandering) ceased publication last year, and due to Lirpa’s close relationship with it, that company also fell on hard economic times. However, now, thanks to the intervention of the noted audio high priest Dr. Amai Loof, son of the widely famed Herr Doktor Prof. I. Lirpa, the company has been resurrected as Loof-Lirpa Labs inc.

The first product from this new incarnation of the respected (sort of) company is the Fire Cable, which was so highly praised by my Communist comrades. This innovative interconnect uses a proprietary, and highly secret, not to mention highly flammable substance as a dielectric, which, when activated by a triggering device within the gold-plated connectors, ignites, thus heating the cable to a temperature at which there is practically no resistance to current flow. According to a "White Paper" issued by Dr. Loof, this allows far more of the audio signal to pass through, revealing previously hidden detail in the recordings. A rather fortunate side effect is that the cable does actually burst into flames about three minutes after a signal first passes through it. Thus, the lucky audiophile gets to replace his cables, and possibly, if he is really lucky, the rest of his equipment as well, and he can do it on a regular basis, as he's got the perfect excuse to tell his "significant other," namely, "My system burned up!"

Due to the problems associated with testing a product having such a limited and singular life span, Dr. Loof kindly provided me with 50 pairs of the cable, so that I might thoroughly explore the sonics of this revolutionary wire. I also found it necessary to obtain 50 identical amplifiers and preamplifiers from my good friend Francois Escargot, of Escargot Audio. As you know, I have used Escargot equipment in my system, as a reference, for many years, ever since I started getting it free. As a reminder, my reference system consists of the Digititis MK1 CD transport, connected through a Sucker Lab 75-ohm digital interconnect to the incredibly complex Digititis Digitalis 24/96 DAC. Vinyl is spun on a Groove Modulation Spinner 6 turntable, equipped with an Inner Groove 2 arm, with a Cactus Needle Scratcher cartridge. The turntable is mounted on a platform made of diamond plate steel, three inches thick, and this, in turn, is suspended from the main structural beams of my house, using shock absorbers from a 1962 Corvair. My electronics are the superb Dauphine preamp, matched with the equally wonderful 2CV amplifier, both on permanent loan from Escargot.

Speaker wires are from Sucker Lab. All electronics are mounted upon "Masticated Mountings" isolation footings, made of imported Iberian chewing gum, and the components are housed in a "Barnum Base" audio rack. This rack, as you probably are aware, is equipped with a secret compartment housing an actual relic of St. Phonius, patron saint of high-end audio. So equipped, I ensconced myself in the "string chair" and proceeded to do some listening.

Sick of hearing about hot computer products? Try Loof-Lirpa's Real- FireWire Interconnect!

The first thing I found was that warm up time was irrelevant, as the cables, and thus the system, warmed up very quickly indeed. The first three minutes of the title cut from the CD *Kill All The Cops*, from the rap group Crack is Good for You (Sellout Records CD 666) proved the cables to be revealing of detail previously masked with lesser cabling. I could clearly hear the sound of a crack pipe being lit in the background, way over to the left side, even through the machine gun fire and squeal of car tires at center and right. I next played the CD *Ten Tunes For Triangle and Tom-Tom* by The Triangle and Tom-Tom Trio (TT Records CD0987654321T). On the first three minutes of cut 7, I could clearly hear the flushing of the toilet in the bathroom down the hall from the recording studio. Quite remarkable.

Overall, these cables seem to impart a sort of raspberry-mocha sound to the music. That isn't to say that if your system has the tendency towards tutti-frutti, that these interconnects will turn your sound to mango, far from it. In such a situation, I would expect to hear a sort of lemon-lime effect. In order to get a second opinion on what I was hearing, I enlisted my lady friend, T-36, whom, as you will recall, has helped me out on many such occasions in the past. I failed, however, to give her full details regarding the product under test. And so, upon smelling the first whiff of smoke, she grabbed the fire extinguisher I had

sitting next to the "string chair," and proceeded to douse my entire system with CO₂, thus ending listening sessions, at least until the mess could be cleaned up.

Once I was able to continue my listening sessions, I played many of my favorite (short) selections from my audiophile approved CDs. I was extremely pleased by soundstage depth, which extended, seemingly, for a mile or so beyond the back wall of my listening space. Frequency response extended into the MHz range, as measured by my "Silly Scope MK1" oscilloscope. This is a "Hot" cable, in more ways than one! While listening to the baroque classic, *The Well Luted Clavier* by J.S. Bach (Imaginary Records IMCD 00000000), the piece ran a little too long, and my entire

system burst into flames. I reached for the extinguisher, only to realize too late that T-36 had totally depleted it. The flames quickly spread to the Tibetan prayer flags I had hanging above the equipment rack, and soon had ignited my imported llama hair sound-absorption panels. Before my local fire department had the blaze fully under control, the entire block had gone up in flames. The sound, though, was wonderful! Even the fire fighters agreed.

In conclusion, if you are the sort of person who lives in constant anticipation of replacing that next component in your system, but sometimes feels a need to justify that purchase, these could be the cables for you. If you are a true audiophile who generally only listens to 30 seconds of an LP or CD before jumping up to make an adjustment or change, they are ideal! Bear in mind that these are cables meant only for the dedicated, serious, and somewhat deranged audiophile, and absolutely must be used with only the finest, most expensive gear available. The less well-heeled audiophile may find the cost of constantly replacing equipment daunting, but those who are not extremely wealthy have no place in this hobby, as I am sure you will agree. I am looking forward to testing the newest product from Loof-Lirpa, the Meltdown integrated amplifier, which has no connection to the a.c. mains whatsoever, as it is powered by a revolutionary new "cold fusion" process.

Edge Electronics Si-1 Preamplifier and M8 Amplifier



DAN: Edge is the acronym for the Electro-acoustics Design Group of Boulder, CO, which has been producing high-end audio equipment for more than a dozen years.

Two cartons containing review samples of their Si-1 preamplifier and M8 amplifier were stacked inside my front door when I returned from work one February afternoon. Each box had a red shock-warning device on the outside which, I came to learn, indicated there'd been some rough handling enroute from Colorado. The preamp appeared unscathed despite the rocky ride from Boulder to my home several hundred miles to the southwest and use of single-carton packaging. But when I picked up the amp carton, I could feel a tremendously heavy weight sliding about inside, a sort of industrial-strength air hockey game. Very disconcerting.

Dwight: "Rocky" ride ... that's good one! Was the amp reduced to a box of loose parts? That is electronic rubble?

Dan: No, just one loose part, but a very important one. It turned out that the "puck" in this gonzo air hockey game was, in fact, the M8's rather substantial toroidal power transformer. Edge's marketing manager, Steve Norber, apologetically asked that I open the cabinet, re-attach the free-flying transformer, and ship the amp back to Edge for repairs.

Dwight: Hey, shift happens. That review gear probably has more frequent roller miles than both of us combined. I don't suppose you waited for the return of the amp to listen to the preamp.

Dan: No, indeed. Although not normally my style, I dutifully first read what I first thought to be two pages of set-up instructions, then wired the Si-1 into my system. I was surprised, and a bit dismayed, to discover that these pages comprise the current "owner's manual." Steve Norber has since informed me that more comprehensive owner's manuals are under development for future purchasers. I really missed having the manuals, however, because I didn't know what to make of the Video inputs. (Could they possibly have something to

do with imaging?) I also missed the comfort afforded by manufacturers who include copies of the final Q&A checklist and test data for each individual unit.

Dwight: I confess the lack of supporting literature caught me by surprise, too. But you really are showing your age here; the Video inputs are, of course, for the audio portion of a video input, the designer's way of paying homage to the home-theater tidal wave. While the M8 amp worked consistently without a hitch, the Si-1 did subsequently play some aural peek-a-boo with its left channel. Some judicious rapping on the chassis temporarily jump-started the tunes, however. (See Mom and Dad, that BSEE wasn't a total waste of money!)

Dan: It worked perfectly for me. And, to my eye, it looks good too. As with the M8, the Si-1 has a stylish matte black surface, with position labels and logo etched in, resulting in a subtle and attractive black-on-black finish. Unfortunately, as a well-aged audiophile (Audiosaurus Rex), my eyes are no longer what they used to be, and without direct sunlight or a flashlight, I couldn't discern which input was being selected. Of course, it would have been easy to fill in a bit of each etched label with a white crayon, but I suspected this would be beyond my purview as a reviewer using loaner gear.

Dwight: Well, A-Rex, it's too bad that more manufacturers can't make great looking gear that also is ergonomically sound....

Dan: Agreed. But, fortunately, since the Si-1 offers no phono section, after locating the CD input position I had no further need for this selector switch. Unfortunately, since the Si-1 offers no phono section, many of my test recordings, as well as the lion's share of my music library gathered dust during the course of these listening sessions.

Dwight: I wasn't quite as enamored of the Si-1/M8 appearance and don't think either of the current boxes will win any industrial design awards in either styling or execution. However, by the time this gets to readers, the newer, machined aluminum, "classy chassis" will



be standard issue for the whole line. The net effect of the upgrade is stunning gear that promises big-league sounds. Speaking of sounds...what did you hear?

Dan: Although it has often been noted that the sound character of solid-state and tube gear is increasingly converging, the Si-1 makes no pretense at being anything other than silicon-based. But despite the fact that my reference system is also solid state, the Si-1 yielded a substantially different sound character than that to which I'm accustomed.

As you know, Dwight, I utilize a balanced configuration in my Classé gear, so my reference interconnect couldn't be used for testing the single-ended Edge. I first tried an old MIT MI-330 and, then, a Straightwire LSI I had around the house. On the plus side, the Si-1 delivered an extremely wide and tall soundstage with surprising detail, and I delighted in that age-old audiophile pleasure of hearing new things in familiar recordings. With either of these interconnects, the Edge delivered an extended, clear, and sharp upper-midrange and top end. Electric guitars and cymbals, for example, displayed the metallic bite so immediately evident in live performances but so often blunted by electronic reproduction. And, best of all, at times I was treated to true "musicality" as, for example, with Duke Ellington's piano (*This One's For Blanton*, Pablo/OJC, OJCCD-810-2) and Ricki Lee Jones' voice (*Pop Pop*, Geffen, GEFD-24426). I was, on the other hand, less satisfied by the sometimes blisteringly-close perspective, little evidence of depth, and lightweight—albeit occasionally muddy—bass the Si-1 offered up in recordings which I know normally exhibit none of these characteristics (for example, Mary Black's *No Frontiers*; Gift Horse, D2-77308).

Dwight: The Si-1 held its own in my big rig, when it stood in for my Audible Illusions Modulus L1, retubed with Siemens NOS. It needed very little warm-up, brought the performers very close, had an extremely smooth top end, and played all frequency bands extremely well. If the Si-1 gave up anything to my L1, it was in kick-drum "slam" and in ultimate detail. I think I know how Edge does it. Having taken a brief look into the Si-1's chassis, it epitomizes the "less is more" Zen philosophy. Of course, there's the beautiful toroidal transformer and power supply goodies, but only a small circuit board with a few op-amps and discrete transistors. Other than a few switches and input/output jacks, there's a Noble pot, which simulates the detents of a more-expensive discrete-resistor volume attenuator. It

gave the large volume knob all the sexy smoothness of silk underwear, but didn't offer me the number of volume levels I need. The newer Si-1 will sport a machined-aluminum chassis, and a \$300 price bump. Future editions will include faster slewing op-amps and a remote control as well.

Dan: After about two weeks of listening to the Si-1 with my amp, the M8 arrived back on my doorstep. And, remarkably, again with the shock indicator showing "red" (maybe these delivery guys HAVE found a way to play air hockey with such heavy parcels!). Happily, this time there was no apparent damage to the amp.

Dwight: Because of our policy to not share either factual details or listening impressions until both of us have completed our reviews, I didn't realize until much later that there'd been so many problems with the deliveries. I wasn't surprised, however, because I have rare video footage of delivery personnel drop-kicking parcels from truck to door, and have heard it may actually become an official Olympic sport by the year 2008. But, of course, Dan, your delivery of the gear to my place obviously involved more TLC.

Dan: I assume this means I needn't apply for a position with a parcel delivery outfit! As for the sound of the M8 doing a solo flight in my system, I'd say that it was of a similar nature to the Si-1, but without the tendency to be immoderate. That is, not as likely to be too aggressive, too thin, or too analytical, as I'd found the preamp to be if everything wasn't just to its liking.

Dwight: You're starting to sound far too much like a psychologist!

Dan: Guilty as charged. In any event, the M8 melded smoothly into the rest of my system with little effort. And it is by far the coolest running amp I've encountered; remarkably so, given its 170-watt rating. What was your experience?

Dwight: When I replaced my Mesa Baron (retubed with Telefunken and Amperex minis, and RCA 6L6GCs) with the M8, I was pleasantly surprised. My current-thirsty Thiel 3.6s have humbled a few amps with big names and even bigger price tags, but the M8 took on the Baron's role like a dedicated understudy—effortlessly and with few sonic differences. The bass, not unexpectedly, was better controlled and supremely confident. Despite its huge dynamics, the amp was much more quiet than its tubed counterpart—an absolutely black musical canvass. Far right-hand piano notes were

a little strident on certain recordings, but much smoother than my old Aragon 4004—no hint of grain whatsoever. Vocals had terrific immediacy—not front row, but IN the microphone. If I had any disappointments, they were minor. I heard a little less detail than I'm used to, and the amp didn't command my head to nod or my feet to tap—just didn't 'boogey' like the Baron.

Dan: What did you find out about the design of the M8?

Dwight: According to the aptly named Tom Maker, designer and president of Edge, "it's all in the iron"! Tom sees an amp as a modulator of wall current, and designs his power supplies with extremely tight regulation. The M8's single 1500-volt-amp toroidal transformer

bench tests at 2500 volt-amps and is allowed to sag only 4 to 5 percent on its output voltage under full load. The efficiency of having only one secondary winding (note hardware purists, the M8 is not a dual-mono design) allows for reduced filtering capacitance and lets this baby produce 170 very conservatively rated watts,

doubling to 340 watts into 4-ohm loads, and doubling again to 680 watts into 2-ohm loads. This monster maxes out around 800 watts continuous, and 13 kilowatts dynamic, for half a second. It uses three gain stages, all bipolar transistors, with ten 1%-matched n-channel devices in each output stage. A conservative bias switches from Class-A mode to Class B at two watts, which explains "da cool runnings, mon." I asked Tom why the sounds seem to roll out of the M8 effortlessly on "Teflon coated ball-bearings", and he

explained that it is because the devices are not heavily biased and consequently, the hardware is very understressed.

There are more changes in store for the M-series amps, including a very advanced protection circuit that will allow slewing rates

to be unleashed well beyond their present, artificially restricted levels. Expect crisper response and even more detail in future incarnations.

Dan: More detail? That'll really be something.

Dwight: What's "more," according to the sexy 8x10 glossies mailed to me, is that the new, 3/8-inch thick,

machined-aluminum chassis walls have thick fins projecting from the walls at 90 degrees, with corners nicely rounded, for the "strong but sensitive" look. According to Tom Maker, if you're going head-to-head with the likes of Rowland and Levinson, you'd better show up dressed for battle. Also, in the revised M-8, the formidable handles that once adorned either side of the thick faceplate are abandoned. Ironically, function bows to aesthetics, as the total weight increases by 30 pounds! Unfortunately, "kah-ching," the Edge bean counters have slapped us with an equally hefty surcharge for all that metal and machine work, pushing the price into the just-under five-kilobuck range.

Dan: Since the Si-1 and M8 were designed to work together, let's turn to their performance as a duo. Using the MIT and Straightwire interconnects between the Si-1 and M8 generally yielded the same kind of results I detailed above for the individual tests, with the M8 amp tending to be the better—or, at least, more easily matched—component in my system. When combined, the strengths of the M8 generally managed to overcome the potential difficulties reported for the Si-1. However, we're still talking about a somewhat analytical and assertive sound, compared to my Classé gear.

My time with the Edges clearly indicates that these pieces—whether

These two Out-of-Phase Audiophile reviewers help bring this amp and preamp from Edge into focus.

BACKGROUND & BIOS

This review by two Out-of-Phase 'philes is the first of a planned series of equipment and music reviews presented as a dialog between Dan and Dwight, two long-time friends and audiophiles. As with most friends, D & D have many things in common as well as many in which they diverge, and *The Audiophile Voice* readers will quickly discover that they have decidedly different views and preferences regarding music reproduction. D & D each hope that some of these views and preferences will align with those of their readers, and that these discussions will therefore be useful to readers in forming their own auditioning priorities and decisions.

Dwight has eclectic musical taste, ranging from gospel, country, jazz, blues, and rock to international and new age. He prefers slower moving, thoughtful musical pieces played by a handful of musicians, preferably on acoustic instruments. He is not a brand snob, and loves to experience synergy in sound systems regardless of pedigree and price. His degrees are in electrical engineering and experimental psychology and he is currently employed as a cognitive engineer at a New Mexico National Laboratory. He enjoys blasting the forest trails on his Kawasaki and preparing international cuisine. His big rig has an EAD digital source, Audible Illusions line stage, current delivery via a retubed Mesa Baron feeding Thiel 3.6s, all connected with Siltech and moored by Sound Anchor.

Dan enjoys small group acoustic ensembles and listens primarily to jazz and folk or world music. He especially favors systems capable of conveying the emotional messages communicated by musicians through their music, and especially abhors those which are, for example, musical only during certain phases of the moon or until the next upgrade is released. He has earned degrees in psychology, counseling, and ergonomics, is employed as a human reliability-safety specialist, and serves as a substitute on-air host for music programs at a public radio station. His system consists of an Immedia turntable sporting a Grado cartridge, Sony CD player, Classé amplification, Dunlavy speakers, and cables by Yamamura, Tara, Audiotruth, and Meitner.

used solo or in tandem — are very responsive to changes in interconnects and, as a pair, they responded magnificently to a borrowed length of Kimber Kable's modestly priced Hero. Now, the bass provided a foundation for the music, and there was substance to the vocalists and instruments. While Jim Hall's guitar on *Reflections* (Telarc CD 83402) previously displayed the requisite sting of steel-strings-on-steel-frets, with the Hero in line, the Edges now also clearly conveyed the tonality of the wood in Hall's hollow-body, carved arch top guitar, leaving no chance to mistake a D'Aquisto for a Les Paul.

Dwight: Sort of a heroic performance for a budget interconnect, no?

Dan: You bet. Also greatly improved were the Fairfield Four's voices (all five of them!) on *Standing in the Safety Zone* (Warner Bros., 9 26945-2) as well as Takako Nishizaki's violin (*Butterfly Lovers Violin Concerto*, Marco Polo 8.223350). Timbre, timbre everywhere! And I do mean everywhere; the Hero let the Edges' huge soundstage flow on through. I was also mightily impressed by the "slam" as heard — and felt — on such recordings as Ali Farka Toure's *Talking Timbuktu* (World Circuit, HNCD 1381) and on Lift the Wings, the opening track on the King's Singers' *Spirit Voices* CD (RCA 09026 68436 2).

Dwight: It sure sounds like this set-up really knocked your socks off.

Dan: Well, barefoot or otherwise, there certainly was an awful lot to like about the Edge tandem. In fact, I

found their ability to deliver detail positively addicting. Background instruments and vocals were delightfully discernible as was recording venue ambiance. Additionally, with the Hero—or, presumably, other compatible interconnects—the Si-1 and M8 combo presents a frequency spectrum which is well-balanced and without glaring discontinuities. Significantly, I found

them to do best that which is most important: the midrange. They also do best that which is most difficult — producing realistic depictions of human voices and solo piano. Check out Bryan Ferry's deliciously retro *As Time Goes By* (Virgin, 7243 8 48270 2 1) and Fred

Hersch's *Thelonious* (Nonesuch, 79456-2), as excellent examples of the Edges' capabilities in this all-important area. What were your experiences with the Si-1/M8 combination?

Dwight: Well, obviously we're using different bases of comparison. While your system might be eminently "musical," I've never found it to be particularly detailed. From my perspective, my tubes have consistently delivered more detail — and that's where I live. I did my initial duo listening in my bedroom, where the pair replaced a Golden Tube SI-50 integrated amp fitted with precisely matched NOS Amperexes at all gain stages. Combined with my Audio Refinements Complete CD and Meadowlark Vireos, the junior rig is a detail production plant. The Edge duo sounded huge—sound was no longer coming from two bookshelf speakers or even the front wall, but came from every-

Dwight: "Vocals with the M8 had terrific immediacy, not front row, but IN the mike."

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where — big and omnidirectional, but without clearly defined imaging. The dynamic swing and unabashed testosterone of the pair made my shy, but complex CD box and diminutive Meadowlarks belt out tunes like Kate Smith on the Fourth of July. I can't imagine anyone wanting or needing any more power than this pair delivers. Bass was authoritative, deep, and well damped, however articulation and pace were not very precise—even pondering at times. Compared to the finely etched detail of the Amperex EL34s, the N-channel bipolar output devices of the M8 were more recessed in the midrange, and retrospectively, a little more neutrally balanced. The top end of the response was very sweet for a solid-state rig, with just a dash of roll-off. Cymbals sounded slightly more splashy than metallic.

Dan, I too found a particular sensitivity to interconnects — and to power cords. The leaner and cleaner the interconnect, the better the sound. I started with some Synergistic Looking Glass and copper Music Metres borrowed from our friends at Sound Consultant, but the sound was a bit bloated and rubbery. When I switched to Kimber KC-1s and later to the Siltech FTM-4 Sgs — much of the fat was trimmed away. Same went for Siltech power cords — plug 'em if you have 'em, 'cause the Edge gear loves silver and low-inductance wires.

Dan: Although my time with the Si-1/M8 duo was limited, I did have a brief opportunity to try my own upgraded power cords on the Edge pieces. These provided a slightly more distant perspective — something which my wife and I strongly prefer — and polished off a few of the occasional rough edges I heard (most likely from the Si-1) in the upper-midrange and top end.

The Si-1 and M8 delivered the widest soundstage yet presented by my system, but what little sense of depth there was to be found was curtailed at the edges. And while both primary (i.e. music) and secondary (e.g. hall ambiance) detail were superb, I was, like you, never quite able to generate a truly solid image of the individual musicians or instruments (where my Dunlavy loudspeakers excel).

Dwight: It seems we had similar, although not identical, experiences with the Edges, despite the differences in our preferences and reference systems.

When I auditioned the pair in the big rig, the synergistic relationship of the duo became much more apparent. No more bloated bass lines or rolled off top end, but big kick-drum slam, deeeep bass, natural mids, and sweet, but extended highs. The only flaws I noticed were, again, unfocused soundstage, less natural percussion, and uninspiring rhythm.

Dan: Yes, but let's note that with the Edges' ability to relay the sonic characteristics of interconnects and, presumably, other upstream components, it's likely that other combinations would exacerbate, ameliorate, or enhance some of the findings we've reported here. (Memo to editor Pitts: please arrange for a roomful of state-of-the-art gear to be warehoused at my home for use in future reviews!)

Dwight: Hey, what about me?

Dan: Oh, right. Gene: please make that two rooms full. Overall, I found my time with the Si-1 and M8 both enjoyable and instructive. Particularly so with the M8 as it seemed the more fully-realized design at this point; and perhaps even more so with the arrival of the anticipated upgrades.

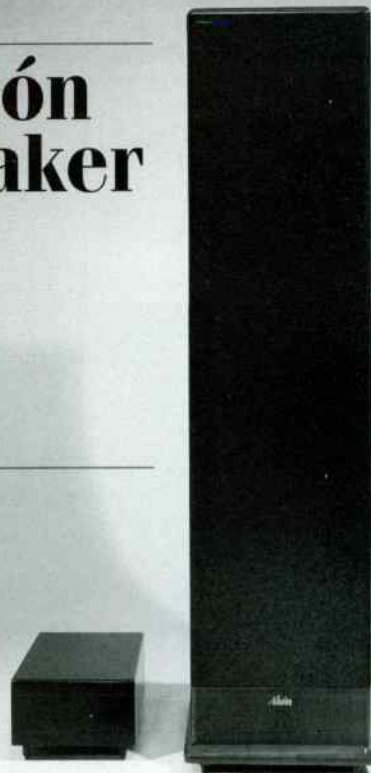
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Dwight: I doubt if the new Brinks-Truck, machined aluminum chassis will alter the sound very much, but the future electronic upgrades should.

Dan: And we should note that these aren't the top-of-the-line offerings from Edge; they've got a Signature-series amp and preamp that no doubt improve on the performance of the models reviewed here.

Dwight: The "NL" series amps, which utilize small lasers to adjust the bias with output level, use dual-mono and monoblock designs, and are rated from 225 to 425 watts (gasp).

Dan: In the end, this proved to be more of an intellectual experience than an emotional one for me, and it's the emotional connection with the music and the musician that I seek most of all as an audiophile. With the limited number of alternate components I had at hand, the Edges did an admirable job of dissecting the sound but, for me, sometimes didn't quite manage to recompose it into a full musical experience. I don't suppose many Voice readers will have a substantial cache of spare cables and components either, so working closely

with a dealer who's knowledgeable—about Edge in particular as well as system/component matching in general—will be of great benefit in eliciting the best from the Si-1 and M8.

Dwight: Since going to glass, I admittedly haven't paid much attention to solid-state preamps. The last one in my system was a Coda, which gave the original Modulus 3 some real competition. I think the Si-1 reviewed here may be better sounding, probably due to its simplicity. At \$2.5k, it's definitely in the high-rent district, where buyers demand gear that will play for 10 years without a burp, and work well with a wide variety of amps and interconnects. The M8, on the other hand, is a brick of an amp — with all the system-friendliness and consistency of the family golden retriev-

er. If the reader is shopping in the Rowland and Levinson neighborhood, and feeling queasy about taking on a second mortgage, he or she should give the Edge amps a lengthy in-house audition.

Dan: It's clear to me that Edge's design and manufacturing priority is on sonics—to borrow a phrase: "It's the sound, stupid." If you're a solid-state fan who digs 'em big, loves 'em brash, and lusts for detail, the Si-1/M8 duo might be what the doctor ordered.

Dwight: I think Tom Maker and his Edge folks are doing some really interesting things with amplifier designs. They're also listening to consumers and reviewers, responding to comments, and refining their amps to be giant-killers. Tom definitely knows how to "make" music from wall current.

NOTES

Edge Si-1 Preamplifier and M8 Amplifier, \$2150 and \$4150, respectively. Edge Electronics, 2888 30th St., Boulder, CO 80301; phone 303/443-6555, fax 303/245-6092, e-mail edgeamps@aol.com, website www.edgeamp.com.



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Legend Audio Design Starlet True Integrated Amplifier

Dwight Miller and Dan Pond



DWIGHT: THE ONLY HONEST oriental rug dealer I know shared the philosophy of his small personal collection with me one day when he said, "If a rug has the power to make me say 'Wow' every time I see it, I know it's worth owning." This little 40-watt integrated tube amp from Legend Audio Design (LAD) wow-ed me from the first time I plugged it in, until I had to pack it up and haul it off to you, Dan. The "little amp that could," did. Every time I walked into the room, it greeted me with an organic aural embrace that kissed me on both cheeks and said "stay for awhile," and I did.

Dan: An audiophile's version of Mae West's "Come up and see me sometime?"

Dwight: No playful teasing here. I know we reviewers usually hold the verdict until the last few paragraphs, but I just couldn't wait. I wanted to

share my enthusiasm with you up at Maria's restaurant, but abided by our "no tell" policy until you had a chance to make your own unbiased judgments.

Dan: The judgment here is that the Starlet is very impressive. Although it doesn't provide the ultimate in performance, it is most definitely an overachiever.

Dwight: When I first heard that we were reviewing a 40-watt amp, I figured it would be a great audition for the bedroom system, but impossible for the big rig. Well, after the Legend Starlet (hey, is this an oxymoron?) kicked my NOS-retubed Golden Tube SI-50 Mk II's butt all over the bedroom, down the steps and into the street, it set its sights on the heavy hardware in the living room. More on this later. Let's get to the guts of this little marvel.

First of all, it's not so little. At close to 75 pounds, I suggest pick-

ing it up backwards if possible, to get the load closer to the spine (sorry, the ergonomist in me cannot be muzzled). The "load" in this case is a shared custom-built power transformer, flanked by two massive output transformers that are specially built to handle low frequencies. And handle they did. Those woofer cones on my Meadowlark Vireos were visibly driven like tractor pistons anytime I had the volume knob above a quarter turn.

Dan: The Starlet drove my 91-dB SPL sensitive Dunlavys effortlessly, no matter what the demands of the music or the level at which I chose to listen. And the volume knob, just as with my social life, never went past 11:00.

Dwight: I found the packaging simple, attractive, and well executed. The ergonomics couldn't be more straight-forward, with a power switch, a three-position, input selector labeled with one, two, or three

dots, and a volume knob, labeled with dots that grow in size as they encircle the knob in a clockwise progression. The five mini tubes and four power tubes populate the floor of the two-level chassis, forward of the transformer enclosure. The tubes are protected by an artistic grille, comprised of rod stock gracefully bent at either end and arranged in parallel, covering the entire chassis. The grille is the perfect compromise of protection against the intrusion of large objects, while affording the tubes to be installed and removed without needing to remove the grille. It has a matte-silver, textured, powdercoat finish, while the chassis is similarly done in purple. (When I asked LAD about the color, I was half expecting some erudite terminology, like galactic violet, but they simply called it purple.) The look is clean and simple, kind of neo-art-deco, and frankly I found it very attractive after coming to grips with my mental model that all stereo gear has to be black, gold, or brushed aluminum.

Dan: Although I'm more often turned on by blond- than purple-starlets, I was pleased by this Starlet's appearance, heft, and the feel of its few controls. In fact, while I'm usually a traditionalist, I might opt for this silver/purple version instead of Legend's more mainstream gold/black offering. I'm less enthused about other aspects of the Starlet's hardware, however, so let me first detail a few non-sonic — which is to say "of secondary importance" — gripes. First, I was confused by the 1-2-3 dot selector switch and RCA inputs jacks you mentioned; not by the correspondence between switch position and input but, rather, whether the increasing number of dots was related to greater input impedance. Knowing that impedance matching is important when connecting through a phono input (of which the Starlet has none), I wondered which of these three inputs was the proper one for my CD player. When the minimalist owner's manual unfortunately failed to provide any guidance, a quick call to you solved the dilemma, but Starlet owners shouldn't need to have an electrical engineer on call to hook up their components. For others who are techni-

cally challenged, all three inputs are suitable for anything except phono sources.

I was disappointed to find those tightly-spaced, nylon-nutted five-way binding posts, which began challenging audiophiles about the time Fulton Gold cables began replacing lamp cord in high-end systems. Next, it's not clear what

Legend's Starlet integrated amp puts straight-forward ergonomics into a well-executed package.

kind of protection this grill really affords; with 1.75-inch spacing, objects from adjustable wrenches to CD jewel cases become potential bottle-busters. Further, in the spirit of "if it quacks like a duck..." the grill has all the earmarks of an excellent handle, which it's not, Legend has found it helpful to caution against use as one. Given the Starlet's weight and uneven distribution, one would hope a utilitarian design such as this could sport a couple of real handles without marring the appearance or greatly impacting the price tag. So, as a package, I found the Starlet True Integrated to be a bit less than completely user-friendly.

Dwight: Jeez, talk about tightly spaced You had better switch to

boxer shorts and decaf — you're starting to sound like Andy Rooney. Two words buddy — banana plugs!

Anyway, Legend Audio has been around since 1992, is located in "Berzerkeley" California, and does not disappoint the expectation of "smart design." They put the right stuff where it was needed in this chassis, if not on it. The power supply and auto-biasing circuits use solid-state components, and the driver circuits are printed, but everything else under the hood is glorious point-to-point wiring with a secret LAD silver hook-up wire, which has a little copper mixed in to prevent brightness.

This "true integrated" amp's pre-amp circuit (as well as the driver boards) uses a dual-triode Philips JAN 5814A new old-stock (NOS) military tube, which has very low noise specs, and according to LAD's Ray Leung is "built better than new tubes." The company estimates an eight- to 10-year lifespan for its minis, and has an ample replacement supply of about 10,000. On the output side are two pairs of closely matched Chinese 6550s from Ruby, running tandem push-pull, Class-A triode mode, with rather cool biasing, to generate 42.5 watts per pair. Lifespan of the 6550s is five to seven years, and a full set of replacement tubes will cost \$195. The unit received a three-day burn-in at the factory and after our additional 50 hours burn-in at home, it

N O T E S

Legend Audio Design Starlet True Integrated Amplifier, \$2995.00.

Legend Audio Design, 2430 Fifth Ave., Units G & H, Berkeley, CA 94710; phone 510/843-2288, fax 510/843-3298; website <http://www.legendaudio.com>, e-mail info@legendaudio.com.

Associated Components

Dwight's big rig has an EAD digital front end, Audible Illusions line stage, current delivery via a retubed Mesa Baron feeding Thiel 3.6s, all connected with Siltech and moored by Sound Anchor. His bedroom system comprises a Golden Tube Audio SI-50 integrated amp, Audio Refinements Complete CD, Meadowlark Vireo speakers, Kimber interconnect and speaker wire, Discovery power cord on amp, and ceramic isolation feet under all.

Dan's system consists of an Immedia-Grado combination to handle analog signals, Sony CD player, Classé amplification, Dunlavy speakers, and cables by Yamamura, Tara, Audiotruth, and Meitner.

was ready to sing. There is no stand-by mode nor is there a warm-up cycle. The unit will play after only 15 seconds, but needs about 20 minutes to sound simply marvelous.

Dan: Although I was ready to brag to the world that I kept company with a red hot starlet for a few weeks, the truth is this Starlet never got beyond warm no matter how much I played it or how hard I drove it.

Dwight: Not surprised. Although I never actually peeked inside, the accompanying literature boasts of high-quality parts, including an Alps volume control, Holco resistors, Solen and Siemens caps, and Premier RCA jacks and speaker posts. I have no reason to doubt that LAD used premium-grade components throughout and put the expensive parts where they could provide the most sonic benefit. Input impedance is reported at a hefty 500 kilohms, bandwidth at one watt is 10 Hz to 25 kHz, S/N ratio 92 dB, and THD no more than 1 per cent at rated output from 20 Hz to 20 kHz. These are admirable specs for an integrated tube amp, and the clean sound suggests they are not exaggerated.

Dan: You're right about it being clean. In fact, the top end is so quiet a casual listener could mistake this performance for a rolled-off treble. Not so; the Starlet delivers highs in full measure.

Dwight: I think the clean sound is partially the result of having only two pairs of tubes working push-pull. In some amplifiers, as more tandems are added in parallel to increase power, minor mismatches can create sonic slush. This also has to be the most conservatively rated 40-watt amp I've heard, 'cause the thing embarrasses my "50-watt" Golden Tube without breaking a sweat. The dual, custom boat-anchor transformers let this baby produce bass notes with authority. The unit's standard load impedance is 4 ohms, but you can optionally order it with 8 or 16 ohms.

Dan: Mating the Starlet with my Dunlavy SC-III's (whose nominal impedance is 4 ohms) yielded a quality of bass which was the single

most impressive aspect of its performance. On Janis Ian's ably-recorded *Breaking Silence* (Morgan Creek), the bass and drums are remarkably taut with an exhilarating degree of snap, and I never before realized just how vibrant and gloriously detailed the acoustic bass is on Ron Carter's *Jazz, My Romance* (Blue Note). I had similar ear-opening

Legend's Starlet sounds good enough and is powerful enough to build a high-end system around.

experiences listening to the two Eddie Vetter-Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan duets on the magnificent *Dead Man Walking* soundtrack (Columbia) and on Monty Alexander's tribute to Bob Marley, *Stir it Up* (Telarc). Electric and acoustic bass as well as kick drum, tabla, udu, and myriad other varieties of drum are all rendered superbly by the Starlet, and I found myself increasingly drawn to the world music in our collection.

However, although thrilled with the quality of bass reproduction, I sometimes found it to be too much of a good thing. Even on my Dunlavys (which are hardly a bass-emphasizing speaker), the lower registers often dominated the music, and more than once I wished for one of Quad's renown "tilt" controls with which to correct the anomalies. And while on the subject of wished-for controls, a standard left-right balance control would have been a useful convenience as well.

Dwight: Changing as few things as possible my bedroom system (Audio Refinements Complete CD and Meadowlark Vireos), I kept my Kimber interconnects and speaker cables, and the Discovery power cable intact and cued up some of Sade's latest, *Lover's Rock*. I was wow-ed by the natural flow of the music — the pace and rhythm were fantastic, in fact the best I've ever experienced in a playback system. There was much more heft in the bass (my original system now sounds anemic), fastidious midrange detail was traded in for liquid, spacious, dynamic vocals that seemed to have a spotlight on them in a black-velvet background. The music

sounded alive. By alive, I mean that the performance had an organic quality of a viable being, not necessarily as in sounding like a "live" performance, but in being lifelike. I think this experience is unique in my audio career. I believe the role of music is to express and communicate joy, and the Starlet did this, in spades. I had trouble believing the modest system I was listening to could deliver such an awesome emotional punch. Sade's husky, mournful, seductive voice connected with the marrow in my bones. This was not an intellectual experience, but an earthy, soulful, root-chakra connection. Dittos for other

materials, including Ottmar Liebert's classical guitar, Steely Dan's irreverent lyrics, and Mary Black's Celtic clarity.

Dan: I find your black velvet analogy particularly interesting because the Starlet conjured up in me an image of the paintings (often of Elvis or Jesus) on black velvet. Although the notes — most notably in the treble — came forth very strikingly out of this "black" background, they seemingly did so at the expense of transparency. There's little conveyance of the space between the musicians/instruments, so my Dunlavys weren't able to create the kind of solid images of which they're capable and, whether derived from the same performance attributes or not, the Starlet rarely afforded much sense of soundstage depth. But the Starlet can indeed make a forceful presentation: on such an ordinary recording as *Thorogood Live* (EMI), when George says he drinks alone (with his friends Jack Daniels and Jim Beam), you are there with him. Great fun!

Dwight: I found the Starlet's bandwidth to be quite extended in both directions with a minor case of suckout in the midrange, which was apparently caused, or at least exacerbated by my Kimber cabling. In retrospect, I realized that the cables in my system tend to complement my electronics by accentuating the frequency extremes to balance the midrange prowess of the EL34 output tubes. Let's call this the "smile" response curve — deep, powerful bass and glassy highs. I say "in retrospect" because the realization

came after trying out Legend's Lemaa 1.5-meter interconnect, which came with the amp. It completely neutralized the "smile" response and flattened the response curve. The bass was now tamed and the midrange detail blossomed. The warm, triode-like, sassy, glassy highs were now studio-monitor neutral — a lot more analytical, dry, with less zest, and a little less rhythm and pace. Don't get me wrong — for \$250 the Lemaa is a fine interconnect, and it does complement the Starlet's response curve as advertised, but at a cost. Not surprisingly, the best sound was achieved with my Siltech FTM-4Sg cables from the big rig.

Dan: In my set up, the Starlet and Lemaa pair didn't "smile," but the emphasized lower frequencies yielded more of a lopsided "smirk," and the combo provided a somewhat distant, round-edged, and dark presentation. Changing to my (admittedly, more expensive) Tara Decade interconnects and also to a Marigo Gen 3 power cord, mitigated these traits to a considerable extent. Everything was a bit closer, in much sharper focus, and with an improved, although still warm, balance, all of which elicited my own "smile response." You'll not be surprised, then, to hear that I did most of my listening with this set up.

I found the Starlet's ability to handle changes in dynamics exemplary. If you're inclined as I am to being easily startled, you'll no doubt find your self involuntarily boosted from your seat when listening to music with sharply dynamic passages. The sense of realism in these cases can be extraordinary — if a mite hard on the heart — owing, I suspect, to the Starlet's ability to closely reproduce these transients without smearing the signal (recall, if you will, my earlier comments about bass snap). A case in point is what proved to be one of the highlights of my Starlet listening sessions, Ladysmith Black Mambazo's *Shaka Zulu* (Warner Bros.), on which the occasional right-in-the-mike yelps from a backing vocalist had me twitching and jumping. Additionally, about half way through the last track, the 10-man ensemble begins lightly tapping their tennis shoe-adorned feet in

unison. They do this with rising and falling intensity and with periodic bursts of full-out stomping which conveyed the same visceral and emotional impact in our tunes room as when my wife and I saw them perform in person.

Dwight: I was skeptical lugging the Starlet downstairs for a torture test

It takes a secure man to admit when his reference gear is bested by a unit that costs half as much.

with the Thiel 3.6s, which tend to be black holes when it comes to power. In its defense though, given the powerful performance upstairs, I felt I would be remiss if the young star didn't get an audition with the heavy gear in the living room. Wow! (Again!). The Starlet not only held its own against my NOS-retubed Audible Illusions L-1 pre-amp and Mesa Baron, but in many ways it outperformed them.

Dan: It takes a secure man to publicly opine that his reference system was in some ways bested by a unit costing half as much.

Dwight: I have to report what my ears experienced. Although I could only achieve moderate listening levels in my 5000-cubic-foot living room before clipping occurred, the first third of the volume pot gave me a new lesson in high-end sound. Ottmar Liebert's guitar was razor sharp, resonant, and had even more "pluck" than I'm accustomed to. His sweeping orchestral moods in his *Leaning Into The Night* allowed me to recognize for the first time what kinds of instruments were responsible for those weird sounds. The noise floor was subterranean and the frequency response so utterly flat I found myself saying, "So that's what that passage I supposed to sound like." There was no fuzz — everything was crystalline. The bass was respectable — but not as driving as with the smaller Vireos. There's a subwoofer-testing, swelling, deeeep subsonic roll on cut 8 of Dire Straits' *On Every Street*, which the Starlet found and

reproduced, although not as loudly as the Baron. Midrange detail was excellent, but maybe a tad less than I'm used to—which is not a criticism. I thrive on detail, but the Starlet has taught me that sometimes the detail can get in the way of the music. Pace and rhythm were outstanding. The superbly produced *Moon Beams* XRCD put Bill Evans' trio in my living room. With integrated components coming back into vogue, the Starlet states its case to become a Legend quite eloquently, and with sound this good, it's difficult to justify separates and expensive interconnects.

Dan: Although I haven't seen or heard anything to suggest that integrated amps are (yet?) capable of equaling the performance of the very finest separates, the Starlet by far out-classed the last integrated tube amp I had in my system (a McIntosh, nearly 20 years ago) and, more importantly, out-classes many nominally high-end (and definitely high-priced) separates currently on the market. As I said at the outset, I'm very favorably impressed by this unit. If folks can get past some of the user-unfriendly aspects of its design (or, better still, if Legend resolves them), don't mind sacrificing a bit of transparency and depth to save a kilobuck or two, favor a slightly warm presentation (as I do), and don't require a phono input, they'll find snuggling up with this Starlet to be a treat.

Dwight: My only fear is that at its price point of three big ones, it will be erroneously perceived by prospective buyers as too expensive for "second" systems, and at 40 watts, it will be seen as too weak for prime time. I would suggest that the Starlet is good enough, and powerful enough, to build a high-end (sounding) system around. True, the speakers will need to be at least 88- to 89-dB SPL efficient, and the listening room can't be a dancehall, but anyone who relegates this little honey to the guest bedroom has way too much money. Legend Audio Design has demonstrated how simplicity and attention to detail can produce superb musical reproduction at a reasonable price. The Starlet receives my highest recommendation.

Bryston BP-25 Preamplifier

James T. Frane



I FIRST DISCOVERED the sound and quality of Bryston at the Hi-Fi '97 show and I later reviewed their integrated amplifier. Bryston is a Canadian Company that has been making amplifiers since 1974. During that time they have carved out a reputation for very high quality sound and hardware. Their current line includes several power amps, an integrated amp, and two basic preamp models: the BP-20 without remote control, and the BP 25 with remote control. Both preamps are also available with an optional phono preamp section for either moving magnet or moving coil cartridges.

Bryston lists the following preamp improvements over their previous units: Intermodulation distortion has been reduced; input-to-input crosstalk is essentially nonexistent; channel-to-channel interaction has been improved; components plug directly into glass-epoxy circuit boards, eliminating variations in signal travel and wire interaction; signal switching and connections utilize heavy gold plating to provide long-term trouble-free connections; a ground plane has been incorporated to further reduce crosstalk and noise throughout the internal circuitry, and the power supply is mounted externally to eliminate the potential for noise and interference from that source.

The BP-25's on-off switch is on the front of the separate power supply, which is connected to the preamp by a cord about two feet long. A green LED shows when the unit is on. The power unit is about 4½ inches wide x 2 inches high x 7-5/8 inches deep and can sit on top of,

next to, or some distance from, the BP-25.

The steel chassis and sleek cabinet are designed to shield against electromagnetic interference. Only 1.75 high x 17 inches wide x 11 inches deep, the unit weighs in at a hefty 17.5 pounds. The controls on the front of the preamp, from left to right, are tape / source switch, mono / stereo switch, a rotary source control, balance control with center detent, motorized volume control, absolute polarity switch, and a mute switch. The source control positions are labeled "Bal 1" and "2," "Phono," "CD," "Tuner," "Video," and "Disc". Changing polarity changes the LED, located between polarity and mute switches, from green to yellow. A quarter-inch headphone jack is just above the LED. When a headphone plug is inserted into the jack, the speakers are automatically silenced. The mono feature is handy for speaker setup, as properly placed and operating stereo speakers fed a mono signal will have an image centered between them.

The back panel has both balanced XLR and unbalanced RCA-type phono connectors. The power connection from the external power transformer is at far left followed by a pair of XLR connectors. The gold-plated phono jacks are: Preamp "out" (two sets for driving two power amplifiers without a Y-connector), "To" and "From" tape jacks, "Disc," "Video," "Tuner," "CD," and "Phono" inputs. The latter is for an outboard phono preamp on the BP-20 or the BP-25 without built-in phono preamp. Next are two pair of balanced output XLR connectors. A

surround sound or other processor, cassette tape deck, or video tape recorder can be connected to the tape loop.

A 12-volt a.c. / d.c. screw-terminal connector on the rear of the power supply provides power amplifier on-off control when used in conjunction with the remote start feature available on Bryston and some other amplifiers. The BP-25 is shipped suspended in a strong, flexible plastic foam within a large heavy-weight cardboard carton. This preamp is available in silver or black, and with an optional wide front panel for rack mounting.

Bryston's 20-year parts and labor warranty against manufacturing defects is, so far as I'm aware, the longest in the industry. The warranty benefits not only the original buyer, but subsequent ones as well, and includes return shipping. James Tanner, vice president of Bryston, related to me some time ago that he had suggested the warranty extension to 20 years. Repairs were very rarely needed, Bryston was not charging customers for repairs, and publicizing the confidence Bryston had gained in their products through experience seemed a good idea.

The five-page owner's manual is sufficient for an experienced person, but I would have liked more detail. The more common industry practice of showing wiring connection diagrams between the preamp and other pieces of equipment might be helpful to many users.

The remote control operates over a wide angle, and it has a sturdy, solid, and luxurious feel, reinforcing the sense of quality. It appears to

have been machined from a solid block of metal. It has momentary buttons for volume, mute, and absolute polarity inversion. The mute button completely silences the output, but does not affect the output to a tape deck. I found that the phase inversion can improve the sound when the absolute phase has been reversed in the chain from mike to speakers from that of the live performance. With phase reversal, the speaker cone moves inward on a note, when it would have moved outward if it were a direct feed from the original. Close control of the BP-25 volume was easy. "Mute" turned off sound completely.

Listening

Introducing the BP-25 into my system made the largest improvement I have experienced in a very long time. The net effect was to make the music more like live. The sound source seemed to become independent of the speakers. Where the music could float between and to the sides of the speakers with the Carver, added dimensions appeared with the BP-25. The depth became more lifelike, with performers at different distances from me, and the back wall was no hindrance. The sound would sometimes start several feet past that wall. It also extended farther to the sides, and could be suspended between and in front of the speakers. The increased ambiance and three dimensionality, particularly with live recordings and others that were well miked and recorded, were superb.

During the course of this audition, I compared the sound through the BP-25 with that of the CD player directly driving the power amp. I am convinced the Bryston does not add artificial enhancement, but that it lets the music through intact and without degradation.

I listened to tuner, tape, CD, and LPs through the BP-25, and found it consistently sounded freer and more open than the Carver. I took care to match the levels as exactly as I could within the limits of my digital sound-level meter. The Carver has done well, having been on every day that I am home, since 1990. It was a very satisfying unit for its time, and a marked improvement over the Denon it replaced, but it has definitely had its day. That it has been bested with improved accuracy and performance is very clear.

"Mrs. Robinson" from Simon and Garfunkel's *Greatest Hits* (Columbia CK 31350) is a performance before a live audience. Besides the feeling of being there, one very distinct difference was that the cymbals were emphasized through the Carver and were relatively strident and edgy. With the BP-25, they were detailed, more musical, and in balance with the rest of the instruments without being harsh. They had the proper metallic shimmer, but lost the aspect of "breaking glass."

Julie London's vocal recordings portray well the ambiance of the recording venue, and many have full orchestra backup. These gained so much realism that it was easy to imagine the performance in front of me.

Jazz and classical performances, from solos to combos or quartets to full orchestrations, were involving and pleasurable, as were big band records. Old rock and roll songs came to life, and good and bad mixes were easily identifiable. All of the rhythm and dynamics of a good recording were there. I was drawn into performances many times, as they were so musical and alive, with appropriate depth and perspective. Voices sounded natural through the BP-25 and instrument timbres were right. The recording spaces were recreated with a three-dimensional presence.

There was no audible crosstalk through the Bryston unless the volume control was nearly to its maxi-

mum setting, a situation that would not occur in use as relatively little movement of the volume control easily drove the power amp to live listening levels. There was no hum or other electronic noise, nor any mechanical sound from the BP-25. You may think this an unusual observation to make, but far too many times, I have experienced these artifacts with preamps that would have otherwise been very desirable to own.

Conclusion

Often the changes wrought by changing electronics are very subtle, but sometimes they are readily apparent. The Bryston BP-25 made an outstanding improvement — that extra step closer to reality one searches for. My standard of reference comprises the many live music performances I regularly attend. The music through my system isn't live, but it is very good. I am an engineer and I don't believe exaggerations accurately convey information, so I would not say the BP-25, or any other unit, is the best. My experience shows that the BP-25 is as good as any I have heard, in my system or others. It is not inexpensive, but its performance makes it a component of exceptional value.

There are many very good preamps available, for a wide variety of prices. I recommend you audition this one if you're in the market for a preamp and it falls within your budget range.

NOTES

Bryston BP-25 Preamplifier, \$2,000.00. Bryston, Ltd., 677 Neal Dr., Peterborough, Ontario K9J 7V4, Canada. Phone 705/742-5325, fax 705/742-0882, e-mail jamestanner@bryston.ca. Selected specifications: Frequency response, 20 Hz to 20 kHz +1 -0.05 dB; IM or THD, less than 0.0025 per cent at 3 volts output.

Associated Equipment

Parasound HCA 1000A power amp, Carver CT-17 preamp-tuner, Parasound P/PH-100 phono preamp, Denon TU-767 tuner, Thorens TD320 Mark III turntable with Grado Prestige Red cartridge, Aiwa AD F800 cassette deck, and Sony XA20ES CD player, Mach 1 Model M-Two speakers with NHT SW3 subwoofers run in dual mono and separately driven by an NHT SA-3 power amp with integral electronic crossover. The Mach Ones were run full range. I also used Revel F30 speakers with the BP-25. Interconnects were by Gotham, WireWorld, Mach 1, and Monster Cable, speaker cables were Mach 1 to the NHT subwoofers, and Kimber 4PR to the Mach 1s and Revel F30s. A Radio Shack digital sound-level meter to match levels.

Sony SCD-777ES SACD Player

A Military Analyst Fires a Round In the Format Wars



Anthony H. Cordesman

I'M GOING TO PRAISE SACD and the Sony SCD-777ES. At the same time, I'm going to bite the hand that feeds me — well mildly — by issuing a few cautions about both the Sony SCD-777ES as a player and about the current state of SACD recordings. Sony was kind enough to lend me an SCD-777ES SACD player, along with an assortment of SACD recordings. I had earlier listened at length to the Sony SAC-1, but only briefly on my own system. Some other reviewers have praised SACD to the skies as the new state of the art, and I was eager to have an SACD unit for extended loan.

Well, familiarity did not breed contempt; I found the Sony SCD-777ES a very good player. In fact, later one-on-one comparisons indicate that it easily holds its own when compared directly in sound quality to the much more expensive SAC-1. This is true in every respect except the noise floor and then the difference only seems to have occurred because the SAC-1 offers balanced outputs and the SCD-777ES doesn't. At the same time, the fact that the unit's sound quality was very good does not make the SCD-777ES into a true state-of-the-art unit, and my listening sessions with discs showed that the current practical benefits of the SACD format can be a very mixed bag.

To begin with CD performance, my reference Mark Levinson 360S goes deeper into the bass with more life and energy than the Sony SCD-777ES. More broadly, the Mark Levinson 360S is more dynamic and has more musical life at all frequencies and levels of musical energy. This is true whether I use the Sony SCD-777ES as my CD transport with the Mark Levinson 360S or use the Theta David as a transport. I should also note that the David is a slightly better sounding transport, and much faster and easier to use than the one in the SCD-777ES. These sonic differences are clearly audible in playing back an extremely wide range of CDs, and they exist regardless of how the filter on the SCD-777ES is set — although I prefer the sound of "Filter 1" and with the unit set on the back for full-range output. I have yet to find anyone who prefers the overall sound of CDs reproduced through the Sony SCD-777ES to that of the Mark Levinson 360S in my system.

To some extent, such a preference might well be predictable. The Sony SCD-777ES only costs a fraction of the price of the Mark Levinson 360S, and the Sony does earn a solid very good rating. Even so, "very good" is not be good enough to make the Sony SCD-777ES truly competitive in the ranks of top-flight CD players. For instance, the electronics in the Sony SCD-777ES do not sound quite as good in CD playback as those in the Tact 2.0, although the difference between the two is far smaller than between the Sony and the Mark Levinson 360S. The Sony has a tad better bass, but the Tact has a bit more life. It is true that the Tact does not come with a CD transport, but it does provide digital speaker-response and room correction, preamp features, and a parametric equalizer. I know which of these two units I'd rather have for CD playback and it isn't the Sony.

How's The SACD Sound?

What about SACD playback through the Sony SCD-777ES? Well, the sound of SACD recordings played back through the SCD-777ES has the same broad difficulties as the sound of CD played back through the SCD-777ES — a lack of ultimate life and dynamics and slightly rolled-off deep bass energy. This similarity in sonics indicates that it may well be a function of the analogue or non-SACD related electronics in the SCD-777ES. This, in turn, is a strong argument for not restricting SACD to integrated players. Sony and Phillips need, I think, to allow to outside high-end firms to develop their own SACD digital-to-analog processors just as soon as possible if we're to find out how good the SACD format can really be. These two firms make some of the finest consumer electronics in the world, but cutting-edge sound is not their traditional forte.

The press has created another problem in assessing SACD. Remastering old analog and digital recordings on SACD does not deserve the kind of praise that many reviewers have lavished on the result. The truth is that many SACD recordings released to date are overpriced rereads, which had only good-to-mediocre sound in the first place. No amount of digital innovation can make a sonic silk purse out of a sow's ear. Using older

or different digital processes in making the recording put on an SACD disc or warming over decade-old analog masters does not really say much about the potential of SACD. Rather than getting state-of-the-art recording techniques and sound based on Direct Stream Digital masters made during the recording session with the DSD recording system, with too many SACDs you pay twice as much as for a regular CD and you get a distinctly *vin ordinaire* master.

SACD remasterings of old recordings are least impressive with over-processed pops (why bother?), mediocre jazz recordings (why bother?), and overproduced, multi-miked mix-downs of classical music. (You can hear the problems in the recording more clearly, and, if anything, this makes the music even less sonically realistic on SACD by revealing more defects.)

The story is different with some great classic performances with good recordings and simple miking, though you do need to be careful to raise the gain to take advantage of the superior signal-to-noise ratio on SACD. However, the SACD recordings of some of the classics by Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra do sound as good or better than my analog LP versions. For example, their recording of *Carmina Burana* (Sony SACD CSON 06163 SA) has cleaner low-level passages and much cleaner high-level dynamics and choral passages, particularly in the areas that are towards the inner grooves of the LP. I prefer the Glenn Gould SACD of Bach's *Goldberg Variations* (Sony SACD CSON 37779 SA) to the vinyl, and the Bruno Walter with the Columbia Symphony Orchestra SACD remasterings rival the LP (try Mozart's *Symphonies Nos. 38 and 40*, Sony SACD SS 6494). Some other digital remasterings are also worth the money but you may not like the performance. Personally, I hate the DMP recording of *Salamander Pie*, and find *Tricycle* (DMP SACD CDMP 08) to be a bit mediocre in spite of the considerable praise back in 1985. I do have to admit, however, that the SACD version is cleaner than the original CD version, although the Mark Levinson again provided better bass and dynamics and Tom Jung's newer digitally remastered version of *Tricycle* (DMP CDMP 443) is much more competitive with the SACD version. (The new CD version of *Tricycle* eliminates two major stages of digital recording in a somewhat unusual 50.4-kHz master.)

In short, just buying a SACD disc does not ensure any meaningful improvement in clarity, harmonic integrity, and low-level detail, and SACD discs are only worth paying for a case by case basis. Any margin of improvement is often too slight to be worth the money, particularly given the fact the CD version can sound better than the SACD version in other ways on other players. Far too many of the current SACD recordings, in my opinion, are barely worth reissuing.

How They Really Sound

Pure DSD recordings using new, state-of-the-art equipment and Direct Stream Digital masters made during the recording session with the DSD recording system are different story. These are SACD recordings that really test the state of the art, and they serve as a far better test of the SCD-777ES. The problem is it is not easy to tell which SACD recordings are made in this way. Only on a few SACD discs do the liner writers make a strong effort to distinguish whether the recording is really based on Direct Stream Digital masters. Virtually no ads for SACD recordings tell the difference, and most reviews and reviewers ignore the recording process.

Having an audiophile label is no indication of quality or even that Direct Stream Digital masters have been used. For example, there's some good stuff using SACD from AudioQuest, but if the overall sound quality of the older AudioQuest recordings on SACD is really all that much better than that of their regular CD version, it doesn't show up through the SCD-777ES. The sound of some SACD versions of the AudioQuest is cleaner and sweeter, and warmer through the SCD-777ES than that of most CDs, but these advantages are offset by the better deep bass, dynamics, and life when I use the Mark Levinson 360S to playback the CD version. As a case in point, the Terry Evans recording of *Puttin' It Down* on SACD (Audioquest SACD1038) is a bit more "refined" than the JVC XRCD version (JVCXR-0014-2) when played back through the SCD-777ES, but the XRCD version has a much more natural gutty life and bass energy played back through the Mark Levinson 360S. I had the same reaction to *Bluesquest* (CADQS 1052).

There are also the "true" SACD recordings, ones really based on Direct Stream Digital masters, out there, and Sony and several recording companies indicate that there are many more to come. For example, the Werhten / Fiamminghi recording of *Tango* (Telarc DSD CD-80526-SA) has a much cleaner and more harmonic sound using SACD playback than CD playback, as well as a more subtle and coherent sound stage. The SACD version still doesn't sound as good in terms of bass and

The best-sounding SACDs were those which used Direct Stream Digital mastering in recording.

NOTES

All listening tests were made with listening levels adjusted to make them directly comparable. Two different playback systems were used in two different rooms. The main playback system for digital comparison used the Pass X-1 and X-600 electronics, and the Dynaudio Evidence, Revel Salon, and Thiel 7.2 speakers. Digital to analog comparisons were made with the Koestu Onyx and Audioquest 7000 cartridges, VPI HJW and Wheaton Tonearms, VPI TNT turntable, and Pass Xono phono preamp. The PS Audio 600 was used as a power conditioner. Speaker cables and digital and analog interconnects included Kimber Select, Transparent Audio Reference XL, and Discovery Plus IV.

dynamic life through the SCD-777ES as the CD version does through the Mark Levinson 360S, but here I would opt for the subtle improvement in musical coherence and harmonic integrity provided by SACD playback. The problem is that I'd like to have both sets of advantages, rather than have to make a trade-off or choice.

At the same time, it is brutally clear that the way in which a recording is made counts for at least as much as whether it is on CD or SACD. The Telarc recording of *Tango* is nowhere nearly as live, dynamic, and driven by a musically natural bass line as the somewhat similar Tom Jung production of the Stockholm Jazz Orchestra version of *Tango* by the same composer (DMP SACD-03). The difference is scarcely the same as the difference between elevator music and a live performance, but the Telarc recording does not compete in sound quality with the DMP recording in playback.

There are times when SACD recordings simply don't hack it at all, even with Direct Stream Digital masters. This is true of the jazz performances, as with Peterson, Brown, and Jackson's *A Really Tall Band* (Telarc DSD/CD 83443-SA) and Dave Brubeck's *The 40th Anniversary Tour of the UK* (Telarc DAD/CD 83440-SA). These aren't bad recordings, but the musicians deserve better much and the recordings certainly do not justify premium prices for the SACD. Put differently, Joe Harley's recording of Jacintha's *Autumn Leaves* (Groove Note SACD GRV1006-3) sounds

much more like live music, even though it is not made from a Direct Stream Digital master.

Other SACD recordings with Direct Stream Digital masters are much better. Examples are the Beck and Ryerson recording of *Alto* (DMP SACD-06). I am not sure how much of this recording is really based on Direct Stream Digital mastering, but the sound is cleaner and more detailed than in older DMP recordings like *Salamander Pie* and the recording is more dynamic and life-like than the Telarcs mentioned above. The same is true of the Steve Davis Project recording of *Quality of Silence* (DMP SACD-04).

This does not mean that the SACD version of a true DSD recording necessarily sounds better in every way. There are still the same basic sonic trade-offs when the SACD version is played back through SCD-777ES SACD and the CD version is played back through the Mark Levinson 360S. In these cases, however, the cleaner and more harmonic sound, a sweeter upper midrange, better depth and more subtle and coherent sound stage in SACD, give the SACD playback a slight sonic advantage over CD. The Beck and Ryerson and Steve Davis Project performances are also pleasant enough to encourage multiple listenings to the music, which is not true of many recordings on SACD to date, at least not for me.

Demanding classical musical tests of natural acoustic sound in SACDs using true Direct Stream Digital masters are still hard to come by, and the results are mixed.

The Cincinnati Pops recording of *On Broadway* (Telarc DSD CD-80498-SA) wins my award for the "Most Annoyingly Uninspired New Musical Material" on SACD to date. It is another reason to stress that even if you determine that an SACD recording does use Direct Stream Digital masters, listen before you buy. Far too often, SACD is an excruciating validation of Gordon Holt's thesis that "the better the recording, the worse the performance."

The Dallas Symphony reading of Mahler's *Symphony No. 2* (Delos SACD 3237) is a different story. It is up-sampled from a 20-bit, 44.1-kHz master, but it still is a stunning demonstration of dynamic range and of what SACD can do for a good recording. I should note, however, that it has a somewhat strange acoustic perspective using the SCD-777ES for playback. It is a bit lacking in natural detail and upper octave information. There is a feeling of space, but not of natural acoustic life. It's a bit like being in a listening room with too many Tube Traps.

I've heard two good Telarc classical DSD recordings. One is Yolanda Kondonassis's *Hovhanness* (Telarc CD-80530). This is the almost ideal SACD demonstrator because the harmonic detail of the harp is critical, there is no deep bass, and the dynamics are naturally limited. It is one of the few SACDs that sounds better in every way than the CD version does with the Mark Levinson 360S. The other is a Jesus Lopez Cobos and Cincinnati Symphony Recording of several Dukas pieces (Telarc CD-80515-SA). This is not the greatest performance in the world, but it is quite good and the SACD version is notably cleaner than the CD version in several important ways. For example, the brass is considerably more natural in the *Fanfare to La Peria* in Band One.

The Mark Levinson (the man, not the company) sampler called *Mark Levinson Live Recordings* (Red Rose Music RRM 01) is also quite good, although it is not clear what digital recording system was used. The material is more like a home recording session than a major musical production, but this also makes it very natural, and the SACD soundtrack sounds cleaner through the Sony SCD 777ES than the CD ver-

EDITOR'S NOTE

I will stipulate that Tony isn't the Christmas Grinch, that he usually hears better than I do, and his ancillary gear is as good or better than mine. But I think he's mixing the music with the method in this analysis. I strongly do not think that any music carrier technique, whether SACD or DVD-A, can improve a recording. The difference between any two methods is that one will get in the way less than the other. That is, whichever system achieves the widest range of bad to good sound is the better carrier. "How clean is your window?" While I certainly think and hear DVD-A to be a very good and worthwhile improvement over standard CD, SACD is the outright winner for me so far. Incidentally, I noted a hybrid unit from Pioneer at the Sony-Philips SACD Pavilion, that is it would play both SACD and DVD-A. And why not? It's only software.

sion does through the Mark Levinson 360S. One notable difference is the cleaner set of sibilants in the voice of Kim Cattral on Band Seven. For some reason, CD can be particularly unkind to female vocal sibilants.

Other good classical Direct Stream Digital masters include two Yo-Yo Ma recordings: *Solo* (Sony SACD SS64114) and *Appalachian Journey* (Sony SACD 66782). These are very clean recordings with great harmonic detail and natural musical clarity and integrity, but *Solo* has only limited deep bass and dynamics, and *Appalachian Journey* did not emerge as state of the art in these respects through the SCD-777ES.

How does SACD through the Sony SCD 777ES compare to 96/24 through the Mark Levinson 360S? Hard to tell. The modern Chesky recordings on 96/24 are very, very good, but there are comparatively few such recordings, and it isn't fair to broadly compare them with a much larger number of different SACD recordings that are of more mixed quality range.

One recording that does allow direct comparisons is the Water Lilly recording of the Philadelphia Orchestra playing *Nature's Realm*. (The CD version is WLA-WS-66-CD, the SACD version is WLA-WS-66-CD, and the 96/24 DVD version is WLA-WS-66-DVD). Let me note that this is one case where playing the SACD version of a recording was more dynamic and lifelike through the SCD-777ES than the CD version played back through the 360S (especially in loud passages on Bands 1 and 3). The 96/24 DVD version, however, sounds just as clean played back through the Mark Levinson 360S as the SACD version does played back through the Sony SCD-777ES, and the Mark Levinson 360S again has more deep bass and natural dynamic life. Another recording that allows direct comparisons between SACD, 96 kHz/24-bit, and CD is the Chesky's *An Introduction to SACD* (Chesky SACD 204). Chesky's SACDs are mastered with very advanced digital equipment, but then so are his 96-kHz/24-bit recordings and his CDs. The bands that allow me to make direct comparisons between the playback of SACD, 96 kHz/24-bit, and CD gave excellent sound with all three methods of recording. In balance, the voice of Rebecca Pigeon was cleaner and more dynamic played back at 96 kHz/ 24 bits through the Mark Levinson 360S and Theta David than in the SACD version played back through SACD on the Sony 777ES in a song like *Spanish Harlem*. Both were cleaner and had more natural harmonics than the CD. The same was true of Livingston Taylor's voice and guitar in the song *First Time Love*, and the jazz group in Jon Faddis' version of *Riverside Park*. The Sony SCD 777ES very definitely does not define the state of the art. (The same proved true incidentally when I substituted a borrowed SACD-1).

"A" Is For ...

As for DVD-A, well, it is still in the throes of release. No one has issued a full set of directly comparable SACD, CD, 96/24, and DVD-A recordings made with the latest equipment and state-of-the-art techniques. Such a release might allow the best sounding system to declare itself, and cut through all the technobabble and

hype. It would also, however, risk giving one side victory in the format wars, and no one seems concerned with fighting fair.

The good news is that Sony says that all of its surround SACD recordings will also have a true stereo track and will be compatible with a stereo SACD player like the SCD 777ES. The bad news is that SCD 777ES could not read the table of contents of either of the first two surround sound SACD demonstration disks that I received (Wispelwey, Tchiakovsky, *Andante Cantabile*, Channel Classics Recordings and Goldsmith, London Symphony Orchestra, *Movie Medleys*, Philips demo disk) and wouldn't make a sound.

It is too early to tell how DVD-A compares to SACD. As almost every knows by now, the introduction of DVD-A has been marred by a combination of cheap and nasty sounding DVD players and trashy surround sound demo material. Pioneer and Onkyo have, however, made some good sounding DVD-A players, and Chesky's *The DVD Collection* Chesky / Pioneer HE 726 shows that at least some DVD-A material can have realistic surround sound (although Chesky uses different speaker placement from a standard 5.1 or 7.1 system).

I'll leave detailed sound quality comparisons for another review, but I have heard enough DVD-A recordings to realize that any surround sound mixdown that does not preserve a true stereo track will present major problems for the future of the Sony 777ES, SACD stereo, and the future of the entire high end stereo industry. At the same time, some recording engineers are concerned that home theater's use of center channel speakers that are almost invariably different from the main left and right channels, not to mention the bass-effects channel, is going to result in far less natural surround-sound recordings and playback than when conventional stereo and full-range speakers are used. They are equally concerned that the prevalence of home theater will result in a far smaller listening area, and major sonic compromises because the rear speakers will rarely be the same distance from the listening position as the main front speakers. From the DTS and Dolby Digital surround music I've heard to date, they have good reason to be concerned. Since SACD surround players are due this fall or winter, it should be clear that SACD players like the SCD-777ES have only begun to open up Pandora's box and are still early shots in the format wars.

Okay, everybody else (nearly) loves SACD through the Sony players, and feels they define the state of the art. I've limited my praise to saying that the Sony SCD-777ES provides excellent value for the money and that some SACD recordings are very promising.

So, I'm a Grinch, my golden ears have rusted, and next year I'll be listening to MPEG. Go out and judge for yourselves. Remember, however, that judging means comparing state-of-the-art CD equipment versus SACD, not the CD output of an SACD player. In fairness to Sony and Philips, it also means comparing reference-quality CD recordings against the best of the new pure DSD SACD recordings that are just coming out on the market as I write this.

I may be a Grinch, but I'm not really convinced about SACD's quality yet.

Musical Design Dm 100b Amplifier and Sp-2b Vacuum Tube Line Preamp



OUR REVOLUTION is some 30 years old now. In 1970, the idea that you should judge an audio component by its sound flew in the face of the accepted practice of measuring everything and making purchases based on those measurements. Japanese receivers were sold advertising 0.005 per cent total harmonic distortion and didn't sound as good as the old tube equipment producing 1 per cent THD. No one had stopped to ask, "Are we measuring the right things," or even, "Do we know what to measure to replicate live music?"

The subjective review magazines were born based on the unique idea that it was the sound that counted, and that human ears were a better judge of the musical experience than a multi-meter. Components were judged "musical" or "not musical," "accurate" or "not accu-

rate," based on extensive listening sessions with critics who used live music as a reference and some wildly diverging relationships between cost and performance resulted.

Designers began to throw money at some design factors not previously considered: Ultra beefy power supplies, the ingredients of a capacitor or resistor, differences between tubes, differences between transistors, types of volume controls, and negative feedback loops. Theorize, build, and listen were the order of the day. Prices on state-of-the-art components skyrocketed owing to limited production runs and the need to pay for research and development. The high-end was born. Today, fat cats sit around showrooms and audio society meetings and listen to amplifiers that cost \$15,000 or more.

But what's happened to the entry level of the hobby? Are we frightening off young recruits and music lovers with these prices? In the earliest days of the high-end, an affordable item like a modified Dynakit PAS preamp might be state-of-the-art. What of today? Can you gain access to the high-end stereo hobby for a reasonable price? Can a music lover hope to glimpse the potential of high-end stereo sound?

There is a corollary problem as well. With a limited budget, how does one approach assembling a system and how does one apportion the dollars for each component of the system?

The oldest truism in the high fidelity industry is that the speaker is the least accurate component in the reproduction chain. That is still true. One need only listen to the wide variety of sounds available at any

given price point in speakers to understand that speaker design not only tries to achieve accuracy, but satisfy sound preferences — sometimes mutually exclusive propositions.

I hold that the way to achieve the greatest personal satisfaction is to select your speaker first. Find the speaker whose sound you both love and feel is accurate based on your listening experiences, spend the money, and then match your electronics to support that sound (or partially compensate for its shortcomings).

At the entry level, you should probably go for a transistor basic amp for reliability, power, flexibility, and price. I don't think you can spend less than \$2,000 for amp and preamp without building kits or going for very off-brands. That leads us to the basic question, and the point of this article: Can you achieve high-end sound with \$2,000 assigned to the basic electronic components of the system? The short answer is, yes, you can.

Musical Design and Musical Concepts (their component modifications division) has been around for 20 years. Designer John Hillig began this business as a component modifications shop and gradually, wisely (considering some flash-in-the-pan high-end companies), built his company into a full-line manufacturer. He builds amps, preamps, and DACs. The basic designs of the amps and preamps are available in different series ("Signature" and "Platinum"), at escalating parts quality and cost. But such exoticism is not the focus of this article. We're going to look at the most basic units and explore the economical end of the high-end.

The DM 100B Amp

This amplifier proved absolutely stable and flexible in operation with a wide variety of speakers and associated components. It runs only slightly warm to the touch and the unit does not seem to need a warm-up period to sound its best.

Tonally, it is completely accurate and neutral. Familiar CDs were reproduced as expected and no identifiable sonic trait carried over from speaker to speaker or system to system, as would be the case if the amp were the source of misconduct.

Of note is the solid and prominent midrange and the micro-

dynamic reproductive ability of the DM 100B. In a listening session with the large Dunlavy SC4 speakers at a friend's home, this was brought to light dramatically. With a Classé DR-9 amp and Melos 333 preamp, my friend's sound was recessed in a way that passed for depth of soundstage, but was in fact, reticent, with a dark midrange,

Tonally, the DM 100B amp is completely accurate and neutral. And, just as good, it is absolutely stable.

and a fairly un-involving presence. Inserting the DM100B brought the music to life in detail and harmonics, brought the soundstage forward (or possibly "lit" the soundstage better), and surrounded the listener in the sound while not perceptibly reducing the depth of the stage.

Micro-dynamics improved greatly. That's a area key to musical enjoyment and not often observed as independent phenomena. Put simply, your system may be able to play loud, and that defines the outer reaches of its dynamic range.

But when the music is in the middle, when you are listening to say, a jazz quartet, how much "jump" is going to be there in each piano note? How well does the system separate the instruments? How great is the "modulation in the middle?" Are you listening to a homogenized ensemble or to four individual instruments?

The Dunlavy speakers unquestionably possess an excellent ability to reproduce micro-dynamic qualities and the Musical Design DM 100B delivered them to the speaker. These two assets, a musical midrange and micro-dynamic capability, brought the Dunlavys to life in a way that very much pleased their owner and me as well. These qualities also appeared with the Dynaudio 1.3SE mini-monitors in my own living room.

An amp's power supply and the ability to deliver high current are usually closely associated with bass performance and here again the 100B acquitted itself

well. My old Mirage M-1si speakers, now ensconced in a friend's house, demand high-current capability and a beefy power supply to keep them from going too warm and boomy. Tube amps were never been able to drive them well; so far, the ideal mating was with a Krell 250, a Class-A, solid-state device with very high current capability. Compared to the very beefy Krell, the 100B went just slightly warmer and not quite as deep on the lowest of low notes. This is excellent performance for a \$1,200.00 amp and the Mirages present something of a severe test.

On the Dynaudio 1.3SE speakers, this additional warmth was desirable in a speaker that runs just slightly lean, and on the Dunlavy speakers the bass seemed just right, complementing the music with the correct degree of warmth and dynamics. The 100B never ran out

NOTES

Musical Design SP2B line stage preamp, \$995; DM 100B amplifier, \$1195.00. Musical Design/Musical Concepts, 49 Jason Court, Saint Charles, MO 63304; phone 636/447-0040, fax 636/926-9266, website <http://www.musicalconcepts.com>.

Associated components

Tara Labs Decade, Cardas Cross, Kimber Kable KCAG interconnects and speaker wire; Harmonic Technology speaker wire with Tara Labs RSC-2 interconnects. Bright Star Audio Big Foot sand bases and Little Rock weights; Melos MA 333 Gold and passive preamps; Krell 250 amplifier; Sonic Frontiers SFT-1 CD transport with Monarchy 22B DAC; Altis Reference DAC and Centuri transport; Mirage M-1si, Contour 1.3SE, and Dunlavy SC4 speakers.

of gas driving the larger speakers on demanding bass material such as "Blue Nile" (*Ptah*, The El'Daoud; Alice Coltrane; Impulse IMPD 201).

The treble range is really quite good, not just for a \$1200.00 solid-state amp, but on an absolute basis. I listened for treble performance both with the Musical Design and Melos active preamps as well as through a homemade passive preamp of the "shunted volume control" type. Only with the most analytical speaker (the Contour 1.3SE) and the most analytical preamp (the passive unit), did I pick up a hint of grain. I'm not convinced it's entirely the amp's fault and I'm willing to divide responsibility between the amp, the digital medium itself, and the software. Through the Mirage or Dunlavy speakers, driven by either the Musical Design or Melos preamps, grain was not evident.

The treble range seemed very flat and natural, neither diminished nor accented. The amp was able to deliver fine detail without smearing or glutting with a sense of "air" around the soundstage without

sounding artificially etched. Historically, treble performance of solid-state, let alone inexpensive solid-state units, has been a weak point, so to achieve this level of performance is significant, and, not

Musical Design's SP-2 preamp is a solid value with a sound character that's open, airy and sweet.

incidentally, even less reason to spend big bucks on electronics.

Soundstage also has become less of a problem since the earliest days of the high-end gear. The primary elements in the creation of a large rectangular sound stage in your living room, are the room itself including the furnishings, the speaker, and the speaker's placement within the room. If you've chosen your speaker carefully and have a capable room, you should get sound to the outside of the speakers at the front, and sound spread across the rear of the

stage (the wall in back of the speakers) running from corner to corner. Electronics, given recordings that honestly capture a soundstage, can only shrink that stage for a variety of reasons, including frequency balance and phase relationships. (Though it is also possible to expand a stage using "tricks" that include the latter elements, this is not usually attempted in basic electronic amplification.)

I am happy to report that the 100B did nothing to shrink the soundstage in the three environments where I listened, despite the variety of associated components I used with it.

The SP-2 Line Preamp

This is a cute little component with black knobs on a silver faceplate and a small window through which you can see the two 6N1P tubes glowing like logs in a fireplace. It has the standard complement of controls: Input selector switch, mode, volume, balance, and a mute switch.

Of note is a toggle switch labeled "direct/source." In the "source" position, you use your selector switch as usual to choose between your source components. In the "direct" position, however, the signal from one source component of your choosing, when plugged into the special set of input jacks at the rear of the chassis, will bypasses the selector switch and mode switches. Direct mode increases the transparency of the signal by eliminating components from the signal path and is an audible improvement.

I very much like this feature and I'd go even further. Even advanced high-end addicts have no idea how "pots" can detract from transparency unless they've done some experimenting. For \$75.00 in labor, Musical Design will also bypass the balance control, along with the two switches in the "direct" mode, thereby achieving the maximum signal clarity possible. Eliminating the balance knob may sound radical, but if you stop to think about it, it's never really used in a typical listening session, especially when listening for pleasure, and I'll take the transparency any day. Plug your most-used, most-accurate component into the "direct" input pair and the rest into the normal jacks. Get the mod done — call the SP-2 a

TECH NOTES

SP2B line stage preamp: Frequency Response: ± 3 dB, 0.05 Hz to 160 KHz; THD: less than 0.1%, 20 Hz to 20 KHz, 2 volts RMS output; Tube Complement: Two 6N1P dual triode; Dimensions: 19 in. W x 12 in. D x 3.75 in. H, 20 pounds. Circuit is a single-stage Class-A, vacuum tube with low distortion and no feedback. Single-Stage, Two Tube Design has incredible simplicity for the best sound and low maintenance cost. Dual "Main Out" jacks simplify bi-amp or dual-amp operation. "Direct / Source" switch maintains great signal purity with your finest source. Regulated "B+" and "Heater" power supplies with separate B+ regulators for each channel. 18 Gold-Plated, Teflon-insulated RCA jacks on all inputs/outputs. IEC-type power cord socket for accessory power cords. Full signal muting for 30 seconds after turn-on or upon your command.

DM 100B amplifier: Rated power: 100 W/chan. @ 8 ohms, 20 Hz - 20 kHz both channels driven, clipping power at 1 kHz is 120 W/chan. @ 8 Ohms, 200 W/Chan. @ 4 ohms; Distortion (THD): 100 W/Ch @ 8 ohms, typically less than 0.05%. Dimensions: 17 in. W x 11.5 in. D x 4.75 in. H. Single-ended, Class-A with current source. Single-ended, Class-A, cascoded, LED-biased driver stage operates in high quiescent current mode; extremely wideband and linear design. Power MOS-FET output stage. No VI limiting, like that used in bipolar output stages. Large power supply, each channel has separate power rectification and capacitor bank with film bypass caps. Twin, large toroidal power transformers for totally dual-mono performance. Gold-plated, Teflon RCA jacks, gold-plated, high-current, five-way binding posts. IEC-type power cord socket for accessory power cords.



\$1070.00 preamp. If you need to restore the balance control for a session, it's a simple matter to re-plug the component into the regular "source" input jacks.

Tweaks aside, I found this preamp to be another solid value and an excellent match for the 100B amp.

Its general character is light, airy, and sweet. This was brought home by the listening experience referred to above with the Dunlavy SC4 speakers. Where the 100B amp brought midrange richness and micro-dynamics to the speaker, the SP-2 preamp added air and "lit" the rear corners of the room significantly compared to the Melos 333 preamp native to the owners system. It almost made me suspicious; of what, I don't know. The change was not small and it completely restored missing ambient information on, among other recordings, "Mulholland Falls" (*Mulholland Falls* soundtrack, MGM-Edel 0029732EDL).

In fact, the changes wrought by the insertion of both Musical Design components with these state-of-the-art speakers was not subtle, and advances my notion that these modestly priced electronics can be used with state-of-the-art speakers for a cost effective approach to building a system.

Strings were sweet, micro-dynamic and dynamic emphasis good, bass solid, and the all important midrange natural. Thanks to vacuum tube design, there was no grain present in the treble region.

Comparisons with my reference Melos 333 Gold and my shunted volume control passive preamp were instructive. The Melos, a two-chassis \$5,000.00 unit had a richer midrange sound coupled with a darker background, and was marginally more transparent than the SP-2 through its "direct" input. The SP-2 excelled in "air" and width of soundstage, perhaps the mirror opposite quality of the dark and rich Melos sound.

Compared with the shunted volume control, in which the signal

passes through only a single 10-kilohm metal-film resistor and has no switching controls, the SP-2 showed some opaqueness. This quality was not particularly evident when listening to the SP-2 by itself, but was heard mainly when switching between the units during listening tests. My strong hunch is that this is not a design deficiency, but the result the extra circuitry and switching of an active preamp and the compromises in all-out parts quality that must be made when building a budget-priced component.

Just a whiff of criticism in a review can be blown out of proportion, so I hasten to add that the preamp shows fine performance and has the convenience and flexibility completely absent in a passive box. It is quiet, very stable in operation in listening torture tests, and build quality is above what could be expected at this price point.

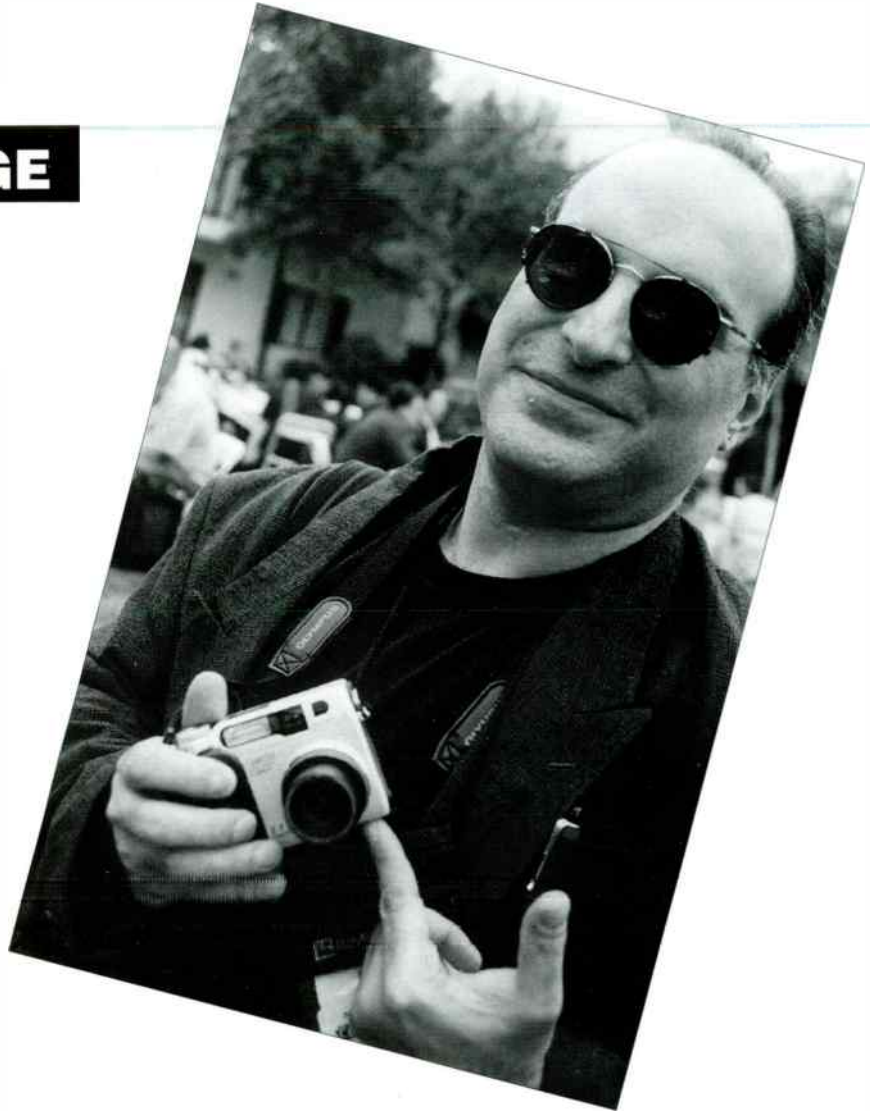
Some Conclusions

The Brass Ear (Bill Brassington, also of this magazine) and I spent an evening listening to this amp and preamp through the Dynaudio 1.3SE speakers. Bill's interest usually lies exclusively with the most expensive products and he was frankly amazed at what a "modest" expenditure in electronics could produce. He threw at the system all his reference software and found no significant or consistent criticisms, and in the end, agreed with me that these are amazing products for their price, ones that can be used for many years without worrying that you're falling too far behind the performance curve.

Are you courageous enough to forgo expensive components? Is your ego tied to brand names? Are you a beginning high-ender on a budget? I'd suggest that spending your hard-earned money is more personally satisfying if you're accumulating a beloved music library or making really meaningful changes with speakers, rather than futzing with electronics. Buy this stuff and be happy.

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B**ACK PAGE**

The Camera Never Lies!

Typical Indecision ...

among British audio writers concerning digital formats, probably due to insufficient numbers of cranial hairs to count all the ones and zeros, at least in the case of this U.K. pundit, Ken Kessler.

This month's winner of the BackPage prize is Ross Wagner of The Audiophile Society from the metro-New York City area. Let *us publish yours and it will earn you \$25.00 or a one-year subscription.*

Sorry, we cannot return unused photos unless they are sent with a stamped self-addressed envelope.

Send your pix to: The Editor, The Audiophile Voice, 215 Glenridge Ave., Lower Level, Montclair, NJ 07042.

See Bob Rock.

The new Sunfire *True Subwoofer* by Bob Carver has received reviews that are redefining the subwoofer industry.

*There has never been a subwoofer like it!
There will never be a subwoofer like it!**

*It's a small eleven inch square
bass cube, and it shakes the
walls and rattles the
rafters. It has its
own built-in two
thousand, seven
hundred watt amp!*

**Trust Bob.
It Rocks!**



SUB REVIEWS

"The True Subwoofer is an achievement on par with the space shuttle and the twinkie."

—Al Griffin

Home Theater, Feb. 97



"Talk about floor shaking bass...turned up to maximum level, I don't think there was anything in the house that wasn't shaking, including the concrete foundation!"

"Don't, I repeat, don't even think about purchasing another subwoofer without giving the Astonishing True subwoofer a listen."

—Joseph M. Cierniak

The Sensible Sound, Issue # 60



"The lowest, flattest, deepest bass I have EVER heard or measured."

—Julian Hirsh

Stereo Review, Dec. 96

**Strictly speaking: for 20 years until patent expires.*

<http://www.sunfirelabs.com>

Bob Carver's
Sunfire
from his mind ... and soul

"...extraordinary"

—Tom Miiller, *The Perfect Vision*,
Issue 33, November/December 2000



The Revolutionary THIEL PowerPoint™ Surface-Mount Loudspeaker

***"The single most extraordinary
—the best—home theater product I
have encountered...I have never
encountered a product that so
completely met a need as the
PowerPoints meet the needs of high
performance home-theater."***

—Tom Miiller, *The Perfect Vision*, Issue 33,
November/December 2000

***"...Thiel has created the first on-wall
speaker that produces real stereo
sound with all the depth, imaging,
and soundstaging that stereo can
produce."***

—Brent Butterworth, Home Theater, May 2000

- Extraordinary uniform, full-room coverage due to unique, angled, close-boundary cabinet design.
- Extraordinary imaging, space and depth reproduction due to greatly diminished boundary reflections in combination with THIEL's trademark phase and time coherence.
- Extraordinary clarity and detail provided by innovative, low distortion, state-of-the-art drivers and very high quality electrical components—uses the same tweeter as our flagship model CS7.2.
- Extraordinary dynamics achieved by state-of-the-art drivers and high (89dB/2.8v-m) sensitivity.
- Extraordinarily faithful tonal balance achieved through advanced driver and crossover design.

Editor's Choice Award 2001 Winner!

—*The Perfect Vision*/Awarded by Tom Miiller

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