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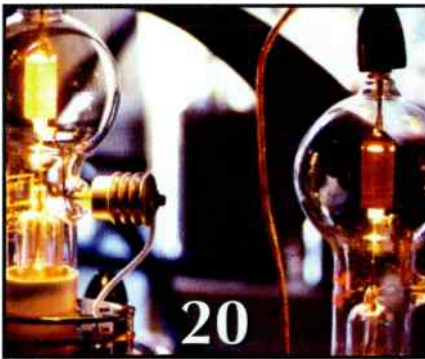
# C

VOLUME IX,  
ISSUE 2

# O N T E N T S

## COLUMNS

- 4 Subscription Information
- 8 Dear Editor: Letters
- 10 New Products
- 29 Under Lock & Key: Pat St.John
- 61 Classified Ads
- 63 Ad Index
- 64 Back Page - Humor



**Consumer Electronics Show - 2003** 12  
*New Bud on the Rose Bush?* Arnis Balgalvis

**Photo Impressions: CES 2003** 20  
*Treasures on 78s* Ross Wagner

**Thyssens-Valentine's Fauré** 24  
*"where words are powerless"* Benjamin Ivry

**On KaZaa and A Cash Cow** 32  
*How We got to Here* Dan Sweeney

## RECORDINGS

The Allman Brothers Band:  
*hittin' the note* 28  
 Michael Tearson

Jimmy Smith:  
*Dot Com Blues* 29  
 Pat St.John

Salif Keita:  
*Moffu* 36  
 Alfred Fredel

The George Barnes Quartet:  
*Don't Get Around Much* 38  
*Anymore*  
 Leslie Gourse

## EQUIPMENT

Classé CP-65 Line State  
 Preamplifier 40  
 Dan Pond

Integra DPS-8.3  
 SACD/DVD-Audio and DVD  
 Player 46  
 John Gatski

The Grado Statement Sonata  
 Phono Cartridge and PH-1  
 Phono Preamplifier 49  
 Anthony H. Cordesman

Anthem TLP1 Preamplifier-  
 Tuner and PVA-1 Amplifier 53  
 James T. Frane

Phonex NeverWire 14  
 Powerline Ethernet Bridge 56  
 Eugene Pitts, IV

Ayon Dragon Loudspeaker 58  
 Peter Breuninger

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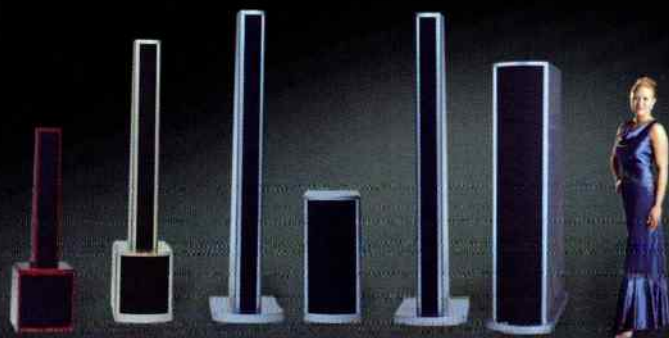
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# L E T T E R S

## **Quiet Dimmers**

Dear Editor:

I read with interest the very fine Panamax review by Ed Long. I was particularly interested in his comments about suppression for dimmers and I am looking for a source of better dimmers, that is ones that are quieter. I have a house full of Lutron models, and while they work well, they aren't quiet. How can I contact Long to learn more about such quieting devices for dimmers?

Thanks, Steve Dull  
via e-mail

Mr. Long replies:

I can't help much, darn it. The problem is that I don't have a copy of the schematic and I know of no reliable way I can get one. I worked on this circuit in the early '60s and it's just too long ago. I do remember that it used a choke in series with the a.c. line, but I just don't remember the value. You may be successful if you experiment, but I didn't know where to suggest that you start. If you do experiment, let us know the outcome, as I am certain Gene Pitts, TAV's Editor, would publish a successful circuit.

## **Better 78's**

Dear Editor:

George Graves' article 'Thar's Gold In Them Thar Attics' contains a number of errors and misleading statements, and I feel compelled to comment on a few. Gustav Holst did not make the first recording of *The Planets* with the London Philharmonic, nor was his first recording made in 1934. His acoustical recording was made with the London Symphony Orchestra for English Columbia between Sept. 1922 and February 1924. His electrical re-make was recorded — for the same label and with the same orchestra — between June and October of 1926. The London Philharmonic did not even exist when these recordings were made; it was founded in 1932 by Sir Thomas Beecham.

There were no Mercury "Living Presence" recordings in 78-rpm form. The term "Living Presence" was adopted after the issue of their first LP recording with Rafael Kubelik and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, the Mussorgsky/Ravel Pictures at an Exhibition, which was recorded in 1951.

In giving advice on selecting equipment for playing 78-rpm recordings, Mr. Graves concentrates on used equipment from the '50s and '60s, most of which will not yield particularly good results. Most of the used turntables he recommends have idler-wheel drive, which will produce higher than desirable levels of rumble. The Bogen turntables (actually made in Switzerland by Lenco) have the idler wheel positioned so it contacts the underside of the platter rather than the rim. As such, most of the rumble component is vertical, which will be exaggerated when playing vertically-cut records, with two stereo channels summed to mono "out-of-phase."

The range of speed adjustment for the Dual turntables is not adequate. It is not uncommon to find acoustical records varying from the low 70s to well above 85-rpm. Caruso's first G&T recordings, made in Milan in April of 1902, were recorded at about 71 rpm, and his second batch of Milan G&T's, from late November or early December 1902, pitch correctly at around 68 rpm. During the era of electrical recording, speeds tend to deviate from the 78-rpm "standard" less than previously, but surprises abound. The normal speed for Victor electrical recordings from the mid to late 1920s is around 77 rpm. But these records can be unpredictable. As an example, Giovanni Martinelli's 1926 Victor electric of "Un di all'azzurro spazio" from Giordano's *Andrea Chenier* was recorded around 73 rpm, and there are other examples. Finally, even though the speed of 78.26 rpm was allegedly standardized in 1929,

there are many records made throughout the 1930s that deviate from the standard.

Most of the stock 78 rpm styli readily available from the major manufacturers will not yield good results either, since groove geometries vary widely. It is important to match the stylus size and shape to the particular record you are playing. Most engineers specializing in transfer of historic recordings, as well as serious collectors, use truncated elliptical styli. The truncated shape keeps the stylus from riding in the bottom of the groove and minimizes noise. Selecting the right truncated stylus allows you to play above or below the wear area, as well.

There are a number of firms selling specialized equipment for playing 78-rpm recordings, including KAB ([www.kabusa.com](http://www.kabusa.com)) Nauck's Vintage Records ([www.78rpm.com](http://www.78rpm.com)) and Diapason Turntables (81 Mineral St., Reading, MA 01867). These firms sell modern turntables, styli (mostly for the Stanton 500-series), and phono preamps tailored specifically to the requirements of 78-rpm recordings.

For a detailed overview of the workings of recording equalization, I suggest my article "Disc Recording Equalization DeMystified," reprinted in the book "The LP is Back" (which is still available from [www.audioxpress.com](http://www.audioxpress.com)).

Gary Galo

Co-Chair, Association for Recorded Sound Collections Technical Committee  
([www.arsc-audio.org](http://www.arsc-audio.org))

Mr. Graves replies:

Chalk it up to the faulty memory of old age, Mr. Gallo. You are correct on both the Holst and the Mercury recording of the Vaughan Williams Oboe concerto. Even though I took most of my old records to the museum, I kept some of them, and these two were among those I kept, so I was able to pull them out of the closet where they reside and check your contentions. Would that I had done so when writing the article; it would have saved me from having to say "mea culpa" now.

The Holst Columbia Masterworks Recording of the Holst *The Planets* Suite for Orchestra was, indeed, the ISO with the composer conducting and must be the 1926 recording

because the label clearly says "Electrical Process." The set I have, by the way, is Masterworks set #83 and it has the year 1934 stamped on the inside cover, hence my false assumption.

And while it is also true that the Mercury 78 of the Vaughan Williams Oboe concerto with Mitch Miller as oboe soloist and the "Saidenberg Little Symphony" under Daniel Saidenberg (Mercury Classics DM-7) does not say Living Presence, it was recorded by C.R. Fine, the same recording engineer who developed the "Living Presence" sound, so the mistake is at least understandable.

Thanks for the corrections, it's good to get the facts straight, and I've learned a valuable lesson, i.e. don't rely on memory. While the names and dates of recordings was sort of ancillary to my article, in my opinion, I might well have checked them. However, I could have easily not specifically mentioned any titles and the message would have been the same.

As far as the equipment used is concerned, this was never intended to be an article written to start people down a career path in sound archiving, or even one for a serious hobbyist, but rather it is just a low-level description of one way in which many of these old records can easily be transferred to CD so that they can bring some fairly major listening enjoyment to current generations of music lovers. It was not designed to be either a definitive work on the subject or even a primer. It is merely a chronicle of how I transferred some 78s to CD without spending a lot of money on specialized equipment. It is also a general overview of the process which might inspire some reader to try his own hand at this task utilizing his own solutions without investing much other than time. I mentioned clearly in the text that there are more sophisticated methodologies available and even mention some of them. I also explained that real archivists used specially shaped styli and special purpose-built turntables, so I don't believe that I was misleading anyone. The method I explained works. The fact that more sophisticated methodologies will yield superior results is simply not in contention here and, indeed, we hope was apparent.

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# C onsumer E lectronics S how 2003

## New Bloom On The Rose?

Arnis Balgalvis

The 2003 Super Bowl of consumer electronics appears to have been the most successful CES ever. A steady stream of visitors to the Las Vegas extravaganza came flocking in from 128 countries, eventually registering an official attendance figure of 116,687, an all-time best for any CES. They came to see 2,283 exhibitors on 1.25 million net square feet of "official" CES exhibit space. That, of course, is without counting The Home Entertainment Show (T.H.E. Show), which is Mike

Maloney's out-board version, located this year at the San Remo Hotel in Las Vegas. Obviously, interest in things electronic is on a distinct rise.

But in the high end audio exhibits themselves, the ones at the Alexis Park, the Convention Center, and at T.H.E. Show, things did not appear to be so rosy. At the Alexis Park, the number of exhibitors appeared to have diminished over the last two years, with fewer rooms occupied by displays. But if the number of exhibitors was down, the

ones who were there did not complain about any decrease in the business that they had come hoping to write. At least, that's what several of them told me.

I have to be careful not to judge too harshly since the distribution of exhibitors has been shifting over the years. For example, the number of companies who choose to display their wares on the ground level of the South Hall of the Convention Center proper is growing. No surprise there, being that the South

Photos: Ross Wagner and Arnis Balgalvis



Hall is the CES's official Home Theater and Satellite venue. And, of course, since home theater has grown by leaps and bounds over the last several years, companies end up going where the profits are.

Whatever the politics and egos and economics, the high-end audio exhibits do not give the visual appearance of a united front. For one thing, they were located all over the place, in four relatively distant locations: The official CES high-end audio exhibits were concentrated at their usual location at the Alexis Park, the Convention Center, and the Hilton Hotel, while T.H.E. Show was at the Hotel San Remo. However, when you talk to some of the exhibitors, they all have very real reasons for choosing their particular display spot. Then again, if one looks at how most of these companies proceed to design their products — the solutions are also different and diverse — it could explain their particular choices.

Despite the look of the high end, for me the overall feeling at the show was one of strength. The wares on display were exciting, the designers were as proud as ever, and there were numerous instances of really great sound.

I must compliment the CES for taking really good care of the press corps. With press rooms located at both the Alexis Park and the Convention Center, and with refreshments and light snacks available throughout the day, it was easy to take a break and regroup. It also made mingling with the rest of the press crew easy. That's on top of the lunch sandwiches that CES also provided. And yes, CES also hosted a daily free lunch for everybody at Alexis Park. But you had to be quick and nimble, not to mention patient, since food tended to run out rather quickly and the lines were long. I think this free lunch situation at the Alexis Park is a bit ironic. It actually was started a few years ago by T.H.E. Show when it was still located at the St. Tropez Hotel located right next to the Alexis Park. Talk about a convenient arrangement! But competition being what it is, T.H.E. Show is now at San Remo, a mile or so away, and no one was handing out a free lunch there this year.

I suspect the reason that CES likes the Alexis Park is that the layout consists of roughly 20 separate



two-story buildings and this results in exhibit rooms that are separated from each other. While that may be good for sonic isolation, getting about in this vast area is no picnic. In addition, about half the displays are on the second floor, which isn't so good for Experienced Editors, the ones with Elderly Knees.

### Alexis Park: In the Beginning...

In recorded music, it all starts at the mike. If you do not get it right there, all is in vain. Many people talk about it, but only a few do something about it. But Ray Kimber of **Kimber Kable** did step up to the plate and is introducing a new approach to recording technology. It is called IsoMike. According to Ray, IsoMike is an acoustic baffle that is positioned between two spaced-omni mikes. Besides being significantly larger and far more absorptive than anything used previously, IsoMike has a shape that improves the low frequency isolation by "scattered phase". Ray had a dedicated exhibit in his DiAural room in the Alexis Park where he demonstrated this technology using a playback source of DSD tape sampled at 2.8224 MHz. The recordings were direct to tape using four of his recently purchased Tascam DS-D98HR tape recorders.

Suffice it to say that his demo was very impressive. Because of Ray's tape machine and the Ed Meitner **EmmLab** DSD DACs, this was about as a revealing a playback situation as could be expected short of a hard-drive playback. The sound had a very open and incisive transparency. I heard micro-resolution along with just about no sense of dynamic constraints. Some very hard to record events, such as drum impacts and brass attacks, came

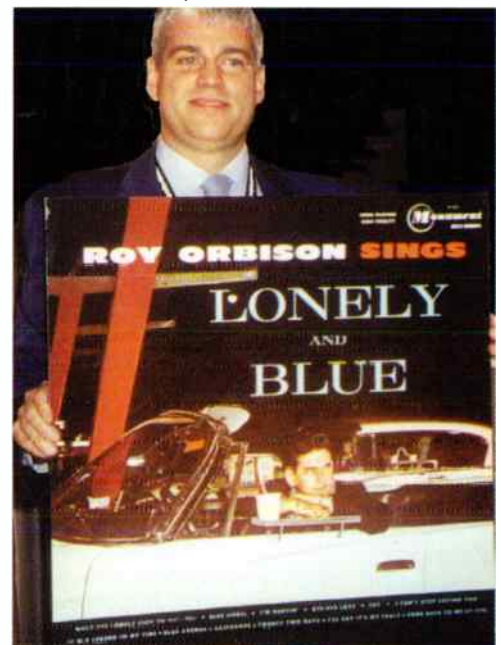
across with startling clarity and resounding attacks, while choral renditions appeared unstrained and intimate. Having been exposed to the normal run-of-the-mill CDs and SACDs, I found myself surprised that recorded sound could actually be this remarkable.

### Software News

Looking back, it appears that this was a show that was good for software — and that goes for both analog and digital. There were new equipment formats for 2003, but music-wise, it was a case of retro, just about every announcement was about reissuing.

I'll start with **Classic Records**. As you'll see, Mike Hobson is no idle man. He and his friends went at it with both barrels, one digital, the other analog.

On the first day he warmed up the press crowd with the announcement that in a joint effort Classic





**Ole Lund Christiansen, The Gnome of GamuT, a hereditary title, we've been told.**

Records and Muse Electronics have decided to go the DVD-Audio route for the hi-rez digital releases. The Classic 24/192 DVD-Audio Series will get its start with the well-known Vanguard title *Songs of Auvergne*, to be followed up with titles from Pete Townshend, Procol Harum, and others from the Vanguard and several additional catalogs. A total of 12 releases are planned for 2003.

The Classic 24/192 DVD-A discs will be Universal DVD discs since they will be designed to play on both DVD-Audio and DVD-Video players. These discs will have the audio title set filled with 24/192 data, while the video title set will have the 24/96 data, and consequently will play on Universal Players that can play DVD-Audio, DVD-Video, and SACD discs. Using original master tapes, with mastering by Bernie Grundman, the transfers will be done using a unique battery-powered 24/192 analog-to-digital converter designed by Kevin Halverson of Muse Electronics.

The next day, now that he had our attention, Mike hit us with the hot news that he'll be doing The Classic Roy Orbison Series. That will include these four rare and coveted titles: *Lonely and Blue*, *Crying, In Dreams*, and *Greatest Hits*. Mike told the excited press corps that this series will feature the following:

Separate mono and stereo releases of each title;

Mastering and cutting, for the first time since the original issues, from the original two-track analog masters engineered by the legendary Bill Porter;

All-tube mastering and cutting on the Classic vintage mono and stereo cutting systems at Bernie Grundman Mastering;

Authentic original artwork and labels, and

Pressing on Classic 200-gram Quix SV-P at Record Technology Inc.

In addition to the Roy Orbison Monument albums, Classic has the Allman Brothers: *Live At Fillmore East* in the cue. All right! Is life good, or what!

By now it's not a CES if there is no big bash by **Sony/Philips** to make yet another SACD announcement. This year this happening took place at the Hard Rock Café. We were invited to descend to the core of the Hard Rock Café, to their inner sanctum club space. Here David Kawakami introduced various executives from EMI, Universal Music Group, Sony and Philips, who went into specifics of all the new exciting releases.

How's this for some big bangs! First, we'll have Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon*, then The Police: *Greatest Hits — Every Breath You Take: The Classics* will start things off the release of the entire Police catalog, and some 15 of Bob Dylan's albums will come out as Legacy Recordings. *Dark Side* will be remixed and remastered in SACD by James Guthrie, the long-time Pink Floyd producer/engineer, and will appear in 5.1 surround. Bob Dylan's and the Police albums will be remastered and released simultaneously on SACD in stereo and on CD.

What's significant is the list of labels involved besides Sony. We are talking about both EMI and the Universal Music Group here.

The *Dark Side* release needs no explanation! What you want to know is that we should be able to get it in our grubby little hands by March 2, 2003 to coincide with the album's 30 Anniversary. The Police and Bob Dylan SACD albums will appear later, with all of them available by fall.

Of equal significance was the announcement that Sony Disc

Manufacturing will install a premier hybrid SACD production line at its U.S. manufacturing facility in Terre Haute, Indiana. The line will produce 15,000 hybrid SACD discs per day. It should be up and running by April, 2003.

Of course, not everything in audio is a multi-national conglomerate. We also have companies like **Mobile Fidelity Sound Lab**. They are now fully reorganized and up and running at full speed under the leadership of Jim Davis, president, and John Wood, executive vice president. At a bash at the San Remo, they revealed what to expect. With Stan Ricker, Ed Meitner, and Tim de Paravicini, they have a very strong team on board to put the Mo-Fi label even more firmly on the map than previously. They announced that "Mobile Fidelity Sound Lab patrons can expect a robust 2003 with an abundance of new releases on the ULTRDISC UHR GAIN hybrid SACD and an emerging proprietary vinyl format as well".

One of the most memorable meetings for me this year took place in the **First Impression Music** room at Alexis Park. Here, Winston Ma, as gracious a host as I know, treated me to some of the most refined and involving sounds at the show. The two-fold purpose of this meeting was to introduce Winston's new cable and electronics products, and to announce his further ventures to bring us refined CDs. Winston Ma had some worthy news on the 16/44.1 CD front. He has formed a new company, Lasting Impression Music, or LIM, that will reissue previously available recordings using the recently refined JVC XRCD process upgraded to the XRCD-24 version.

The first two LIM releases will be the Sheffield Lab's recording of *Amanda McBroom and Lincoln Mayorga Growing Up In Hollywood Town* and Dave Grusin's *Discovered Again! Plus!* Yes, these are a couple of the first D-to-D LP titles, but since Dough Sax had also captured these sessions on 30-ips tapes, that's what Winston will be using for these LIM reissues on XRCD-24. These releases will be followed up with *Lincoln Mayorga and Distinguished Friends*, *The Sheffield Drum Record* and *James Newton Howard and Friends*.

Winston has teamed up with John Tucker — a former NASA engi-



neer who is now the General Manager of FIM — to design or modify equipment for FIM. At the show they demonstrated a modest, but significantly modified CD player. How significantly? Well, they started with a \$99.00 player, added substantial parts along with some serious engineering, and ended with a unit that sells for \$2000. And the sound? Absolutely sublime.

I found it interesting that a number of new universal players, i.e. players capable of SACD and DVD-A playback, were introduced by serious high-end companies. Two such outfits are Bel Canto and MSB Technology Corp. who had their new units on display. There were several other manufacturers who indicated that they have plans to do likewise.

## Highlights

Here are a number of exhibits that really got my attention. Please do not assign any meaning to the order of appearance. They stood out for the reasons mentioned in each case.

**Ensemble** showed up with a completely new product line-up. Everything had been redesigned including the cosmetics. You can rest assured that Urs Wagner maintained the exceptionally high standards that he has been observed to achieve for many previous years. He introduced three new digital products, the Dirondo player, a top-loader reference one-box machine (\$8,000) and the equivalent Dirondo drive and Dichrono hi-dac separates (\$7,000 ea.) The latter offers 32-48 kHz to 96-kHz up-sampling and with a slot reserved for 192 kHz for future developments. This DAC has an integral preamp for direct-drive applications.

The Figura loudspeaker (\$8900) is a two-way, time-compensated, bass-reflex design with a claimed frequency response of 30 Hz to 30 kHz. It features a proprietary aluminum-sandwich cabinet and a decoupled platform for the support base. Driven by the Fuaco integrated amp, rated at 150 watts into 4 ohms, using Ensemble's own cables, the sound was as delicate, detailed and musically convincing as I have come to expect from all my most enjoyable experiences on previous occasions. Perfectly pure pleasure.

**Technical Audio Devices** or TAD unveiled a statement in high perfor-

mance loudspeakers. The TAD Model-1 Loudspeaker is a very serious 4-way design with a \$40,000 price point. Since the sound impressed me to no end, I asked around for reasons. Andrew Jones, the Director of Engineering, responded. What I liked the most about the response was that there was no magic involved; everything was based on solid engineering.

The enclosure is truly radical. Not so much in shape, but in construction. Notice I said "enclosure" because it's not another MDF box. What they did was to take 52 individually machined layers of birch plywood, each precision cut to a specific shape, and, after the desired alignment, they are stacked on top of each other in the proper sequence. This assembly is made whole by gluing everything together under great pressure. The result is an extremely rigid enclosure, with the appropriate ports and speaker openings, but in a remarkably stiff form due to the integrally cross-braced approach.

Driver-wise, the heart of the system is a 165-mm, coherent-source, dual-concentric, beryllium mid-range and high-frequency driver. It consists of a cone midrange driver and a dome-cone high-frequency driver. What the light weight and high strength of beryllium provide is not only an exceptionally rigid, but also a very shallow cone. This shallow shape aids dispersion, the dual concentricity provides consistent off-axis performance, avoiding the problems of discrete spaced drivers. The one-point position also provides consistent performance in different rooms. This driver covers the range of 300 Hz to 100 kHz, and it is housed in a separate sub-assembly (they call it a head) integrated at the top of the main enclosure. It is a casting of composite material that's 50/50 mix of aluminum and resin. Add to this a 200-mm mid-bass driver for the 100 to 300 Hz range, and two 250-mm woofers incorporating a tri-laminate composite cone along with a sophisticated magnet and voice-coil assembly, and we have a design that performed just wonderfully.

These speakers make their presence felt in a room. Each speaker is 54.4 inches tall, 22.8 inches wide, and 22.4 inches deep, and weighs 285 lbs. I was impressed by the transparent and coherent sound of



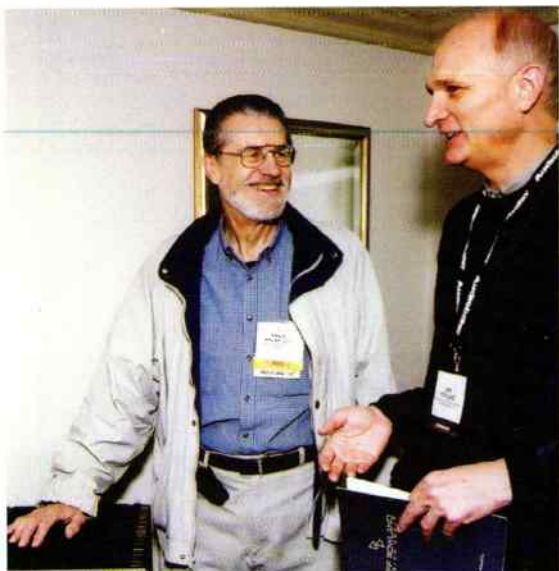
**Andrew Jones, being justifiably proud of the TAD Model 1 speaker; he's the chief designer.**

the system. Imaging was stunning and dynamically the impression was of limitless possibilities across the very extended bandwidth.

At **PBN Audio** Peter Noerbaek introduced a new loudspeaker, the Montana EPX. Priced at an even \$10,000, this three-way impressed me with its dynamic and wide-band presentation. What I have found so enticing in the PBN products over the years, is Peter's ability to very seamlessly marry a really robust low-frequency performance with an open midrange and extended highs. Outwardly, to a casual listener, the EPX may appear to be just another three-way design, but that's far from the truth. Peter went with four 10-inch woofers and mounted them in a vented isobaric chamber. Since it's tuned to 22 Hz, the EPX easily produces bass below 20 Hz. Dual vertically aligned 5-inch mid-range drivers flank a 1-inch custom Montana / ScanSpeak Revelator dome tweeter. The drivers are positioned vertically and are housed in the PBN hexagonal enclosure. As usual, I spent quite a bit of time in the PBN suite just kicking back and enjoying the great sounds.

**Impact Technology** introduced the Airfoil 2, a scaled-down version





**“Arnie and Jeff give new meaning to the higher aspects of high-end.”**

of their \$35,000 Airfoil 5.2 flagship. At \$6,500 it is also at a scaled-down price point. The Airfoil 2 uses three of their unique airfoil drivers along with a transmission line-loaded 6.5-inch cone driver for the low frequencies. The cross-over is at 150 Hz. And let me tell you, it's a beauty of a performer. Under show conditions, and with very modest associated equipment, I was impressed to no end. Impact Technology had chosen to use the Metronome T-1i CD player (\$6900) along with the Brinkman integrated amp and

**“I thought these horns were more efficient,” said Vladimir to Arnie.**

Stealth cables.

At a press conference at the Convention Center, **Dynaudio** unveiled an entirely new range of their Contour Series Loudspeakers. These loudspeakers, debuting 15 years ago, were major contributors to Dynaudio's success. While a number of technical updates have been incorporated since their initial entry into the marketplace, the new Contour series, in addition to the new Esotec and Esotar tweeters and the updated new woofers, has a completely new look. While the high-tech cabinets and baffle designs have been redesigned aesthetically, they also incorporate enhancements for absorbing cabinet resonances to keep colorations to an absolute minimum. The line will consist of two floor-standing models, the Contour S 5.4 and Contour S 3.4, as well as the Contour S 1.4, the Contour S 1.4 mini-monitor, the Contour S R surround / rear channel, and the Contour S C center channel.

**Jeff Rowland Design Group** introduced the 302 stereo power amplifier (\$14,800). Embracing a spanking new switching power conversion technology, the 302 is the front-runner of a completely new line of power amplifiers from Rowland. This new technology is not Class D or any other class in use right now. Rowland's proprietary and patented power conversion technology utilizes novel modulation techniques and error-correction

topologies which he refers to as Multivariable Enhanced Cascade Control (MECC) and Controlled Oscillation Modulation (COM). MECC comes into play to manage and control error correction of frequency response, distortion, noise, and output impedance. COM improves distortion performance, and also provides improved bandwidth and efficiency, as well as offering a significantly simplified circuit topology.

JRDG will make several configurations available. The 302 is a 300-wpc stereo unit, the 304 is a 4-channel 300-wpc amp with four sets of balanced or RCA inputs. A Model 301 will be the firm's statement piece. A mono configuration that will feature a mono input with two isolated speaker outputs. These outputs can be configured by the user in parallel or in series for to optimally interface with as wide a range of different loudspeaker loads as possible. Finally there's the 302/4, which will have stereo input, but four channels of outputs, thus allowing for active stereo bi-amping.

Luke Manley of **VTL** showed up with his Reference Amplifier. This 800-watt, all-tube monoblock has been codenamed the Siegfried (\$40,000). Referring to it as having “tube-smart” technology, Manley says the Siegfried provides continuous real-time control of important parameters. This not only contributes to improving the sonic performance, but it also extends tube life dramatically.

**Balanced Audio Technology** brought three new products to the show, two preamps and a phono stage. The VK-31SE (\$5000) and the VK-51SE (\$8500) preamps are the evolutionary follow-ups of the VK-30SE and the VK-50SE, respectively, while the VK-P10SE Super-Pak had its origins in the VK-P10SE. The most significant improvement in all three instances is the power supply. The VK-31SE benefits from the newly incorporated Super-Pak that, with a 260-joule energy storage capacity, now doubles the original value. Along similar lines, the Super-Pak in the VK-51SE is upgraded to 325-joules capacity. For the VK-P10SE, the Super-Pak is now part of an option that also includes the replacement of electrolytic capacitors in the first and second gain stages. In each case, the Super-



Pak has been improved significantly by incorporating oil-capacitors for power supply bypass.

**Boulder Amplifiers** introduced the 1050 mono power amplifier. Having had the pleasure to experience the absolutely superb performance of their 1060 stereo amp in my system, I have the highest regard for this company. The 1050 will use the same chassis as the 1060, but instead of being a 300-wpc stereo amp, it will provide 500 "Boulder watts" of power. This means, says the firm, that 500 watts will be available continuously regardless of load impedance down to 2 ohms; the amp can also do 600 watts peak into 8 ohms, 1200 watts into 4 ohms, and 2000 watts into 2 ohms. To my eye, Boulder has created one of the most aesthetically pleasing power amp designs in the business by using a heat sink look that is without peer. The internal construction is similarly absolutely first rate. The 1050 has a \$30,00 price tag.

Victor Tiscareno of **Red Rose Music** showed off some of the products that fit the profile of Mark Levinson's promise "to make the finest sonic quality available to the wider audience." The first was the Model 150 Monoblock. This unit measures 16.25 inches in length by just 2.75 inches in width by 5.25 in height, yet will put out 50 watts of exceptionally clean power into 8 ohms. Obviously, you can just keep ordering them as your system expands. And with Victor expecting a price of under \$795 per unit, it will not do serious damage to your wallet.

The other Red Rose product was their Spirit bookshelf speaker (\$1200 per pair). Red Rose is offering a pair of these speakers, an integrated amp (\$1200) and a pair of their 336J speaker cables, for only \$2000! No, stands are not included — they're \$400 more if you want the better model. Victor's demo of these products was remarkably convincing. This appears to be a true bargain and practical to boot. But then again, isn't that what Mark promised!

**Bel Canto and MSB Technology Corp.** showed a significant multi-channel readiness. Each company displayed a universal SACD/DVD-A player in addition to multi-channel control units. Bel Canto featured their PrePro Home Theater Preamp/Processor (\$7900). Able to



support 7.1 audio, it is capable of just about anything imaginable in the control and performance category. It even includes a full-color TFT display to simplify access to programming menus. For the six-channel surround realm, Bel Canto offers the Pre6 Pre-amp (\$3800). This is a full-featured preamp that provides, according to Bel Canto, "Multi-Channel Sound with a two-channel Soul." The universal player will play CD, DVD-V, DVD-A, SACD, and MP3. It should also keep Videophiles happy with its ability to provide progressive scan, 480 p, since it incorporates the Faroudja DCDi deinterlacing technology.

MSB's Universal SACD/DVD-A player listed at \$7,995. This player includes an analog volume control for all channels in addition to 24-bit, 192-kHz DACs and 192-kHz MSB up-sampling. For two channels, MSB displayed the DAC II PREAMP. Implementing dual 24-bit, 100-Mbit/sec, sign-magnitude R2R ladder DACs with four discrete converters, it featured balanced and RCA outputs including an internal stepped attenuator for analog volume control. I was particularly pleased to see that ladder DACs had not been abandoned. It's a pity that in the rush to dazzle the consumer with dizzying specs, fundamental D-to-A advantages are sacrificed by jumping on the sigma-delta bandwagon.

Speaking of high class DACs, **Theta Digital** announced that their long-awaited Generation VIII (\$10,000) is actually shipping. This fully differential, balanced DAC has custom programmable-software digital filters feeding a duo of digital-to-analog converters per channel. The good news is also that all previous models of the Generation Series,

including the DS Pre and DS Pro, can be upgraded to the Gen VIII performance level.

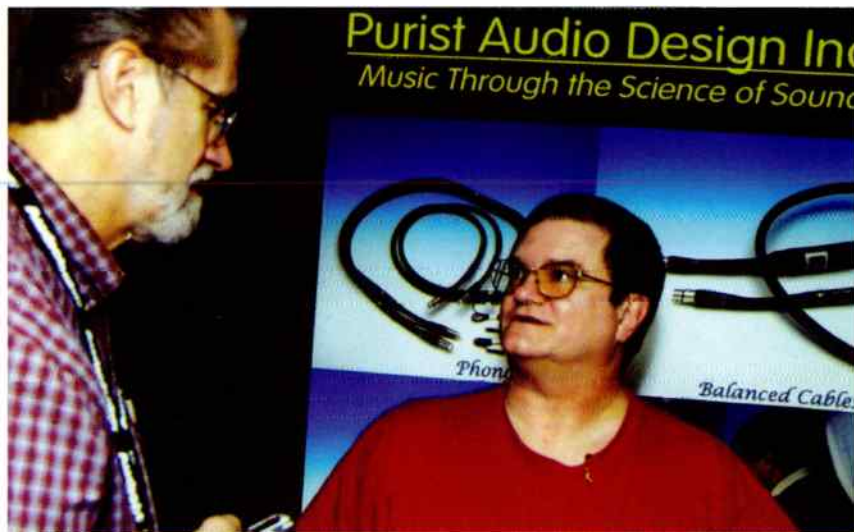
I would be remiss if I did not mention the **Omicron Group**. This Italian company had a complete lineup of superbly executed amplifiers and loudspeakers. The Pi Greco series of solid-state electronics consists of a P15se preamp and an F50se power amp. The amp is rated at 50 watt per channel of pure Class A, but can be reconfigured as a 150-watt monoblock. Even more impressive was the equipment rack. This stunning modular and completely adaptable support structure consists of rods, spacers, and ferrules that permit it to be configured into custom shapes to accommodate all equipment sizes and shapes.

But the part that stunned me was the sound when used with their Coherence Stage loudspeakers (\$15,000). This design uses an ESS AMT Heil tweeter, a 5-inch Gorlich Zellaton midrange, and a custom 8.5-inch Morel woofer with an external cross-over. My notes say: "No speaker, excellent staging, with very deep stage, excellent detail." But it was more than that — it was certainly one of the highlights of this CES. At the time I spoke with Mauri Mauro, Omicron Group did not have a rep in the US. But I'm sure that situation won't last long.

## T.H.E. Show At the San Remo

When it came to really substantial displays, the San Remo took the prize. While it is true that the rooms on the three upper floors in the Gold Tower were "normal" size hotel rooms, the exhibits on the ground floor in the six Chateau Ballrooms were very impressive. I





**“Pure cables, forever!” said Jim Aud to Arnie.**

also include here several displays in the Conference Center that were located in a separate structure across the parking lot from the Hotel San Remo.

As luck would have it, I only got to visit the **Halcro / Wilson Audio** exhibit in the Conference Center. Mike O’Hanlin was the host and he was showing off a most impressive surround-sound set-up, which sported two Wilson Audio Maxx speakers in the front, a Wilson Audio Watch doing the center channel, and a couple of Sophia units doing the rear-channel honors. Power amp-wise, this system featured Halcro DM-68 monoblocks (19,000 each) everywhere. Included also was the Metronome T-1i Compact D player (\$6900) and the new Halcro DM-10 preamp (\$16,000) when called upon to do two-channel duties.

For the SACD surround demos, Meitner equipment was enlisted. The preamp was the **EmmLabs “Switchman”** (\$4500) while the EmmLabs DAC-6 (\$9000) performed the six-channel DAC decoding duties. I was impressed by the exceptionally pristine sound that seemed to be able to unravel even the most subtle details. At the same time, this system presented a very forceful rendition of the more dynamic or substantial passages, although with the low-frequency reproduction was a bit too forward for my taste.

Next came the Chateau Ballrooms. I’ll call them the Patio Row since they could be accessed from a very nice patio at the back of the hotel.

The **Nearfield Acoustics** and VAC suite sounded very stirring and

majestic. The combination of the **George Mark Audio Technologies** First Overture (\$5,990) DAC and preamp combination, with a pair of the absolutely stunning-looking VAC Phi 70 (\$10,000 each) monoblock power amps and the Pipedreams Hemisphere loudspeaker system gave one of the better sonic experiences at this CES. I believe that the Pipedreams put on their best-ever performance in my experience — it was better than at any time earlier.

George Mark Audio Technologies is a new company formed by two audio veterans George Bischoff and Mark Moschello. The First Overture is an all-tube, two-chassis DAC and preamp combination. It’s a 24-bit, 192-kHz capable decoder that up-samples to 192 kHz. Signals on AES/EBU, coax or Toslink are sensed by an auto-select circuit. The analog section is a pure triode, Class-A, true balanced circuit, with zero feedback, in an all-tube differential amplifier with an internal volume control.

The VAC Phi 70 is a Class-A Ultrode 70-watt mono amplifier (\$10,000), one of the latest designs in the Phi power amp series unveiled by Kevin Hayes. The same look and circuit topology is also available as a 32-watt-per-channel stereo amplifier and as a Beam Power 220-watt mono amp (\$9,000).

At the last hour I ran into Vladimir Lamm, the creator of the famous amplifiers by **Lamm Industries**. Since I was way behind schedule, I was in a hurry. Luckily for me, he would not have any of that. He politely guided me into the sweet spot, and had me sit and prepare to listen. At that point, knowing Vladimir, I realized I was in for a treat.

He put on an old Connoisseur Society LP of Ivan Moravec doing Beethoven’s *Moonlight Sonata*, and he had me. Captivated, amazed, and intrigued. Bewitched, bothered, and bewildered.

How come? You see, I was listening to 42-year-old loudspeakers! They were the Siemens Bionor Loudspeakers. A two-way system, it consisted of a horn-loaded mid-range and tweeter unit and a horn-loaded cone woofer. Not too unusual ... except that each side was seven feet high, a good 10 feet wide and at least five feet deep right behind the drivers.

What was bothering me was that I was listening to a decades old product and I was absorbed and involved. I had really expected that much more progress had taken place in the intervening years. It also occurred to me that given the progress in amplification and playback, the designers of this speaker probably never got to appreciate just how great their accomplishment really is.

In the other suites down here, there were other exhibits by Lumen White, Wisdom Audio and Ayon Audio, but limited time forced me to miss them. But there were a few rooms in the Golden Tower that I got to visit .

**Purist Audio Design, Sound Lab** and **Atma-Sphere** had teamed up very successfully. Purist’s Jim Aud introduced two completely new and improved cable lines, Musaeus and Venustas, using a new shielding material called Ferox. This material, developed by Purist Audio, replaces the fluid jacket that surrounds the conductors of their cables. Ferox is a “doped silicon-based granular material” with superior ability to reject e.m.i. and r.f.i., in addition to having excellent anti-vibration properties.

Sound Lab featured the Millennium-1 Electrostatic Loudspeakers. Talking to Dr. Roger West, I learned about a number of technical enhancements he’s made recently, including distributed resonance for extended bass response, a pure-copper charge diffusion ring, more nearly uniform energy distribution across the spectrum, and the optional toroidal audio transformers.

At the **TacT Audio** room, Peter Lyngdorf was explaining the benefits of room correction with special



attention to bass reproduction. TacT has realized that a major problem of subwoofers has to do with their speed. Since the newly introduced TacT RCS 2.2X includes a crossover in the digital domain, problems of subwoofer integration raise their ugly head. Their solution is to use TacT Audio designed subs. No, it's not because they want to sell more product — it's because they have designed a sub that is compatible with the idea of room correction. The fact that the subs are relatively inexpensive eliminates the idea of greed from the equation.

Furthermore, TacT will sell you the parts and plans so that you can roll your own. Peter did demo the TacT set up using the RCS 2.2X along with a pair of TacT digital 2150 stereo amps driving their own speakers and a pair of their subs. Since room correction is involved, TacT recommends that the woofers are placed in the corners of the room. As it turned out, this demo was very successful. The bass came across remarkably tight and extended. And yes, it had a sense of integration and being very much part of the overall presentation.

I have saved the best for last. The great thing about shows is that —

more times than not — you run across something that takes you by complete surprise. This was one of those shows.

What I am referring to here is the work of one Josh Stippich. His company is **Electronluv** and he had on display some of the most exotic and unique tube electronics on the planet. They may be amplifiers, but to me they are works of art first and foremost. Using mercury-vapor quad-mono power supplies and directly heated triode (DHT) tubes, Electronluv products are housed on art-deco chassis made of hand-crafted stainless steel and copper. Josh custom wires by ear, perfecting circuitry and employing only DHTs throughout the box, not just in a few places. He uses no resistors, caps, or inductors, instead relying on custom transformers to join the stages together.

Each Electronluv amplifier is built to order and ranges in price from \$9,500 for the budget model to \$35,000 per pair in the premium monoblock version. If desired, amplifiers can be ordered with a variety of tubes, including 2A3 and 300B. Preamplifiers are also available in both budget and premium models, and prices range from

\$4,800 to \$9,500. Even though I had been forewarned that this was a must-see event, Josh's original vision of audio gear was a revelation. But then again we are talking here about art. For me, there is no other way to "see" this. I admire the talent and imagination that Josh Stippich displayed by taking creativity in audio to an admirable level. The best part is that Josh is only 26 years old — we can look forward to many more creations from him in the years to come.

**Peter Lyngdorf, the man from TacT.**



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# CES in Pictures

## A Gallery of Visual Impressions Photographs by Ross Wagner

The 2003 Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas is as much a visual display as it is a market place — if one knows where to look. These impressions by *TAV* friend Ross Wagner are proof enough that he knows where to look and how to get us to share his vision.

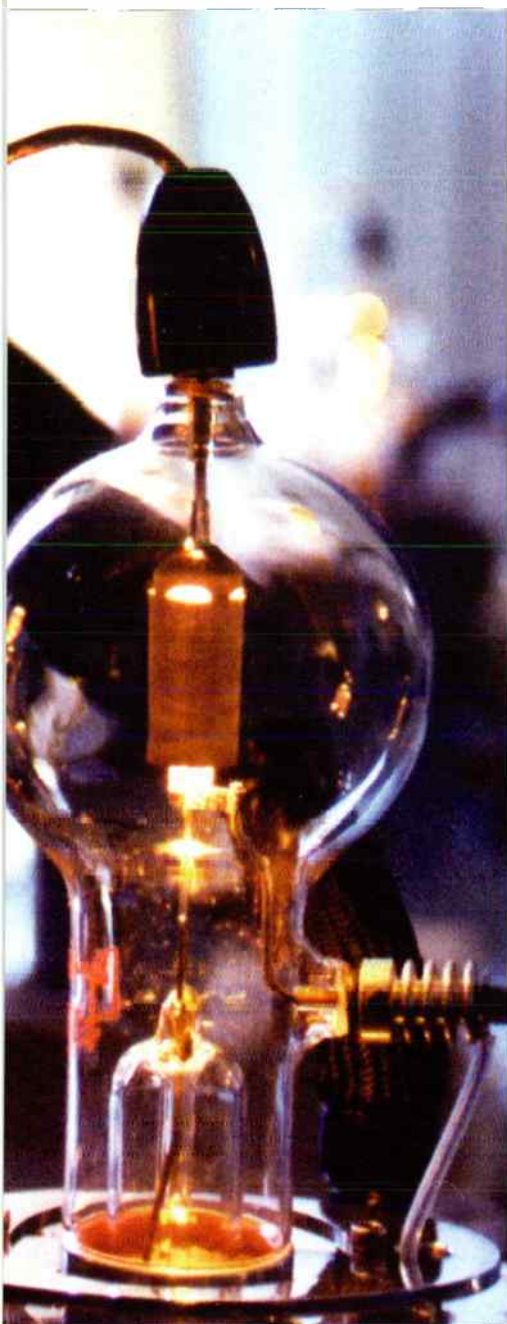
Electron Luv's Art Deco  
monoblock amps.







Reviewer/Photographer  
Ross Wagner sees  
as acutely as he listens.

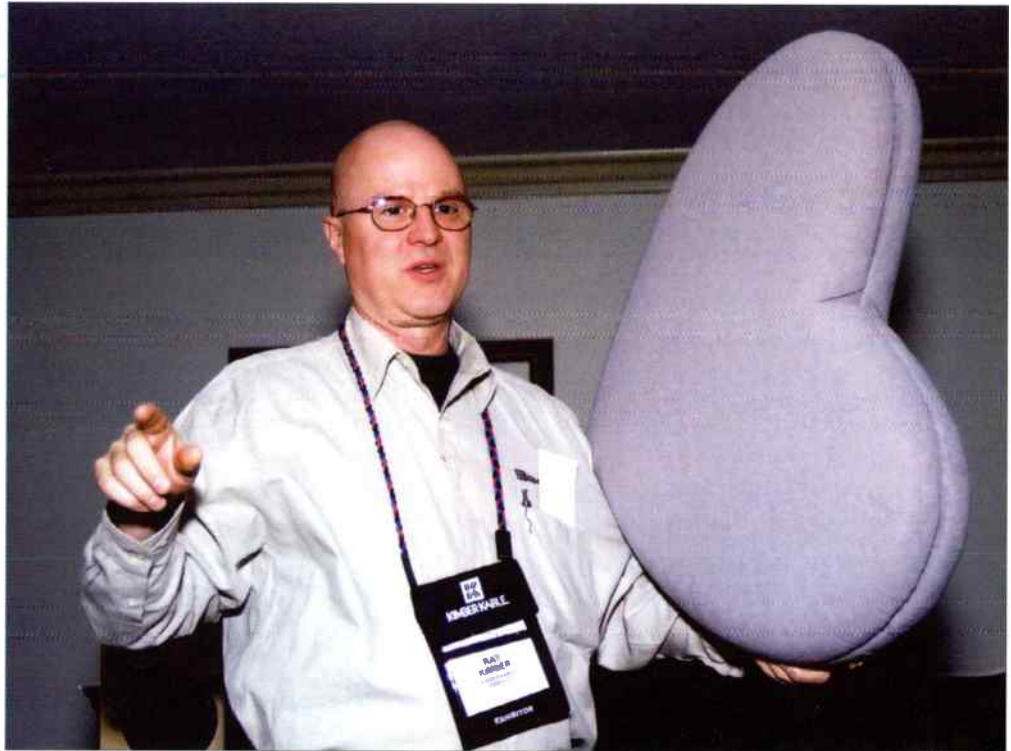


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Janis Ian, whose songs attracted high-end crowds to the Alexis Park Apollo Ballroom, greets a well-wisher after her concert.



LOOK DEEPLY, deeply into my eye, and never mind what I am saying....

# “Music Starts where words are powerless!”



Benjamin Ivry

*Classical*

Germaine  
Thyssens-Valentine  
Plays Fauré

*Fauré: Barcarolles,  
Theme & Variations*  
Testament 1215

*Gabriel Fauré: 13 Nocturnes*  
Testament 1262

*Fauré: 4 Valses caprices,  
6 Impromptus, 8 Pièces brèves*  
Testament 1263

**T**HE PIANO MUSIC of Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924) is distinguished by a tender intimacy and delicate emotion that is all too rarely expressed by today's concert virtuosos. Performers accustomed to projecting knuckle-busting showpieces can be stumped by music where flash counts for little. Such past performers as Marcelle Meyer, Gaby Casadesus, and Albert Ferber were all paramount interpreters of Fauré, and their achievements have only slowly been reprinted on CD. Both Meyer and Casadesus were married to noted musicians, and Ferber spent most of his career as a teacher in London. But if their renown was a long time in coming, the possibility of historic reissues on CD still holds unexploited promise. Most recently, Testament has made the overdue decision to reprint three discs of excellent 1950's recordings by Germaine Thyssens-Valentin (1902-1987), long known to music lovers in France but more obscure elsewhere.

Perhaps not coincidentally, many of the finest performers of Fauré, with the exception of Albert Ferber, a Swiss pupil of Rachmaninov, were women. Because of the difficulties for women to maintain a career, they often performed for groups of friends — Meyer and Thyssens-Valentin were particularly renowned for this

type of entertaining in Parisian *soirées*. That said, many of the world's greatest male pianists are equally unknown to the rank and file because they devoted their energies to teaching — Spain's Frank Marshall and Cleveland's Arthur Loesser are two very noteworthy examples. Marshall made very few recordings, his most famous outing being the piano accompaniment for the Popular Songs of Manuel de Falla, with the mezzo-soprano Conchita Supervia, reprinted on Pearl Records.

Written up in this magazine recently, Loesser recorded more often, but only a slim selection of his artistry is available on Pearl (accompanying the fiddler Toscha Seidel) and in some live performances on Marston Records. Loesser's greatest performance, of Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*, remains out of print. Lacking a big record company with an advertising budget to drum the name of artist into the public's head, even the most sublime artist can be overlooked in his or her lifetime. A recording contract in classical music has become more than ever like some sort of perverted political career, where the elected ones are often very far from the brightest, or the best.

Yet the reappearance of these Thyssens-Valentin discs brings hope for many a neglected master, suggest-



ing that posterity may be fairer than the past and present in terms of justly evaluating talent and achievement. In Thyssens-Valentin's art — overlooked by the masses or not — something inherent in Fauré's music was captured, which in turn is brilliantly conveyed in the intimacy of listening to a CD at home for today's audiophiles, as opposed to sitting in a noisy, oversized concert hall straining to hear over other audience members' coughs and clanking jewelry.

Born in Holland, Thyssens-Valentin moved as a child with her family to Belgium to study music, and while still a child, was studying in Paris. While she eventually became as Parisian as anyone, her Dutch roots may have held an element of her success. Like many another Dutch musician — one thinks of the mastery of the Dutch baritone Bernard Kruysen in French classical songs — Thyssens-Valentin seems to have captured a softness of lyric approach, avoiding any inappropriate angularity or affectedness. She would surely have had more of a career, except she took 25 years off from public pursuits in order to raise five children. In a way, her trajectory is parallel to that of the American poet Marie Ponsot, recently discovered by the general public while in her eighties, who also took a 25-year hiatus from publishing her work in order to raise a family. Unfortunately, the physical demands of a pianistic career are such that it is not always wise to delay too late a return, and Thyssens-Valentin suffered a stroke at age 81 that effectively ended her career.

A pupil of the famed pedagogue Isidor Philipp, Jeanne-Marie Darré (another great and unjustly forgotten pianist who made superb recordings) and Marguerite Long, Thyssens-Valentin conveys Fauré's sinuous melodies with full-hearted tone, but avoid some of the meatiness of other acclaimed performers of Fauré like Arthur Rubinstein. Thyssens-Valentin made many, many more recordings than these three, and it is to be sincerely hoped that other publishers of historical material will jump on the bandwagon to reissue these admirable items. They are in direct sound, entirely acceptable for the audiophile if a little closely miked at times. Unlike the "snap-crackle-pop" of an earlier generation of Fauré recordings by masters like Alfred Cortot, there are almost no concessions to be made in terms of sound quality, especially considering the supreme artistic quality on display here. The artistry of Thyssens-Valentin is of a kind that survives naturally through the generations. Her grandson is Benoît Rolland, a much-admired maker of instrumental bows; since 2001 his business has been in the Boston neighborhood of Charlestown. His website is [www.rolland-bows.com](http://www.rolland-bows.com).

Rolland began piano lessons with his grandmother at age four. Several times a week during his whole childhood, he would visit his grandmother's town house for lessons. By age seven he was also playing violin, and made his concert debut at age 15. Rolland states,

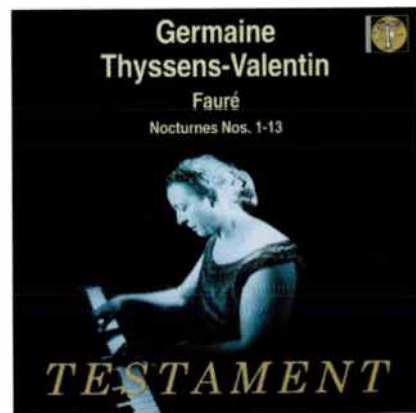


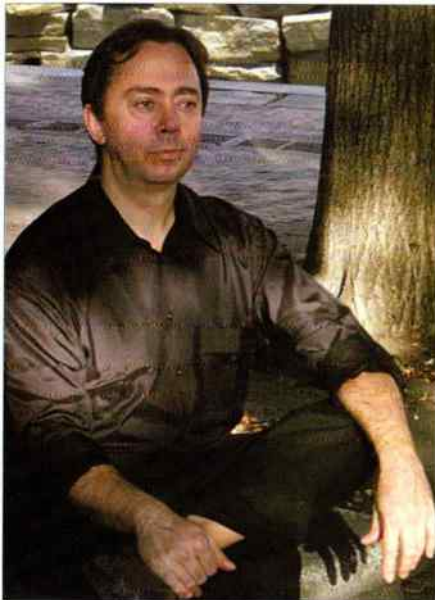
"Firstly, it is probable that my grandmother would have been quite well known to the concert-going public in France and Europe had she devoted herself entirely to her career. In her youth, she was already noted for her extraordinary musical sensitivity, her outstanding finger technique and her great professionalism. Her iron will and ambition helped her to surmount every obstacle." Rolland explains that while his grandmother did retire from her career for two decades, she did not give up the piano entirely during that time: "She didn't stop practicing the piano for 20 years, but

slowed down. She certainly would not have been able to begin her career again with such a degree of professionalism had she not maintained her pianistic level. But as often happens with great artists, she was single-minded, with a certain abruptness that sometimes worked against her. People were wary of her frank way of speaking, and her temper. She never hesitated to say what she thought of whoever disagreed with her, whether it was her friends, family, or groups of highly reputed colleagues. One can easily understand how this can disturb and hinder the advance of fame in any field, including her own."

Still, Rolland says admiringly, "She was able to confront the prejudices against women performers through her talent, which put her among the musical elite of her era." Thyssens-Valentin actually was far more than a Fauré specialist, often playing works by Beethoven, Mozart, Bach (her favorite), Schumann, Scarlatti, Chopin, Couperin, Debussy, Fauré, Déodat de Séverac, and Ravel. With the modern composer Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992) who often came to her musical salons, she had an unhappy experience quite typical of Messiaen, who has bizarrely been seen as some kind of saintly character by generations of disciples, despite massive evidence to the contrary. Thyssens-Valentin knew Messiaen quite well and respected his music deeply, and rehearsed his "Petites Liturgies" for six months for a planned concert.

Then after six months of practice for eight to 10 hours per day, which included finger-stretching exercises several times per day, Messiaen withdrew permission for her to play





**Benoît Rolland, grandson of Germaine Thyssens-Valentine.**

the work in public. Why did Messiaen behave in this way, when he was famous for his obsequious praise of any and every musician who performed his works? Turns out that the work in question was dedicated to Messiaen's wife, Yvonne Loriod, who was to become its exclusive interpreter for many years. Sadly, Thyssens-Valentin was upset for several months by this disappointment, which unhappily sent her into a period of depression.

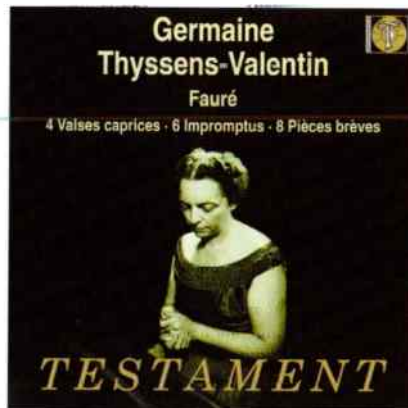
Thyssens-Valentin usually had happier experiences playing French composers, whom she favored toward the end of her career. She felt that these composers

expressed a certain temperament, and particularly admired the inventive spirit of the French modernists. Her recordings included not just Fauré but also Mozart concertos, according to Rolland, and Schumann's "Carnaval" and "Papillons." She did, however, truly love Fauré, which is evident in her performances. Rolland recalls how "using the composer's works, she would offer her views on interpretation, explaining that all the nuances, stylistic elements, and musical atmosphere from the largest-scaled ones to the most subtle, were more inherent in Fauré than in any other composer." In her teaching, she stressed that the piano is "more

a singing instrument than an instrument whose strings are hammered, and jotted down her own fingerings on musical scores in order to link sounds and reduce the need for pedaling, as much as possible. She played with this in mind, and it must be said that playing Fauré with as little pedal as possible is quite a feat!" Indeed, a majority of pianists, even those who lived in Fauré's time, err by offering a soupy, echoing mass of sound, thinking that the imprecise sound of the pedaled note is a form of impressionism. Thyssens-Valentin's comparative clarity is part of the magic of her recordings, and its immediate appeal to audiophiles.

Thyssens-Valentin's gift for "extreme simplicity and intimacy," according to Rolland, led her to prefer performances of Mozart concertos with pared-down ensembles, of the kind which have become fashionable today. She would play Bach keyboard concertos with tiny ensembles, and without any pedal whatsoever, with results that Rolland recalls as "highly colored sonorities and the finest intimate effect."

All told, Thyssens-Valentin enjoyed quoting Debussy to the telling effect that "music starts where words are powerless."



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## Rock

Allman Brothers Band *Hittin' The Note*  
Peach/Sanctuary 06076-84599-2

**H**ITTIN' *THE NOTE*, the first Allman Brothers Band album of new material in about eight years, is a wonder. It is every bit as good as anything the band has recorded in its storied 35-year history. The 11-song, 75-minute program sizzles end to end.

These days the band is founder-members Gregg Allman on keys and lead vocals and drummers Butch Trucks and Jaimoe, plus guitarist-singer Warren Haynes, percussionist Marc Quinones, bassist Oteil Burbridge, and Butch's son Derek Trucks on guitars. As a unit, they wear proudly the road-tested cohesion of a band that earns its stripes every night they play. The album's dense sound has that vintage Allman feel of *Eat A Peach* and other great Allman Brothers Band albums.

Gregg Allman's world-weary voice is the true link to the beginning. His singing still reflects a blues

drenched life of ups and downs. His voice *knows*. The twin guitars of Haynes and Trucks don't duplicate the fabled Duane Allman and Dickie Betts chemistry, but they do invoke it pretty thoroughly. Their chemistry, however, is all their own as they constantly feed off of each other.

Allman's songwriting, too, remains a hallmark, though Haynes really is the primary songwriter these days. He has co-writer credits on nine of the 11 songs: Five with Allman, four with others. The key cover is a memorable, loving version of the early Rolling Stones classic, "Hearts Of Stone."

ABB always leaves plenty of room for the band to expand on the songs with instrumental exploration. They are the seminal jam band from which others in the idiom can learn volumes. Unlike most, ABB never loses sight of the root of the song in the improvisation. However high

and far they fly, they can return to the ground of the song in a trice.

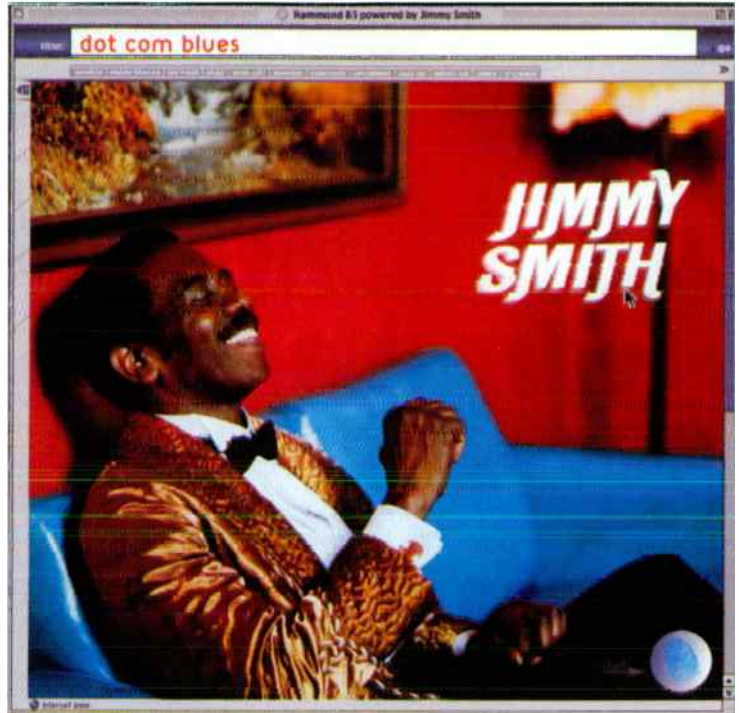
Engineer/co-producer Michael Barbiero imbues the album with a rich sound with depth and guts, but never sounds cluttered. His technical expertise lets the band's inspired performances shine.

War horses of the road that they are, I'd about given up hope the Allman Brothers Band would ever again make an album of new material as rich, as excellent as *Hittin' The Note*. But here it is fully worthy of the band's great heritage. Surely when all is said and done, *Hittin' The Note* will be one of 2003's most rewarding treasures.

One other thing: The Allman Brothers Band is about to begin releasing multi-CD albums of selected concerts from over the span of the years much like The Grateful Dead has done. I'll be watching carefully for those. They could be monumental.



Pat St. John



Blues

Jimmy Smith *Dot Com Blues*  
Blue Thumb Records 314 543 978-2

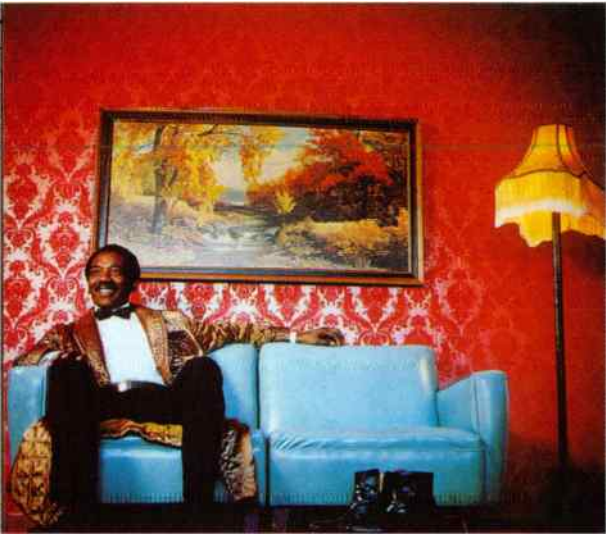
**Pat St. John** has been doing commercial voiceovers, promos, narration and TV announcing throughout his career, as well as hosting his radio programs in New York City. If you're looking for a spokesman, check out Pat's new web site where you can hear and see examples of his work. His web page of Voiceover work is located at [www.PatStJohn.com](http://www.PatStJohn.com). Your comments about Pat's articles in TAV and questions about music are welcome as well.

**T**HE WORD "LEGEND" seems to be thrown around quite a bit these days, but in the world of Jazz, the word definitely fits one James Oscar Smith. Starting in 1956 he took the genre of jazz to a whole new level with his masterful Hammond organ, recording album after album on the Blue Note label, before switching to Verve in 1963, where he continued to influence and entertain until 1972. After that, he bounced around various labels until he took a break around 1995 that lasted until he released *Dot Com Blues* in early 2001.

Talk about bouncing, this CD will have you movin' & groovin' like perhaps no album has had you do for a while. Yes, he's always

been defined as jazz, but this one is aptly going to be defined here as *blues*, as the title suggests. OK, he's kind of "switched gears" on this record, since it's not really what Jimmy's known for, particularly when it comes to the (sometimes) too long deep jazz instrumentals that bogged him down a bit in the late 60's, as well as some of his "rock cover songs" that he was talked into doing around the same time. Any of this minor criticism should be totally dismissed from a guy whose releases total roughly a hundred albums. Here's one, if you missed it that hits the bull's-eye!

On *Dot Com Blues*, Jimmy has invited guests who sing a variety of songs, ranging from ones written



swingin' and indeed "struttin'", only interrupted once when Jimmy himself growls "Gimme that break", where his organ kicks in, the boogie keeps going, and it's no interruption at all. Interesting, as both Taj's album & *Dot Com Blues* were produced by John Porter, who also plays guitar on a number of tracks.

The great Dr. John makes generous contributions to this CD, with songwriting, his great piano playing, and the lead vocal on the rocking lead off track "Only In It For The Money", which of course, he isn't. Check out Etta James' lead vocal on Willie Dixon's "I Just Wanna Make Love To You" and you find another legend, fronting a legend, with a song written by a legend. (Told you that word gets thrown around a lot, but deservedly so here. In fact, I should have used it when I mentioned Dr. John).

specifically for this album (both by Jimmy & collaborations with his invited artists), to blues standards, to re-makes by the artists who did them on their own albums previously. One such example of that is a song called "Strut" by Taj Mahal, which he had originally done on his own 1993 album *Dancing The Blues*. I remember hearing that song for the first time and just went nuts with enthusiasm (I love it when that happens). I bet I listened to that song 100 times and never got tired of it. The version on this Jimmy Smith album is better. Taj is just

For those who only think of Jimmy as a pure instrumentalist, there are plenty of those on this disc to satisfy. "8 Counts for Rita" and the title track (both Smith originals) keep the blues and jazz intertwined

in up-tempo, and Jimmy's rendition of Duke Ellington's "Mood Indigo", his own "Tuition Blues", and the classic "C C Rider" mellow things out for yet more diversity that this collection exudes.

If that's not enough to convince you this is a must for your collection, relative newcomer Keb' Mo' contributes a song he wrote titled "Over & Over", with some great guitar playing by both Keb' himself and Phil Upchurch. Yet, back to that "legend" word, it's none other than B.B. King vocalizing and playing on "Three O'Clock Blues". That tune not only is enhanced by long-time Joe Cocker pianist Chris Stainton, but the versatile bass licks of Pino Palladino, whose work with Eric Clapton among others adds to the perfection that this album truly is. (Pino, by the way, was the replacement for the late John Entwistle just as The Who was beginning their most recent tour). I have to say it... any Palladino is a pal 'o mine oh!

With this Hammond B3 powered by Jimmy Smith, *Dot Com Blues* never drags, but indeed clicks, so (without any further computer references) get this CD, because I promise you, you'll dig-it-all!

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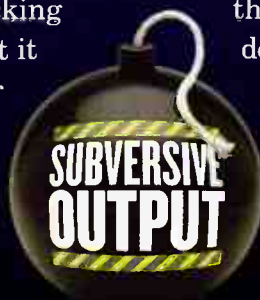
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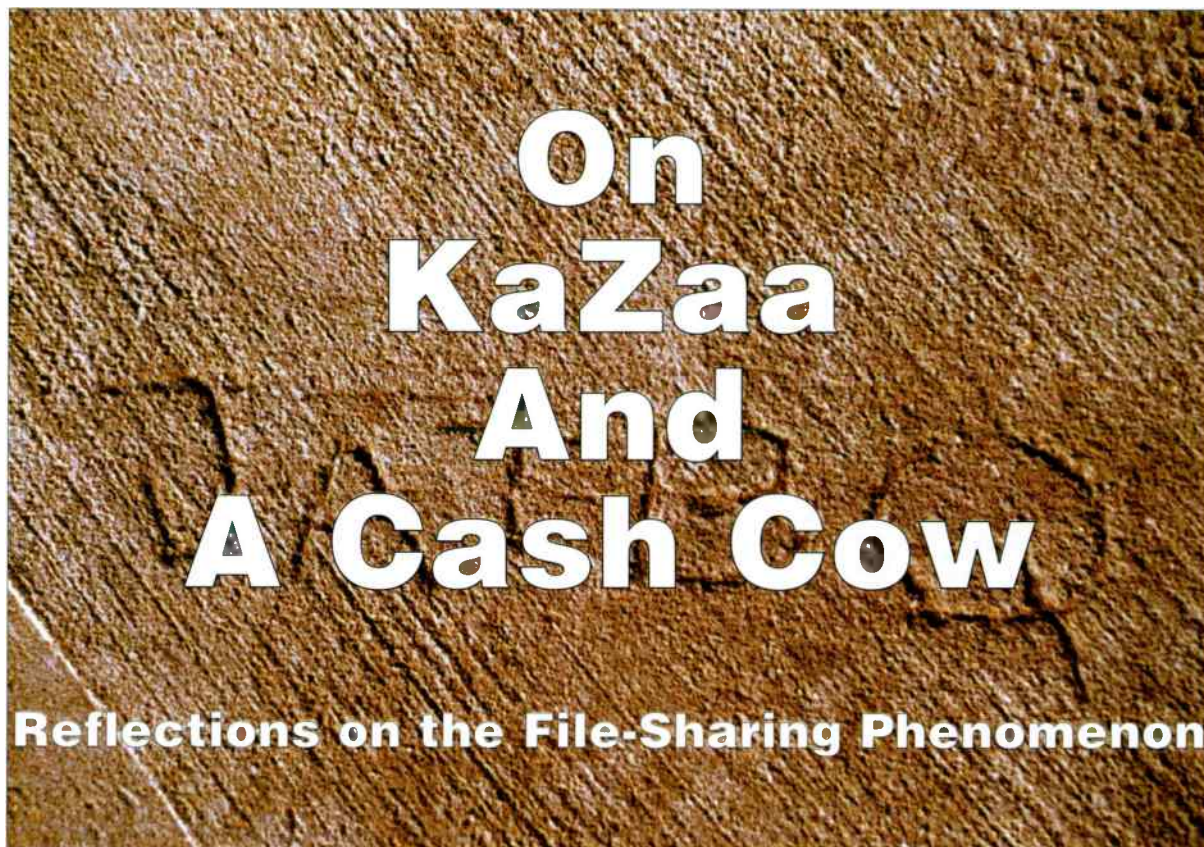
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**I'** M A VETERAN. In reporting on issues such as copy protection and intellectual property rights on music, I have tried to function as a war correspondent. I try to stay above the fray and to report objectively. But it's not always easy to do that because inevitably one touches upon matters that are subject to such strongly held views. Refusal to take a position is regarded with suspicion by partisans on both sides of the issues who often assume the existence of some hidden agenda.

And such partisans. On the one hand, we have outraged producers of content such as songstress and quantum physicist Britney Spears (check out her semiconductor physics website at <http://britney-spears.ac/lasers.htm>) who declares, "it [file sharing] is like stealing CDs" (no quantum indeterminacy here). On the other hand, we have an anonymous National Public Radio college-age interviewee who states on the last day of Napster's service, "I feel that I have not only a moral right but a moral obligation to share music files." How do you deal with that degree of moral clari-

ty, to borrow a phrase from our President? And imagine the two of them in the same room — the physicist and the moralist, the artist and her audience.

(The Britney Spears Semiconductor Physics Website is one of more than 100 unauthorized fan websites devoted to the singer. Legitimate questions could be raised by Ms. Spears, if she chose, as to whether the photographs of herself adorning that website constitute fair use. Which goes to show how very dense the legal thicket surrounding intellectual property issues really is.)

Or perhaps we should resist the urge. Instead, let's go beyond partisanship and try to look at what is, and possibly will be, rather than what someone believes should be.

### **Play It Again — and Again**

To explore intellectual property issues within the music industry, is to stroll down a hall of mirrors. Things are definitely not always as they seem. Still, we



can begin with a few fairly firm facts. The music recording industry had, by most accounts, a dreadful year in 2002, and there were two consecutive dreadful years preceding. CD sales, it is said, are way down, and the labels are being pinched. Industry figures indicate a total decline in unit sales of 20 per cent over the past three years, with 10 per cent of that decline occurring in 2002.

That's the fact. To what to attribute that fact is less certain.

Everyone knows that the record labels attribute the shrinkage to the free distribution of music files through peer-to-peer networks such as KaZaA, Grokster, Morpheus, Gnutella, et al. Those who share files by such means generally scoff at such assertions, however, and those who know of a certainty are not absolutely to be trusted because they've come by their knowledge in the service of the content providers.

One who definitely knows is Kevin Moylan, chief information officer for Vidiuz, a digital security company that has monitored KaZaA for the RIAA and the Motion Picture Association. "KaZaA has approximately 188 million users worldwide," Moylan asserts. "That's over a 100 million more than Napster had by the most generous estimates. And that," he adds, "represents a lot of downloads."

Moylan, who is by no means the reactionary one might expect, is quick to admit that the decline in CD sales and the rise in file sharing, in and of itself, does not establish a causal relationship. "But," he remarks, "it is certainly suggestive." And unquestionably within the music industry itself, that suggestion is generally seized upon as a certainty.

Fred von Lohmann, senior staff attorney at the Electronic Frontier, a consumer rights advocacy group that is frequently critical of music industry actions in regard to copyright protection, affects a degree of skepticism. "There's been some slippage of revenues, but you've got to remember that record labels themselves have largely stopped shipping singles. Of course, the unit sales are going to decline."

Michael Goodman, a senior analyst with the Yankee Group who tracks intellectual property issues relating to the entertainment media, goes further, arguing, "there are no objective numbers out there. I don't trust industry figures, though I do believe that file transfers are having an effect on CD sales. The question then becomes what is the correct response. The response of the labels is to try to block or restrict file sharing. Is that the correct response?"

### **What's at Stake for Whom**

Goodman's question is absolutely key. The fact that it elicits little uniformity of response either across or within the affected segments, i.e. content owners, artists, and audiences, indicates that it is likely to continue to be posed for some time to come.

The record labels, as represented by the RIAA, have been largely reactionary to date, responding with legal, legislative, and technological weapons of varying effectiveness.

The principal legal ploys have been lawsuits against file-sharing services on the grounds that they represent copyright infringements and unauthorized distribution of copyrighted materials. Whatever one thinks of the validity of this position, the RIAA has prevailed in most cases, most famously in the case against Napster which was effectively destroyed through litigation. A more recent tactic, exemplified in a civil action on the part of the RIAA against Verizon, has been to cite the Internet

Service Provider for permitting unauthorized distribution to take place over his network and to compel the provider to reveal the identity of offenders. In this too, the RIAA has generally prevailed. The RIAA has also gone after manufacturers

of devices permitting the duplication of files, though less successfully.

The problem for the record labels is that a few high profile cases are not going to end file sharing, since much of it takes place over noncommercial virtual networks like KaZaA. How do you put a network protocol out of business? One answer is proposed legislation like last year's Hollings Bill, the Security Systems and Standardization Act that would impose blocking firmware on any digital device that could be used for file transfers. That bill died in committee and drew heated opposition from the computer industry and consumer electronics manufacturers, but something akin to it is likely to appear in the future.

The third tactic, one that is generally combined with litigation and lobbying, is the one exemplified by software from companies like Vidiuz and Audible Magic, a kind of "spyware" that reads Internet traffic at network peering points and determines its origin, destination, and its content. Transmissions deemed to be in violation of copyright can then be flagged and interdicted. Of course, it might be objected that the file sharer could simply encrypt the file, but Moylan dismisses that tactic. "The sender wants it out in the open, who's gonna be able to read it otherwise? Kids in dorm rooms can hardly administer nationwide encryption key systems."

So is spyware the magic bullet that the labels will use to slay the Morpheus, KaZaA, and Grokster monsters? "I don't think," so says Moylan. "Our approach is effective, but it's also very expensive. I think that the labels should be figuring out how to profit in the peer-to-peer world, not trying to destroy it."

Other technical ploys by the music industry include copy-protected CDs and usage restrictions on authorized downloads. While reasonably effective at thwarting bootlegging, both tend to fail in marketing terms. "Why would I want to buy something I can't duplicate?" asks von Lohmann? "Offer the listener that and I'll guarantee he'll go to KaZaA."

### **The Neglected Artist**

Josh Leopold, a well-known entertainment-industry attorney who represents artists and has litigated on intellectual property issues, certainly believes that file sharing impacts record sales, but refuses to take a strong public stand on the matter and cautions his artists to stay clear of the topic in public statements. "I'm kind of

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## **It's not easy to be objective about downloading of music. Why, even the editor of The Audiophile Voice ....**

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waiting for some kind of resolution," says Leopold. "I'm not speaking out anymore. You see, it's more of an issue with the labels than with the artists. Most artists don't make any money off recordings anyway, it merely supports touring."

Leopold is even more dismissive of authorized downloads from label-supported services like *pressplay* and MusicNet. "There's no profit for the artist in them at all. They're like record clubs."

Goodman takes an even more extreme position on the matter. "Whose fight is this really? When you get right down to it, we're getting to the point where an established artist doesn't really need the record label anymore. If the music release merely supports concerts, and MP3s are becoming the main means of distribution,

what's the function of the label? Where the labels still have a function is in breaking new acts, but there's no reason why that can't be done online. The *launch.com* site does a pretty good job of that now."

And yet neither Goodman nor any of our other respondents is prepared to accept the notion that content should be simply given away over the Internet. The artist, they maintain, has a right to profit from downloads, and, if some authorities are to be believed, might yet profit considerably more from them than from traditional stamped discs.

### **Demand Side – the Consumer**

Any attempt to compensate the artist for file shares will have to enlist the support of the consumer, and yet

# Downloads Go Legit!

While most of the millions of music downloads that take place every month are not authorized by the content owners, a real business in legitimate downloads per profit does exist, and has existed for several years. And indeed its history closely parallels that of free distribution.

The free distribution of music files over the Internet did not begin with Napster, but extends back to the mid nineties when the public Internet was first gaining traction. No one knows who first settled on using the MPEG MP3 standard for compressing files for easy transport, but by the late nineties music file shares had become commonplace on college campuses. By 1998 the record industry had begun to take notice of the practice and attempted to preempt it with services of its own. Of these pioneering efforts, *a2b* was by far the best known, enlisting the support of major labels, but never achieving much acceptance in the market. Another fairly prominent service was *Liquid Audio*, actually an online independent popular music label that competed with the majors. In addition, some artists began distributing single cuts free over the Internet as teasers to stimulate album sales, as well as streaming music from their Websites (streamed multimedia is technically not a download and is difficult to save onto a disk). Other online services such as *MP3.com* inhabited a sort of legal limbo between legitimacy and piracy, alternately courting the labels and incurring their wrath.

In any case, during the late nineties and the first two years of this century nobody made much money from legitimate downloads and the labels appeared to lose interest. Now it is reviving.

Where it differs from the past is that it is driven by the major record retailers as much as the labels. The biggest retailers are reacting to the two-year decline in compact disc sales by forming their own online distribution channels including *Echo* and *Anderson Merchandisers* which recently acquired some of the assets of *Liquid Audio*. Acting on behalf of *Wal-Mart*,

*Anderson's* plan involves downloads on the retailer's premises, a ploy that has been tried before with indifferent success, but *Echo* can be accessed over the Internet with pricing at \$0.99 per cut or \$14.99 per album.

The labels themselves directly support *PressPlan*, *MusicNet* on AOL, *Listen.com's Rhapsody*, *MusicNow* (formerly *Full Audio*), as well as a number of smaller services. The majors all have very deep catalogs, minimally, hundreds of thousands of albums on file, but, in every case, current hits are incompletely represented. Pricing at \$0.99 per cut is becoming standard across the industry.

In order to placate the labels, all of these legit services utilize so-called "tethered downloads," which means that files are copy guarded in various ways to thwart free distribution of the files subsequently — in other words, one doesn't fully own the material. Most of the authorities we interviewed, regardless of their own feelings about free distribution, believe that placing restrictions on downloaded material, severely detracts from its attractiveness to end users. All of these services are too new to allow evaluating their impact, so the validity of such beliefs remains to be seen.

At this juncture, online music services still need to prove themselves in the marketplace. To date, nobody has succeeded with fee-based online music service, whether a major label or a startup seeking to construct a new business model. Some have suggested that perhaps the answer is to offer something better than CD, something with enhanced resolution such as SACD or DVD-A. But with typical broadband connections running only in the hundreds of kilobits, downloading 192/24 could take hours, and the built-in encryption in both standards might pose a problem for those expecting free use subsequently.

In the meantime, it will be interesting to observe the progress of these latest legit efforts. Perhaps the labels have learned something from past failures. Or perhaps not.



no one disputes that the huge majority of file transfers today involve no compensation, direct or otherwise, to the artist. How might that be changed?

"Better online content," suggests Robert Schwartz of the National Recording Rights Coalition. "Emulate DVD with outtakes, alternate takes, additional material."

Moylan takes a slightly different tack. "Better sound and production. Most stuff on the web is highly compressed, poorly edited, and the files themselves haven't been normalized. It's wretched stuff. Surely, we can sell against that."

"Yeah, quality," Goodman agrees, "but the price has to be right, and there can't be any restrictions on subsequent use. Look, commercial online content can make a go of it. Altnet is fairly successful now, and they'd be even more successful if they could get more licensed material."

But one who disagrees is von Lohmann. "I think we need to go to a compulsory licensing model where the ISPs charge flat monthly duplicating fees to their users and the money is divided up by the artists based on CD sales. That ends the problem."

"Completely against every established principle of copyright," objects Leopold. "The artists will never accept it."



"Can't work," objects Goodman. "It's unfair to those with multiple accounts and those who download nothing. It's highly inequitable, though it's often proposed."

So where is there further consensus on a resolution?

Only in acceptance of the view that the labels themselves will be very slow to change and will continue to try to shore up the traditional business model. For that reason, no one is predicting peace any time soon.

## Internet and Broadband Penetration In Asia and the United States

These figures are taken from a published study put together by Asia Network Research, a Korean analyst firm. The study was published at the end of last year. The following percentages refer to total population in each country, *not* households.

### Percentage Of Broadband Users:

Korea: 16.7%  
 Hong Kong: 9%  
 Taiwan: 5.2%  
 USA: 4.1%  
 Europe (mean average): 2.3%  
 Japan: 2.2%

### Internet Penetration Per Unit Population, Irrespective Of Speed Of Connection.

Percentage	Number of Users
Hong Kong: 59%	4,310,000
USA: 58.5%	161,140,000
Korea: 56.6%	24,380,000
Japan: 39.2%	49,720,000
Taiwan: 35.1%	7,820,000

Australia has a 54.38% penetration, and New Zealand has 49.9% penetration.

According to Jonathan Lamy, director of communications for the RIAA, 190 million persons around the world, have downloaded the KaZaA program. He claims to have gotten that figure from a private research firm. How many of them regularly swap files is difficult to determine, however. RIAA says 2.6 billion illicit downloads occur every month, most of them

over KaZaA. My guess is that a small percentage of owners of KaZaA software are responsible for a disproportionate amount of the downloads.

I think the proposition that KaZaA is driving broadband adoption would be very difficult to demonstrate. A substantial number of the DSL lines installed worldwide are for telecommuting, and any file swaps are incidental. Historically, MP3 downloads have occurred where broadband was already in place, i.e. college dorm rooms. The networks were originally put in place to facilitate student research, but were repurposed, so to speak.

I do believe that a lot more porn gets downloaded than music or movie files, but I can't prove it.

Bear in mind that any analyst reports in respect to usage patterns rather than *actual* deployment of broadband are based on highly suspect, statistically very small samples. There's a false precision to most of these published studies. The people who really know are the telephone carriers and the big ISPs because they engineer their networks for given amounts of traffic. But they keep that information pretty close to the vest.

I like to see if Vidiuz has any figures linking KaZaA software ownership to broadband, but I cannot undertake an analyst report on KaZaA traffic volumes or of what percentage of users have broadband access. The only organization that could supply such information is a very large ISP like AOL/Time Warner, and obviously they are not about release such information — the potential liability is simply enormous.



Alfred Fredel



**F**OR ONE MOMENT, imagine that you are born into a royal family. You should have everything at your disposal that a member of the Malian aristocracy is entitled to have with one exception; you were born albino. One would ask, why should that make any difference to anyone? The fact is that in the culture of the Mali

Empire, being an albino was considered bad luck. As a result, Salif Keita was shunned by his family and community. He turned to his childhood memories of the *griots* (a group of traveling bards or cultural ambassadors in African culture) who would come to sing the praises of his family. These individuals

inspired the young Keita, and thus he began a career as a musician.

To begin his career, Salif Keita moved to Bamako, the capital of Mali, where he struggled. He later emigrated to Paris, where he took his place among other stars of popular African music including Manu Dibango, King Sunny Ade, Youssou

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N'Dour and Mory Kante. Filled with the musical influences of his native Africa, Cuba, Haiti and the Arab world as well as western popular music, *Soro*, Keita's first major solo release, created a sensation. The album was accessible to western audiences but maintained its traditional essence. Keita was inspired by the trials and tribulations of everyday life in Mali, along with its lessons, and continues to use these elements as the focal point of his music to this day.

Another milestone for Keita was his recording *Amen* produced by Joe Zawinul of Weather Report. This controversial album included such notable guest artists such as Wayne Shorter, Bill Summers and Carlos Santana and addressed more-contemporary issues in his native Mali, such as the question of democracy both in Mali as well as in the Ivory Coast. Many of the predictions and messages in this album have come to pass, including the overthrow of Moussa Traore in Mali.

So, how does all this information fit in with his current Universal France release? It gives the reader a sense of where Keita had been and how he has evolved as an artist. After his mediocre 1999 electro-

based release *Papa*, Keita took a step back from the Afro-pop style and returned to his roots. *Moffou* is a homecoming of sorts that celebrates traditional sounds of Africa in a largely acoustically based album. He has joined many of Mali's finest traditional instrumentalists with some of the best acoustic players in France. Rocking fiercely with Latin rhythms, this record features Caribbean reggae/calypso beats and hot "jeli" (griot) grooves from long-time associate Kante Manfile.

The album is well recorded and engineered and there are many wonderful sonorities and rhythms offered to the listener. It is obvious that a great deal of attention was paid to the record's sonic details. The voices of the women in the chorus are rich and inviting, almost flawless in their vocal blend.

Keita's skill as a guitarist is featured in three solo performances. Of these three tracks, "Ana Na Ming" has a painful honest mood, where the listener may feel that he has entered into a very private moment in the artist's life. The hard groove of "Madan," filled with a rich fusion of percussion, vocal and stringed instruments has enough energy to keep you moving for the entire

track, a testament to the top-tier musicians amassed for this album. The opening song on the album is simply stunning, bringing with it a romantic, dark and melancholic atmosphere that draws the listener into the fabric of the Latin rhythm that fills the song. From the warm accordion of Benoit Urbain to the sultry vocals of Cesaria Evora, "Yamore," is a song that is balanced well and helps to illustrate Keita's skill as a composer.

In *Moffou*, Keita takes a deep breath and finds himself comfortable and proud of his African heritage. This album is earthy, honest and sincere, and it encourages African people to be proud of their cultural inheritance. It is a recording that is authentically African in nature, with enough complex rhythm and sufficient soul for even the most demanding listener.

Keita is a survivor, who has triumphed over adversity and personal stigma. This album is his best to date and it beckons people to hear the sound of the *moffou* (the simple wind instrument for which the album is named) that enchants the listener as its melodies ride the airwaves.

Highly recommended.

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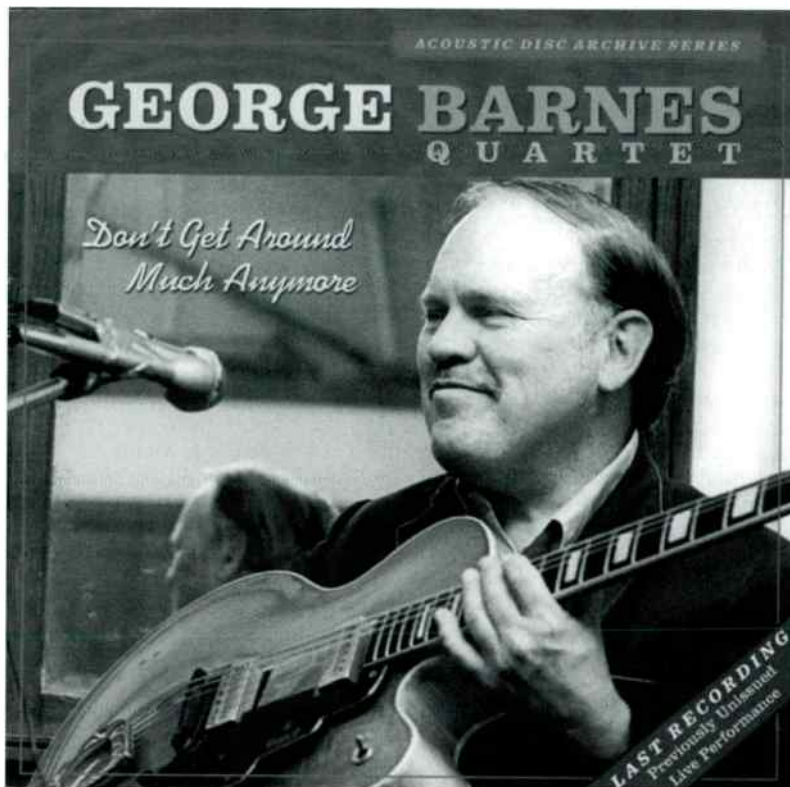
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## Leslie Gourse

# Jazz

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**H**ERE'S AN ALBUM of melodious, vivacious and swinging music led by an upbeat, entertaining, meticulous and gifted guitarist, George Barnes, whose work can enhance your life and obliterate your stresses. One of the good old good ones, as Louis Armstrong would have said, Barnes began playing professionally in 1938. He was never as well known as many of his contemporaries and musical soul mates such as Eddie Lang, Charlie Christian, and Oscar Moore. It's hard to figure out why Barnes wasn't more famous, but he recorded a great deal with blues singers and played in the studios for much of his career. It really doesn't matter now why he wasn't better known. What matters is the great performance he turned in when he recorded this classic album of 14 tunes plus charming patter live at the Willows Theater, Concord, CA, his adopted home town, on July 27, 1977.

This session was previously unreleased; it was his last album. He died about six weeks later in Concord. The songs he chose to play on this well-programmed, excellently paced album show he was firmly rooted in the swing era. Furthermore, the album demonstrates that he played in the vanguard of the guitarists of the 1930s and '40s and could match any of his peers for vitality and virtuosity. He played single-note lines on the electric guitar. When he played with guitarists who supplied him with the chordal foundation, he really shone.

He was born in South Chicago Heights, Illinois on July 17, 1921. Where he first heard about single-note lines or the electric guitar isn't clear. He may have heard Eddie Lang, a great guitarist, Bing Crosby's favorite, playing them in the 1920s. Barnes began playing professionally with Western Swing groups and blues men including Big Bill

the audiophile voice



Bronzy and may have heard single-note lines from them; the blues men were his early early influences. Or he may have heard Oscar Moore playing with the Nat King Cole trio by 1938, or Charlie Christian who become famous in 1940 and '41 for his work with Benny Goodman and whose exciting, influential jam sessions were recorded live at Minton's In Harlem. Barnes's vitality was a match for any of his peers's. Whoever influenced him to play single-note lines, at a time when bebop was beginning to require that guitarists play the way the horn players did, Barnes knew a hip sound when he heard it. He had an adventurous spirit; he may have used a different system of tuning from other guitarists.

The liner notes by his daughter portray a man exuberantly in love with his metier and his audiences, and the music bears out her description. Most of the songs are short and sweet, from the brief, speedy "Fascinating Rhythm," to the uptempo "Why Was I Born?" with long, fluid lines, and the slow, poignant "When Sunny Gets Blue." He doesn't forget to compliment the appreciative audience: "They know what the good stuff is," he says, in his down-to-earth way. He announced "Sweet Georgia Brown" by saying it was the Harlem Globetrotter's warm-up song, "They can't dribble as fast as we play it." The majority of the songs are at fast tempos, with the exceptions of "I May Be Wrong," and "I Can't Get Started, a romantic, slow ballad in the hands of the Barnes quartet. And he keeps thanking the men playing with him, rhythm guitarist Duncan James, bassist Dean Reilly, and drummer Benny Barth, with whom he played a great deal in the late 1970s.

From 1962 to '65, single-note aficionado Barnes teamed up with another great guitarist, Carl Kress, who played sophisticated chords. Barnes then played for a while with Bucky Pizzarelli, then hit his stride in particular in a quartet he co-led with cornetist Ruby Braff from 1973-75. He worked with a variety of other great musicians, such as ultra modern bassist Michael Moore. Barnes's work on this live album equals anything he ever played before. As he aged, he never lost an iota of mastery or delight; his sound remains infectious to this day.

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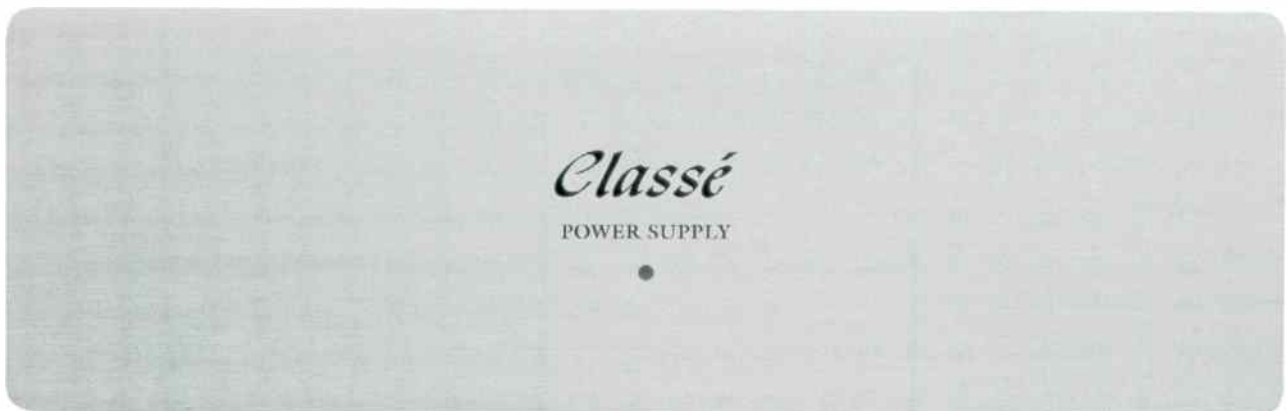
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# Classé CP-65 Line Stage Preamplifier

Dan Pond



**A**ND SO IT WAS that the DR-6 beget the Model Six, which beget the CP-60, which beget the CP-65. Know ye now that I have long ago gone to the marketplace and acquired a Six, and that it was good. And it came to pass that Master TAV said unto me "Hear ye the CP-65," and this I joyfully have done. And it, too, is good. Damn good.

Through the initial release of the CP-60, this genealogy refers to

Classé's top-of-the-line preamplifiers. However, with the release of the Omega series equipment a few years ago, the CP-60 and its direct descendant the CP-65 dropped down a notch among Classé's offerings. Throughout its 20-something years, this Canadian electronics manufacturer has asserted that all their preamplifiers and amplifiers are based on the same circuit concepts, including use of multiple,

small capacitors for power supply filtering stages, adapted as required to achieve different output levels. Successive generations of their equipment exhibit circuit refinements and enhancements in accordance with a continuous improvement process that would make any Harvard Business School graduate proud. Classé has deservedly garnered a reputation for products with build-quality and performance-to-



price ratios able to please all but the skinniest of flints. With the \$5,000 CP-65 — less than half the price of its Omega preamp — Classé seeks to extend this reputation.

I have for many years been a Classé guy (insert your own joke here), with the Model Six preamp and Twenty-five amp comprising the heart of my audio system and serving as the benchmark against which I've assessed other components, both as a consumer and reviewer. Many such components have passed through my ears over the years, but while some bettered our Classé gear in one or more respects, none afforded us —or, at least, none which we could afford afforded us — sufficient performance improvements or increases in musical satisfaction to justify dis-

designed the CP-65 to complement tomorrow's audiophile-grade stereo and home entertainment systems. I am, however, sorry to report that this forward-looking perspective on market demands has also resulted in the elimination of an optional internal phono section, as was available in the -65's predecessors and is still offered in the two preamps lower in current lineup. This is unfortunate from my point of view, both in the global sense for what it may increasingly portend for vinyl lovers and, more narrowly, for the unavailability of Classé's traditionally very fine built-in phono preamplification capabilities in their two top units. Although the power supply for the review unit has a *Phono* power output in tandem with that for *Line*, as of this writing, Classé's plans are to

The cabinets and especially the brushed silver face plates of both the power supply and main unit are satisfyingly hefty, I'm sure as part of Classé's resonance control efforts. This is true as well for the CP-65's circuit boards. The preamplifier and power supply weigh in at 28 and 10 pounds, respectively. The full-function remote — which I was delighted to discover operated perfectly from a position 90 degrees to the side of the unit— is heavy, machined metal. While this is now expected at the CP-65's price point, functionally it seems only to offer the opportunity to "pump iron" while listening and, so, to assuage guilt over being an audiophile couch potato.

The display, which has a black surround that offsets it neatly from



placing the Six/Twenty-Five combo. But my audition of Classé's new two-box, remote-controlled line stage, the CP-65, might prove to be a trial separation that threatens the state of this union.

Like its predecessors, the CP-65 is a true differential design. It has provision for three balanced and three single-ended inputs, and there are two outputs of each type. Additionally, there are single-ended and balanced tape inputs and a single-ended tape out. All balanced jacks are wired with pin 2 hot, and the balanced outputs deliver 6-dB greater gain than their single-ended counterparts. Input impedance is 33 kilohms and the output impedance is a long interconnect-friendly 50 ohms. Bi-polar, J-FET, and MOS-FET transistors are employed in ways said to take advantage of their respective strengths.

New for the CP-65 are future-looking provisions for remote computer control via a RS-232 serial port and inclusion of a "unity gain" circuit which conveys signals through to the output unchanged, thereby referring gain control to, for example, an external multi-channel processor. Classé has clearly

eliminate the former, and for their on-the-drawing board external phono preamp to have its own separate power supply. Finally, over successive generations of its top preamps, Classé has alternately provided and rejected phase-inversion capability. It is the fate of CP-65 owners to do without.

Electrical isolation, including elimination of a.c. line noise and prevention of noise transmission between amplification sections, is said to be a major design feature of the CP-65. Two power supplies are fed from the single transformer: One for the analog signal circuit and another, which requires less regulation and filtering, for the digital display. In addition to use of a separate power supply chassis containing the transformer and providing active pre-regulation, the input and output sockets are completely separated within the main cabinet. The umbilical connecting power supply and preamplifier is fitted with multi-pin, military-style, circular plastic connectors (CPCs) to further enhance isolation. (I think these CPCs, with their symmetrical configuration, need alignment marks or guide pins to aid connecting.)

the silver face plate, can be customized to indicate specific input and output options, for example *SACD* and *Tuner* instead of *Balanced 1* and *Line 1*. The LEDs, which should be legible to most anyone at typical viewing distances, are red, have three remote-controlled intensity levels, and can be turned off completely.

Front panel and remote controls are easily identified and activated. I'm greatly appreciative of the *Mute* function that, when disengaged, ramps the volume up to its former level, thereby dampening the startle effect and thus potentially adding years to my life. Especially pleasant and effective is the smooth-operating, detent-less volume control that seems of Hippocratic — that is, first do no harm — design convention. Full range control is associated with a 0 to 600 display range, with increments of five associated with a single remote-control button press or minimal front-panel control movement, each of which yields a small but discernable difference in volume. (Why 0 - 600 in steps of five was chosen rather than 0 - 120 in single-unit increments remains a mystery. It reminds me of a recent

# NOTES

**Classé CP-65 Line Stage Preamplifier**, \$5,000.00, Classé Audio Inc., 5070 François Cusson, Lachine, Quebec, Canada H8T 1B3; phone 514/636-6384, fax 514/636-14328, website [www.classeaudio.com](http://www.classeaudio.com), e-mail

## Associated Equipment

Immedia RPM-1 turntable and RPM-2 arm, Grado TLZ cartridge, Sony CDP-550 CD player, Classé Six preamplifier and Twenty-five amp, Dunlavy SC-IIIa speakers, tonearm cable by Yamamura, Tara Decade used as digital interconnect, Audiortruth Lapis x3 balanced interconnect, Meitner 25-2-24 speaker cable, Marigo Gen 3 and Classé reference power cords on amp and preamp, respectively, and Monster HTS 2000 surge protector/RF filter. Quad 34 and 405-2 amplification and custom-built 2-way stand mounted speakers are used in the satellite-based video system.

visit to a garden supply center at which a new lawn feed formulation was touted by a large sign proclaiming "Now with more inert ingredients!")

The CP-65's range of volume control makes possible late night listening to the most hot-rodged pop recordings, something our Six and numerous other preamps are not capable of handling very well. More importantly, the resolution at even

low volume levels provides for a musically satisfying experience. For example, the harmonic detail from Michael Hedges' various guitars is breathtaking on the compilation CD *Beyond the Boundaries* (Windham Hill 01934-11612-2), and most of this information is available under "don't wake the (grand) baby" volume constraints. So, too, for Jim Hall's appropriately titled *Textures* (Telarc CD-83402), with the CP-65

delivering wondrous definition of timpani, dumbek, and steel drums in support of Hall's jazz guitar. (I do confess, however, to being unable to identify percussionist Kenny Wollenson's use of goat hooves, regardless of listening level. It is, I suppose, for just such occasions that Classé offers their Omega series gear.)

Of course, with more energetic forms of music — John Baldry's *Rock with the Best* (Hyperion HYCD 296 164) is a particularly enjoyable example — the full impact of electric bass, kick drum and, in Baldry's case baritone sax, may not be realized unless a bit more volume is used. On "When You're Ugly Like Me," for example, the baritone sax is almost a whisper when played at low levels. But with increased volume, it comes forth through the CP-65 as crisp, solid honks that punctuate the music and lyrics very effectively. By comparison, with our Six in line these barblats are much more pronounced and likely to excite both room and visceral resonances. The same is true of the thunderous *pahu* drum on Isreal Kamakawiwo'ole's *Facing Future* (Bigboy BBCD 5901). While I can't be certain of the impact Long

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John and Iz were seeking, I believe the CP-65's tauter low frequency reproduction is more accurate and true to the music and, therefore, in the long run the more satisfying.

To me, such long-term satisfaction is an essential aspect of a quality music reproduction system, and this is among the strongest of the CP-65's suits. Some nominally audiophile components and systems do little more than spotlight themselves or various sonic elements. While this is impressive at a show or on the showroom floor, it almost inevitably leads to equipment turnover or lots of television watching. I found the CP-65's musical presentation effortless, both holistically and in all details, and I never experienced the slightest fatigue (a response to which I'm easily inclined) no matter what kind of recording nor how long the listening session. Make no mistake: While it provides the most graceful of presentations, if Patti Smith or Marianne Faithfull give you a musical slap in the face, the CP-65 will do nothing to soften the blow. But when Holly Cole or Diana Krall whisper sweet nothings, you'll hear and feel every nuance and emotion. Splendid. [Editor's Sigh: Quiver!]







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Though you'll probably need no reminder, let me point out that the performance of most high caliber components is system dependent. Of particular importance here, I found power cords to markedly affect the CP-65's sonic traits and, I suspect, one would find the same with different types and models of interconnects (I used only our AudioTruth Lapis x3 balanced cables). With the stock cord, and after perhaps 50 hours of break-in, images were solid, dynamics robust, and detail impressive. For example, the Japanese instruments, and in particular the 17-string bass koto, on composer Kuniyoshi Sugawara's *Ugetsufu* (Playasound PS 65166) are a thrill to hear. Using the Marigo Gen 3 cord that normally feeds our Twenty-five amp, the sound was quite similar, but each of these characteristics seemed to improve slightly.

But when I hooked up the CP-65 using the Classé "reference" cord from our Six and returned the Marigo to its usual position, a whole new aural picture emerged. Less solid but far more sharply cast images, dynamics a bit less potent, detail still impressive. And now

there was a large infusion of air into the soundstage as well as a strong sense of the space between the instruments. I had the feeling that without having changed my distance to the musicians, I was now closer to and more involved in the music. This is the cable set-up I

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**The CP-65 is a well-made, superb-sounding line stage that should be satisfying to you for years to come.**


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used for most of the review period. So configured, the self-titled and well-recorded CD by the vocal group, The Ritz (*The Ritz*, Denon 33CY-1839) presented stable, properly sized images and a life-like sound quality that was immediate and joyful. You'll want—in fact, need—to audition your -65 with multiple cords and cables to bring out the best in the gear and those sonic traits you prefer to hear.

Another strength is the -65's startlingly fast transient response, evident on myriad recordings ranging from Michael Hedges' solo work on

the aforementioned *Beyond the Boundaries*, through Dick Hyman's jazz ensemble (*From the Age of Swing*, Reference Recordings RR-59CD), to large-scale pieces such as are found on the *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* soundtrack (Sony SK 89347). If the CP-65 preamplifier was any faster in starting and stopping, Classé's attorneys would insist that the owner's manual (an informative and, may I say, *classy* production) include a stern warning that seatbelts be installed on listening chairs.

So, what's to improve? I know it's possible to find units delivering a bit more openness on the top end or soundstage width and depth, but I haven't heard any \$5,000 preamp deliver better overall performance. On the other hand, given the significant sonic improvements obviously possible through power cord swapping, I would like to see a more effective cord provided. (But I do recognize the dilemma that even very fine cords may be swapped by users to provide needed balances or emphases peculiar to individual applications.) Last, I'll bet I'm not the only one who'd like the



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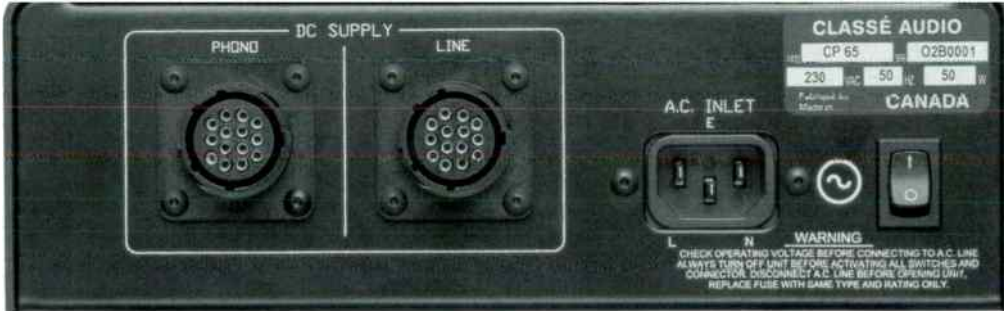
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capability to invert phase, especially from the listening position.

I've had a few highly regarded \$2.5K to \$3K preamps in our system over the past few months and none came close to the CP-65's level of accomplishment. Paying the difference in price between these and a CP-65 would be an easy decision. On the other hand, I have not had the opportunity to hear Classé's \$11K Omega or other top-of-the-line preamplifiers (some of which sport price tags approaching \$20K) in my system. However, I don't believe they can outperform the CP-65 by a corresponding factor of two, three, or more and, given the near-universal *law of diminishing returns*, we should not expect them to. The CP-65 is, therefore, a strong candi-

date to retain Classé's performance-to-price ratio crown, and it certainly sets quite a high bar in competition.

Overall, Classé's CP-65 preamp is a well-made, superb sounding line stage. It offers a neutrality of sound reproduction that makes it difficult to describe, is sensitive to ancillary components/cords/cables, and emphatically puts to rest Classé's earlier reputation for producing warm or dark sounding gear. If you've got *all* of the wherewithal, *and* the remainder of your system is up to the same standard, *and* if hearing goat hooves is really important to you, one of the cost-no-object line stages may be just your thing. But for those whose wherewithal is somewhat less than all, the CP-65 may prove an enormously

satisfying line stage, almost certainly for years to come.

As for me, the decision to replace the Six is a difficult one, even though the CP-65 is in many ways a superior performer and, (I'm embarrassed to say) nearly as important, it is remote controlled. While the build and performance quality of the CP-65 line stage are considerable, for those spinning vinyl so, too, are the convenience and cost savings of a preamp with internal phono section. I'll need to decide soon whether to return a line stage or mail a check to Classé, but you can be sure we'll be delighting in the CP-65 no matter how short or long it stays with us.

Do yourself and your system a favor: hear ye the CP-65.

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# Integra DPS-8.3 SACD/DVD-Audio & DVD Player

John Gatski



**W**ITH AUDIO FORMATS out there aplenty to choose from — Super Audio CD (SACD), DVD Audio, DTS, and Dolby Digital — it's no wonder there is confusion among audiophiles on what format to go with. The ideal solution for a manufacturer is to make a player that handles all the formats, and that is just what the \$1,200 Integra DPS-8.3 does. If you have an audio disc, most likely the DPS-8.3 can play it.

## Features

Integra is a relative new-comer to high-end audio, and the DPS-8.3 is their flagship Compact Disc player. As a certified THX-Ultra DVD video player with 12-bit, 108-MHz video converter performance, the DPS-8.3 offers audio playback in Dolby Digital multi-channel, DVD audio (24-bit, 192-kHz sampling in two channel) in stereo or multi-channel 5.1, DTS in multi-channel 5.1 or stereo, and multi-channel or stereo

*John Gatski, publisher and executive editor for Pro Audio Review magazine, is a regular contributor to The Audiophile Voice.*

SACD. It will also play CD-Rs and MP3 discs.

Physically, the DPS-8.3 is a ruggedly built player with discrete parts and plenty of features. The basic black player has numerous front and back panel features and connections. The full-featured remote duplicates front panel functions and must be used when setting up on-screen audio and video parameters (more on that later).

The disc tray is located in the middle of the player and is easy to access. On the right side of the player, front panel buttons include the requisite *Open/Close*, *Pause*, *Stop*, *Play*, and *Forward/Advance*. Integra also includes a headphone jack with a volume control. The DPS-8.3 has a mini-toggle and menu access buttons for *Basic* setup in case you misplace the remote.

On the left side, the functions include the power button and a *Video Circuit Off* feature for those who believe that video noise can degrade audio performance in a combo player (I see this feature more and more in premium players). There also is a *CD Direct* fea-

ture that allows bypass of the ancillary audio paths for better PCM 16-bit playback quality.

Around back are the usual array of output jacks. The audio jacks include two sets of stereo RCA outputs, front, center, surround and subwoofer RCA outputs, a second set of jacks for a Dolby EX surround system, plus two Toslink and one coax digital audio outputs.

Video jacks, lest you forget the DPS-8.3 is a high-end video player as well, include two sets of component video jacks (RCA and BNC), two S-video, and two composite jacks. A RS-232 port allows for turn-on control from other devices. For commercial and fixed installations where remote startup is required, Integra smartly made the line trigger capable of turning on other Integra audio/video devices via the 12V trigger-out jack. Thus, the unit could be right at home, not only in a normal living room rack, but a bar, board room, etc. Nice job, Integra.

There are also jacks for an external infrared remote sensor in places where the remote cannot see the front panel sensor.



## Set-Up

Although the Integra DPS-8.3 is an audiophile CD player in its audio capability, it is a DVD player with much of its set up and operability based in the video realm. That means that if you want a proper set up, you must hook it up to a video monitor. If you want to use the features for analog out, especially the multi-channel SACD or DVD audio output, you cannot set it up without seeing the on-screen menus. The front panel letter block does not give you quite enough information to be confident about your setup.

Activating the *Audio 1* menu, allows the set up of two- or 5.1-channel analog output, and Dolby Digital, DTS, M-PEG (MP3) or linear PCM via the digital output. Though the preliminary owner's manual said the DPS-8.3 does not decode DTS, it will actually handle that format. Thus, if you play a DTS DVD and want to hear the DTS soundtrack, you don't need to feed an external decoder. Another option is to select the DTS-to-PCM option in the *Audio 1* window; it will convert the soundtrack to stereo linear PCM, so you can at least listen to the DTS in stereo. The DPS-8.3 will also do the same with Dolby Digital soundtracks in that they can be converted to stereo linear PCM and output from the digital out jack.

The *Audio 1* menu also requires you to set the SACD channel area. The factory default is two-channel. Thus, if you are going to listen to multi-channel SACDs you will have to enable that option from the menu.

The *Linear PCM Output* menu item is important if you are outputting audio to an external digital converter. If you enable the 96-kHz compatibility feature by selecting *Yes* in the setup menu, the player is capable of digital output of 24-bit, 96-kHz audio. The digital default sampling frequency is set to 96 kHz. If you select *Down Sample*, only 48-kHz audio will be output, and it will not sound as good if you are trying to play the high resolution DVD-Audio discs through an external converter.

The DPS-8.3 will not digitally output multi-channel DVD-Audio; output from the digital-out jack is stereo only. Also, if you play a 176-kHz or 192-kHz sampled DVD-A

disc, it will be down-sampled to 96 kHz or lower frequencies, and it may not play at all if it is copy protected. Yeah, I know, this DVD-A stuff sure is complicated.

SACD is much simpler in that it is only output from the analog jacks. However, to access the SACD's multitrack playback, if it has one, you must select that option from the menu, otherwise, only the stereo soundtrack will play as a default.

Other *Audio 1* menu items include the option to disable the digital output of the player.

The *Audio 2* menu includes selection of two-channel or 5.1-channel playback through the ana-

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## If you want to play both SACD and DVD-A, check out Integra's great 8.3!

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log outputs, adjustments for the 5.1 speaker set up (small, large or no speaker for L, C, R, RS and LS and subwoofer), test tones and gain adjustment, and delay for each channel.

Although I will not go into the video setup in detail, I did do a setup in order to ascertain video quality for DVD movies, and these setup menus are similar to other DVD players I have used.

My audio setup parameters included stereo and multi-channel SACD and DVD-A as well as CDs. Equipment used in the evaluation included a Bryston 14B SST stereo amplifier (two-channel playback), Parasound HCA-2003 three-channel amplifier (multi-channel playback), Dynaco ST-200 II (rear-surround amp), Legacy High Current preamp (two-channel playback), Rogue Audio Model 99 tube preamp (two-channel playback), Sunfire Cinema Grand III surround preamp, Sony SCD-777ES and C555ES SACD players, Panasonic DVD RP-91 DVD Audio player, Bel Canto DAC

2 24-bit, 192-kHz up-sampling converter, Legacy Classic II ribbon monitors (left and right front), Legacy Silver Screen ribbon monitor (center), Legacy Studio speakers (left and right surrounds) Alpha-Core solid-silver interconnects and speaker cables, and Alpha-Core power conditioner. I sampled a fair number of SACDs, quite a few DVD-As, several CDs as well as some movies for DVD-video. Considering the features, the DPS-8.3 was easy to set up and use.

First up was SACD playback. I put in a jazz title from Anthony Wilson's Trio *Our Gang* (Groove Note-10008-3), one of my favorite SACDs. The live-to-two track recording captures a jazz guitar, drums and Hammond B-3 in all their analog glory. This recording is just amazingly natural on a good player. My reference Sony SCD-777ES is about as good as I have heard it, but the DPS-

8.3 sounded pretty darn good as well. It did not quite have the sparkle of the Sony, but the Integra may have been a touch smoother.

On a DMP SACD release, Steve Davis's *Quality of Silence*, the DPS-8.3 was very smooth on the cymbals, and the bass was tight and controlled. Again, the word smoothness comes to mind to describe this player. No hint of harshness at all. Through a number of SACDs, the smooth characteristic was always confirmed. Imaging was quite convincing as well, with plenty of depth and space. All of my stereo preamps showed off the Integra in a favorable light.

In two-channel DVD-A playback at 24-bit, 96-kHz resolution, I thought the DPS-8.3 had a bit more sparkle than the SACD playback. My reissues of Fleetwood Mac *Rumours* and George Benson's *Breezin'* sounded really nice with extra width of soundstage you do not get from 16-bit. Its sound was close to my reference DVD-A player, Panasonic DVD-RP91.

## NOTES

**Integra DPS-8.3 SACD/DVD Audio/DVD Player, \$1,299.00.** Integra, 18 Park Way, Upper Saddle River, NJ 07458; phone 201/785-2600; fax 201/785-2650; website [www.integrahometheater.com](http://www.integrahometheater.com).

Speaking of DVD-A, with the inclusion of multiple soundtracks including Dolby Digital (for DVD video player compatibility), stereo at 24-bit, 192-kHz, and 5.1-channel at 24-bit, 96-kHz, you will be lost without the video screen to tell which soundtrack, or "Group," you are accessing.

On all my DVD-As, if I put in the disc and pushed *Play*, the player defaulted to the 5.1 24-bit, 96-kHz sound track, or "Group 1." And

since I was listening in stereo, the machine opted to downmix the multi-channel tracks, contained in "Group 1," into a stereo mix. This, mind you, is not the high-resolution discrete stereo mix, but the machine's downmixed version of the tracks, a pale imitation compared to the real stereo mix, which is "Group 2." The 5.1 downmixed track level was lower, and the imaging was not as good as the discrete stereo track.

However, once I figured out that "Group 1" was multi-channel and "Group 2" was stereo, I knew to select the proper group soundtrack that I desired in advance of pushing *Play*. If you want the best-sounding stereo, choose "Group 2."

In the multi-channel modes of SACD and DVD-A, the sound was good, but some of the mixes are an acquired taste. The new mixes (and remixes of old titles) in surround can be awesome, check out Tom Jung's *Grace BIV*, an a cappella gospel recording with just the right ambience in the rear channels.

While the DPS-8.3 does offer DTS output, I didn't spend any time with it, as I prefer the sound of SACD or DVD-Audio.

However, other recordings I have heard are a mixed bag with incessant panning and instruments localized in the back channels that do not sound natural at all. It is not the fault of the player, but the sound mixer. Properly recorded and mixed high-resolution multi-channel performances can be really convincing.

### Conclusion

Overall, I liked the ease of use, the fact that the Integra DPS-8.3 supports SACD and DVD-A, and its rugged build for home or commercial installations. And kudos for the numerous video adjustments the DPS-8.3 includes. You can customize the picture to your heart's content.

In my opinion, the Integra's 12-bit, progressive-scan picture quality can be tweaked to pretty good video with the best DVDs. However, I thought it was a tick or two behind the quality of the new Sony NS999ES DVD/SACD player with 14-bit video. Of course, the Sony does not offer DVD-A.

The only trouble I had with the DPS-8.3 was with the remote. The toggle function often would not maneuver to the on-screen icons very easily. It was not precise enough, making me choose the wrong menu item many times. It could be, however, the difficulty was with this particular remote.

In any case, the Integra DPS 8.3 is high-quality, almost all-in-one player that features the two state-of-the-art high resolution audio playback formats, SACD and DVD-A. Those looking for a multi-player should check out this player. You can't go wrong.

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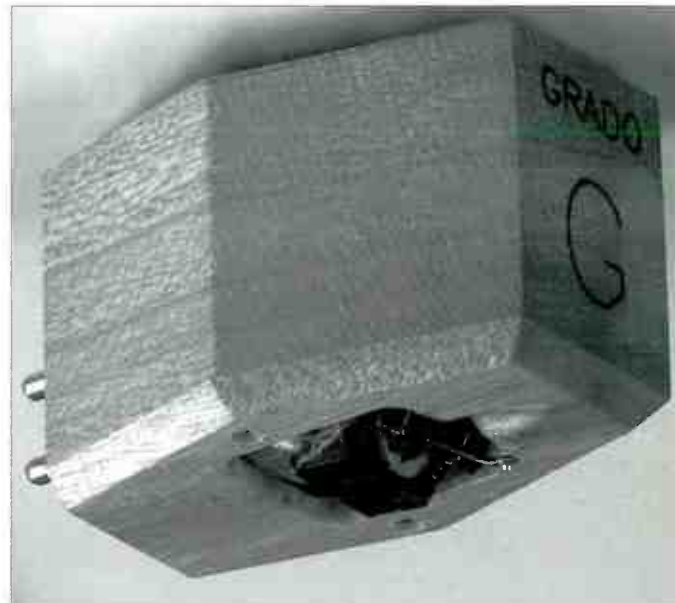
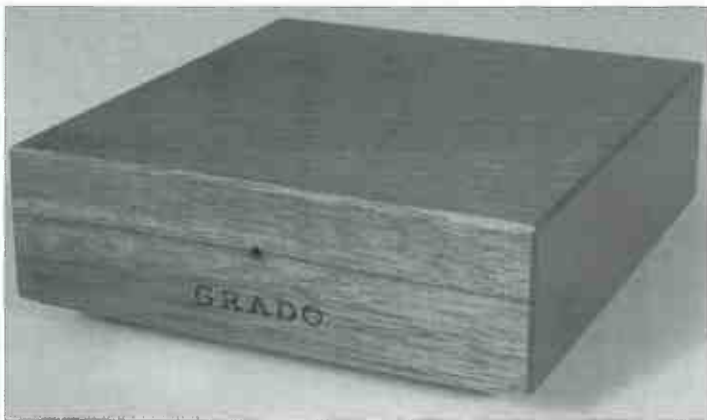
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# The Grado Statement Sonata Phono Cartridge and PH-1 Phono Preamp

Anthony H. Cordesman



**T**HERE AREN'T MANY dynasties in high-end audio, particularly ones that extend back the vast eons to its founding days in the 1950s. The Grado folks, however, have been present since the very beginning and Father Joe has been a leader in phono cartridge development for roughly half a century. It shouldn't be surprising, therefore, that I turned

to the Grado firm while looking for an affordable path to reference quality analog sound. Companies like Shure may have an equally distinguished history, but no company I know of has the same lineage in terms of owner-designers from the same family refining their product over a period of decades. Koetsu is the only potential rival I can think

of, and it is a much younger (not to mention more expensive) dynasty.

The combination of the Grado Statement Sonata cartridge and PH-1 phono preamp also just happened to exactly meet the \$1,000 limit I currently define as "affordable." I grant you that this meaning of "affordable" is also one that could only apply to high-end audio. There

also are much cheaper approaches to entry-level analog. Phono preamps from Creek, Musical Fidelity, Rega, and Sumiko, for example, cost substantially less than the \$500 list of Grado's PH-1. You also do not need to spend \$500 for the Statement Sonata phono cartridge, since Grado sells a range of cartridge models that begin at all of \$40.00. And don't you even begin to think that the cheapest Grado can't be particularly good. It is! The fact is, however, that the Statement Sonata cartridge and PH-1 phono preamp make a superb combination, they are easy to set up, and they produce some of the best sound around. I also feel it will be of more than passing importance to an audiophile shopping in this price range that the Statement Sonata and PH-1 will really produce excellent sound and also will work well in virtually any properly set up tone-arm and turntable.

One of the great joys of analog *should* be that there are at least as many different "voices" to cartridges as there are to musical instruments and speakers, and that you can match the sound of a cartridge to your particular taste in sound. I don't know, however, of many dealers today who will give you the chance to audition different cartridges, or who can explain the interface problems with given phono preamps and tonearms. I'd like to think there was a true analog specialist within driving range of every reader's home, but few dealers really specialize in analog sound these days. And worse, manufacturers tell me far too many horror stories about dealers who provide no auditions or ones with badly set up gear, and then — perhaps worse — try to sell the product with no or wrong set up.

This doesn't mean that the Grado Statement Sonata cartridge and PH-1 are not "bullet proof." They can be set up incorrectly and they can produce hum in some combinations of tone-arm and turntable. However, they are far more system tolerant than most such combinations.

For obvious reasons, the PH-1 phono preamp and Statement Sonata are an exact match in terms of loading and gain. The Sonata Statement is less simple to set up and handle than the PH-1, but is very practical and reliable for any

audiophile willing to provide a minimum of care. Even though the Sonata has a low 0.5-mV output more common to moving-coil cartridges than moving-magnet types, I had no hum problems with a variety of Audioquest, Triplaner, and VPI tone-arms, and tracking was good to very good with tracking force set at 1.5 to 1.7 grams, even with warped records.

The cartridge body of the Sonata is shaped in ways that allow easy visual alignment of vertical azimuth and the vertical tracking angle. Alignment using the cartridge body produced good results in both areas and was consistent with both a new and a broken-in cartridge. This is not true of far too many of today's cartridges.

Some care is needed in mounting and handling the cartridge. The Statement Sonata does not have the user changeable stylus of older Grados. It has a wood body that matches the PH-1's case, but this body only partially protects the open mechanism and stylus assembly, and this assembly is not as robust as the ones in older Grados. It uses a much smaller, modified four-piece OTL cantilever technology to achieve a 10 per cent tip-mass reduction over the Grado Prestige

series. As a result, Grado's Statement Sonata does need careful handling while it's being mounted in the tonearm.

However, the Statement Sonata does not require exceptional care once mounted. The specially designed nude elliptical-diamond stylus in the Sonata is relatively tolerant to different set-ups and groove variations, but still produces an immense amount of natural musical detail. Far too many cartridges with complex stylus shapes produce excess treble energy or increased record noise or have trouble with slightly warped or worn records. The Statement Sonata lowers smoothly into the groove. The cartridge does not produce any of the jitter as it is first lowered into the groove or goes into the lead-out groove at the end of the record that some older Grados did, and the cartridge body rides safely above the record even with warped records.

In short, be careful to protect the stylus assembly during set up, pay strict attention to the cartridge and tone-arm mounting instructions, and provide proper grounding of the phono preamp and tone arm. Be reasonably smart about lowering and raising the cartridge while playing records, and you have a car-

## NOTES

**Grado Statement Sonata Phono Cartridge**, \$500.00, and **Grado PH-1 Phono Preamp**, \$500.00, Grado Laboratories, 4614 Seventh Ave., New York, New York 11220; phone 718/435-5340, website [www.gradolabs.com/frameset\\_main.htm](http://www.gradolabs.com/frameset_main.htm).

### Associated Equipment

*Downstairs Audio Reference Speaker System:* Van den Hul Black Beauty, Sumiko Celebration, and Koetsu Onyx cartridges; VPI TNT turntable and HWJr 12.5 tone-arm; Sony 777ES SACD player and transport; Mark Levinson 360S D/A Converter; Pass Xono phono preamp; Pass X0 stereo preamp; Pass X600 power amplifiers; Dynaudio Evidence Temptation Speakers; Kimber XL and Transparent Audio Reference XL interconnects and speaker cables.

*Upstairs Audio Reference Speaker System:* Audio Alchemy, PS Audio, and Pioneer CD/DVD transports; VPI TNT Aries Scout turntable and HWJr 9 tone-arm; Sony 777ES SACD player; McIntosh MR-71 tuner; Krell phono preamp; Pass X1 stereo preamp; Krell MDA300 power amplifiers and custom-rebuilt modification of McIntosh tube amplifier; Thiel 7.2 speakers, and Discovery Cable and Kimber XL interconnects and speaker cables.



tridge that should survive quite handily for years.

## Sonics

As for the sound of the Grado Statement Sonata cartridge and PH-1 phono preamp, I was not surprised to get excellent sonic results for the money. Grado has always delivered in this respect. I was surprised, however, by the improvement in sonic nuances that the Statement Sonata cartridge made over the Grados I've auditioned in past.

I expect superb midrange performance with a Grado product. Grado has been providing this for its entire existence. In the past, however, this superb midrange has come at the price of deep bass and upper octaves that weren't quite as tight and clean as the midrange. The result has been a rich, but slightly imbalanced sound — similar in many ways to older tube preamps and amplifiers.

Grado also is basically a moving-magnet design and this has had another kind of sonic price tag. Joe Grado (the current President John Grado's uncle) is one of the inventors of the moving-coil cartridge, but he always felt that moving coils were too resonant and had an artificial life that only came from upper octave peaks and ringing. He also was reluctant to experiment with small, fragile cantilevers and stylus shapes. There is no question that Joe Grado was right in many respects. Far too many moving coils had — and have — a rising top end that adds artificial "life" to the music as well as produces added groove

noise. Even today, many cartridges seem to have cantilever assemblies that are far too fragile and either fail or change the sound of the cartridge with time.

At the same time, the older Grados tended to sound very

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## Grado's Statement Sonata cartridge is a hybrid, using some items of moving-coil design and some from their flux-bridge design.

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smooth but lack the life and detail of the best moving coils. They always sounded a bit over-controlled and dull to me. They had air but they did not keep up with the steady improvement in the best moving coils, and their upper octaves never quite had the level of musical energy they should. Cartridge loading was also a problem. High impedance loading gave the Grados more life, but at the expense of control and clean sound. Low impedance loading made them sound smoother but that also dulled them.

The Statement Sonata and PH-1 combination are a different story in every respect. The deep bass is far better in terms of power, control, and detail. The sound of organ music is excellent even with my most demanding old Crystal direct-to-disc LPs. The same is true of the bass drums on my old Telarc demo records, and the god-awful cannons at the climax of the Telarc *1812*. The Sonata even does a very good

job in resolving the loudest, bass-heavy passages in the Telarc Saint Saen's *Third Symphony*, which is the LP from hell in terms of complex bass passages.

More importantly, the Sonata does a great job in reproducing the bass with classic jazz, bass guitar, and ordinary symphonic music. It also really gets down into the detail of the rhythm line in remasterings of old rock. (Try Creedence Clearwater Revival's *Chronicle*, Fantasy Stereo CCR-2). There also seemed to be a natural synergy between the Statement Sonata and PH-1. I got

slightly better bass using the PH-1 than using my much more expensive Krell and Pass phono preamps — something that was not true when I used the PH-1 with other brands of cartridges. Perhaps it's a matter of a better match in cartridge loading. In any case you get very, very good bass for the money.

Yes, the midrange was excellent. It was more detailed than was the case with my older Grado cartridges, but was still rich, sweet, and compelling. Maybe still just a touch warm, but just a touch. I'd call it seductive rather than colored, and the sound staging in the midrange was a real joy. I don't know of any moving coils that do not cost more for the cartridge alone than the Grado Statement Sonata and PH-1 combined, that do as good a job of providing an open, three dimensional, and stable sound stage. And, the sound stage does not degrade with complex musical material. (There's excellent reproduction of the sound stage in the complex Bach and Telemann chamber music in *German Chamber Music*, Accent 8019.) My reference van den Hul does do better, but the Grado really provides an outstanding sound stage for the money.

The upper octaves of the Sonata Statement were also more extended, more open, and had more air than older Grados. I did not measure the frequency response in detail — I've learned the hard way that such measurements rarely correlate to what I hear. The upper octaves of the Grado Sonata did, however, extend to the limits of my test records and sounded very smooth. More important, there was no hint of glare or excess energy, but there

## Cartridge Specs

Frequency Response: 10-60,000 Hz.  
Channel Separation: 40 dB at 1 kHz.  
Average Separation: 30 dB from 10 to 30,000 Hz.  
Input Load Impedance: 47 kilohms.  
Output: 5 mV at 1-kHz, 5 cm/sec.  
Recommended Tracking Force: 1.5 grams.  
Stylus Type: Elliptical.  
Inductance: 2 mH.  
Resistance: 2 ohms.  
Compliance: 20.  
Stylus Replacement: Factory.  
Weight: 7 grams.

was a lot of upper octave detail and air. (Very good results with a special pressing of the L.A.4's *Watch What Happens*, Concord Jazz CJ63, and *Direct Disc Recording* by Charlie Byrd, Crystal, 8002).

The upper octaves of the Sonata Statement and PH-1 did have limits. Some expensive moving coils do a better job in the upper octaves, and my Krell and Pass phono preamps did outperform the PH-1 in this region even when I drove the PH-1 with the Sonata. At the same time, the upper octaves of the Statement Sonata and PH-1 combined with the midrange to produce a very nice illusion of natural mid to mid-rear hall sound. If you like live music — which has an amazing lack of the high frequency energy common on virtually all modern recordings — you will find the Grado's upper octaves do a very good job of matching musical reality. If you want to make the sound of LPs have the same tendency towards upper octave glare as most CDs, this isn't the combination for you.

As for the issue of musical life and dynamic excitement, the

Statement Sonata and PH-1 do very well indeed. You will not hear any of the false excitement or energy that comes from the upper octave peaks and resonance in many — if not most — moving coils. You will hear more sound stage life than in older Grados, more natural life in

reproduced by a moving coil. It is clear that something is happening with such a cartridge that is more a matter of exciting coloration than accuracy. Ironically, this coloration is particularly common with moving-coil cartridges that use very exotic styluses and cantilevers, have very low outputs, and are extremely expensive. In general, the more you pay, the more colored and exotic the sound tends to get.

If you want to carry out comparative listening on your own, I have found Sumiko and van den Hul cartridges to provide some of the best moving-coil sound around, and both have moving-coil models in the same general price range as the Grado Statement Sonata. At the same time, it should be clear that the Grado dynasty has gotten better with time, and the Statement Sonata and PH-1 are a remarkably life-like and musical combination. (Each, incidentally, also works very well indeed on its own.) I suspect that few "affordable" combinations in anything like their price range are as free of listening fatigue, and offer as musically natural a sound. Very nice indeed!

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### **A true audio dynasty, the Grados have always offered sonic bargains.**

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solo instruments, more sound stage life and excitement in live recordings, and a more three dimensional excitement to those recordings that have both depth and natural musical energy.

I would argue that the very best moving coils still have more apparent "life" and dynamic energy than the Sonata. I've done a lot of comparative listening in past years to moving-coil cartridges and direct copies of the master tape used to make the record. Most of the time, the tape does have more life and energy than an LP offers when

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# *Anthem TLP1 Preamp-Tuner and PVA-1 Amp*

James T. Frane



CANADA'S SONIC FRONTIERS offers a terrific bargain for your musical enjoyment with two solid-state units from their Anthem line, the TLP1 preamp-tuner and the 125-watt stereo PVA-2 power amplifier. The complete Anthem line offers another preamp tuner with a video processor as well as a multi-channel power amplifier of higher power output. All Anthem units come with black chassis and your choice of silver or black front panels. The TLP1 preamp-tuner and the PVA-2 power amplifier reviewed here came with the silver front that I found to be an enjoyable visual change of pace, contrasting nicely with my equipment.

## **TLP1 Preamp-Tuner**

The TLP1 has an information display window that is a half-inch tall by four inches long in the center of the front panel. There's one large knob (the master control) to the right, and many other function buttons spread across the front, 24 in all. From left to right (some are in rows above others), they are:

Functions: CD, Tape, FM-AM, DVD, VCR, Sat-Aux, and Record. You can listen to one source while recording another. To select a record path, press the Record button followed by the Source (within 3 seconds).

Station preset buttons 1-6. There are 18 FM and 6 AM stations. As

there are only six buttons, one pushes the FM-AM button to access each set of six. Stations can be stored during scanning.

Seek: Radio stations can be selected manually by turning the master control or using the seek button. Holding the Seek button in briefly will sample each station for a few seconds. Pressing the button again will stop scanning at the current station.

Balance/Display: Push this button to show the status of balance or the display brightness, which can then be controlled by the master control knob. Push it once to control balance or twice for display brightness.

Bass, Treble, Bypass: Select Bass or Treble buttons to allow adjustment with the master control. The Bypass button circumvents the tone controls entirely.

Mute silences the output.

Contour: When turned on, Contour adds graduated increases of bass and treble as the sound level is lowered below the -20 dB setting in order to compensate for the ear's reduced sensitivity at low levels.

Tune turns the master control into an AM-FM tuning knob.

ST-HB-MN selects FM reception as stereo, high blend, or monaural to provide better reception on weak stations.

Power turns the unit on and off.

The front panel also contains a headphone jack and indicator LEDs for source selection buttons, contour, and power. Plugging headphones into the jack mutes the output to the speakers. On first use, the volume of each input can be separately adjusted to equalize sound levels when changing sources. This is a very handy feature that is lacking on most preamps I've seen.

The manual cautions against using a power line conditioner with the TLP1 because of possible incompatibilities. In addition, it's not required as the TLP1 power supply includes filtering and voltage regulation. The detachable power cord has two conductors (no ground) and a reversible two-prong plug.

The master control knob is detented and feels notchy as you rotate it. In the "volume" adjust mode, each detent is a half dB change in volume. You can make endless rotations of the knob, as there are no stops.

The back panel has five pairs of gold-plated RCA jacks for source inputs that correspond to the front panel selection switches, plus spring-loaded AM and coax FM antenna connections. There are also six pairs of outputs. From the left, the first pair is a fixed line level output for tape deck or VCR. The second pair is labeled "Zone 2" allowing the sources connected to the preamp to be routed by wiring to another room. The following four pairs of outputs are for power amps; one pair each for subwoofer low pass or full range, and a second set

for power amp high pass or full range.

The battery-powered (2 AA cells) remote control furnished with the TLP1 repeats all of the front panel controls. As this is a universal remote, its actions must be directed to the proper item of equipment

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## This winning combination of matched gear may be impossible to beat at its price point.

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before the action is selected. For example, to execute a command on the DVD player in the system, DVD must first be selected, followed by the desired action. Directions for setting up the remote to operate different components are included. The 8¼-inch long by 2¼-inch wide black plastic remote has a soft rubberized finish reminiscent of suede and 51 buttons in groups of three and four across. The remote worked from any angle in front of the preamp or to its side. The remote is impressively complete and responsive. Actions are executed with a few milliseconds delay as the command is processed. On the back of the TLP1, there is a relay trigger connection that can be wired to another component, such as a power amp, with a like feature to enable the TLP1 to turn it on and off. There is an infrared receiver connection to allow using the remote from another room. To accomplish this, a repeater is installed in the room and wired to this connection.

The well-written 27-page TLP1 owners manual is one of the most complete I've seen. Explanations and illustrations are clear and complete. As this is a preamp with many more features than I usually encounter, I was pleased to find that the accuracy and clarity of these instructions went a long way towards minimizing frustrations. The logical design of the TLP1 allows one to install and operate it without a glance at the instructions, but reading them will help a person take advantage of its many features.

### PVA-2 Power Amplifier

The PVA-2 is designed to match the TLP1 aesthetically, although it is

taller and has only a power button and an LED on the front. The LED is green when the amp is on—and red when the amp is on standby in either the trigger- or auto-on mode. Instructions strongly suggest a minimum of 12-inches free space above the amp for adequate cooling.

Substantial internal heat sinks are vented through generous slots in the top of the cover. I installed the PVA-2 on top of a cabinet with about a foot of space above it and open space all around; it became only slightly warm to the touch during operation. The

detachable power cord has a polarized two-blade plug (one blade wider than the other) with no ground wire. This is the only power amp I recall seeing very recently that didn't use a three-blade, grounded plug.

The back of the amp has jacks for trigger input (see the description for the TLP1 above), and a selector switch for the "on" modes. They are:

Manual-On: The amp is turned on and off by the front panel push-button.

Trigger-On: This is a 5 to 24 volt a.c. or d.c. input to allow remote on and off switching from another component.

Auto-On: A mode where the amp turns on when it senses an input signal. With this mode, the front power button is left on.

### Listening To The Pair

Tuner Performance: I compared the number and quality of the FM stations received by my 1986 vintage Denon and the TLP1 using a yagi-type directional FM antenna aimed toward San Francisco and Berkeley. The Denon found 24 good stations (good stereo reception), 6 fair (listenable in mono), and 10 poor (listenable in mono with some static). The TLP1 found 21 good, 6 fair and 5 poor stations. The FM threshold on the TLP1 was a bit higher than that of the Denon, so that weaker stations were muted. The sound quality of both tuners on stations giving good stereo reception was about the same. The high blend and monaural switches for FM improved a weak station's reception.

All of the great features imaginable would be of little use in a pre-amp-tuner that didn't have good



sound, but it was easy to enjoy the TLP1 right out of the box. I suspect others had used the review unit as someone seemed to have desired a +6 dB setting for the treble, but that was easily changed. I used a wide variety of music to audition the TLP1 and its PVA-2mate.

My reference Bryston preamp had some better sonic attributes than the TLP1, but this didn't surprise me, given the fact the Bryston is almost twice the price of the TLP1 and PVA 2 combined. The following comparisons were made with the TLP1 or the Bryston paired with the Anthem PVA 2 power amp. Levels were matched. On *The Kirby Stone Touch* by The Kirby Stone Four LP (Columbia CS 8164), the performers gained their own distinct locations on a stage of increased depth with the Bryston, attributes that were not as evident with the TLP1. They seemed to be in the room just behind the speakers. On Dave McKenna's *Giant Strides* (Concord Jazz CCD-4099), an album that tends toward a slightly edgy sound, "Windsong" and "Dave's Blues" were a bit mellower with an added bass extension on the Bryston. Diana Krall's voice and piano on "Let's Fall In Love", "I Love Being Here With You", and "The Look of Love" from her *Live In Paris* album (Verve 440 065 109-2) was slightly shallower and more recessed on the TLP1, and lacked the depth and warmth it had the Bryston. With the Anthem, there was the very slightest of added edge to her voice and the instruments.

I listened to Beethoven's Symphony No. 3 in E flat major

(Eroica), performed by The Met Orchestra conducted by James Levine (Deutsche Grammophon D 105753) and Schubert's Symphony No. 8 (Unfinished) from the same CD. Both had more of the sound and sense of size of the concert hall and the width and depth of the orchestra with the Bryston. Switching to late '60s rock, "My Best Friend" and other cuts from Jefferson Airplane's *Surrealistic Pillow* (RCA PCD13766) extended to the outsides of the speakers and had more front-to-back depth and layering, as well as increased bass warmth on the Bryston compared to the TLP1. "Because of You" from The Essential Tony Bennett (RPM/Columbia/Legacy C2K 86634) was a little wider, deeper and just the smallest bit mellower with the Bryston. "I Left My Heart in San Francisco" has excess sibilance on this album, which didn't sound great with the Bryston, but was too strident on the Anthem.

When I tried the Anthem preamp with my Parasound power amp of similar power output, I was unable to detect any differences. Both had plenty of power margin and handled dynamics well. I auditioned this combination with different albums, including *Jazz At The Pawnshop* (Prophone PRCD 7778) and Vince Guaraldi's Greatest Hits (Fantasy FCD-7706-2). My experience has been that power amplifiers of similar types and power ratings that are used within their output limits have sounded the same in my system. Sometimes, it takes a little more or less preamp output to drive a given power amp, which results in

different speaker volume with the same volume control setting.

## TLP1 Summary

I listened to FM, records, and CDs of many ages and types of music recorded in venues ranging from studios through clubs to concert halls. There were differences in the sound of the Anthem TLP1 and the Bryston preamps. The considerably more expensive Bryston sound had, in general, more stage depth, front-to-back layering, separation of performers, width and a little more warmth. The TLP1 was still quite enjoyable for listening, and stood up very well in such a comparison. There was no audible crosstalk between sources. Coupled with its fine AM-FM tuner, with myriad adjustments and memory features, as well as a fine and fully functional remote control, it is the best sonic bargain I've yet to find. Within its price range, the Anthem TLP1 is the best preamp I have yet had the pleasure to review.

## PVA-2 Summary

This power amp performed flawlessly. There was no operational noise, and no turn-on or -off thumps or other anomalies. I found the binding posts to be easy to use and I could obtain and maintain tight connections to spade lugs on speaker cable. The posts also accept banana plugs. Both the input jacks and output posts are widely separated, a feature I applaud. I have found speaker connections too closely spaced, making it a challenge to prevent shorts. The power output was more than adequate for my speakers, which are on the more sensitive side, and my listening habits, which do not exceed unamplified live levels. If you have speakers of low sensitivity or like to listen at high levels or fill a very large room, you may require more power. The amp was always cool running, and caused no problems when stacked on top of the TLP1.

## Overall Summary

This is a winning combination of matched equipment, but they each performed well as separate components. I found them both aesthetically pleasing, and it's nice to have a choice of silver or black faceplates. I would be hard-pressed to come up with a superior alternative combo or separates at their prices.

# NOTES

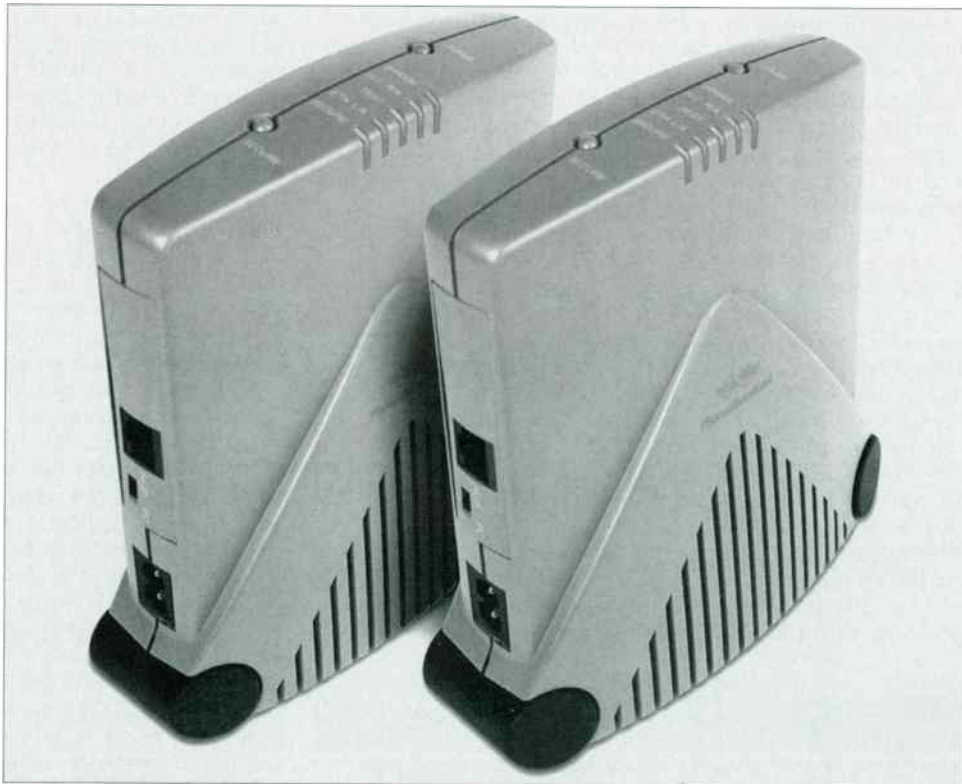
**Anthem TLP1 preamp-tuner**, \$699.00, and **Anthem PVA-2**, \$649.00. Anthem, c/o Audio Stream, P.O. Box 2410, Niagara Falls, NY 14302; 905/632-0180; fax 905/632-0183.

### Associated Equipment

Bryston BP25 preamp; Parasound HCA-1000A power amp; Mach One Model M-Two speakers (run full range) on stands and a NHT SW3 subwoofer driven by an NHT SA-3 power amplifier with electronic crossover; Mach 1, Gotham, WireWorld, and Monster Cable interconnect cables; Mach 1 twisted pair speaker cables to the Mach Ones and Kimber 4PR cables to the sub; Sony CDP-XA20ES CD player; Thorens TD-320 Mark III turntable; Sumiko Blue Point phono cartridge; Parasound P/PH-100 phono preamp, and a Denon TU-767 tuner.

# Phonex NeverWire 14 Powerline Ethernet Bridge

Eugene Pitts, IV



**T**HIS IS ONE of the many new products for home networking coming onto the market. While the connectivity of these networks is generally going wireless, Phonex's NeverWire 14 uses your existing a.c. power lines to create a seamless home network. Installation is as easy as plugging in two cables, there are no drivers or software to install, and Phonex gives you a great big-picture installation manual.

In the box, the NeverWire 14 has two connectors — a power plug and an RJ-45 Ethernet jack.

Installation couldn't be easier. Simply plug the power cord into the wall and the included RJ-45 cable into the device and you're ready to share either an internet connection or existing files. To create a network, you need two (or more) NeverWire boxes. The NeverWire solution allows you to set up a LAN or home network, with full internet and file sharing functionality, just by placing their device anywhere near an electrical outlet and plugging in.

The NeverWire setup was very easy and, as the firm's product liter-

ature promised, took under five minutes. If you already have a network interface card (NIC) in your computer, and most newer machines will, then there is no need to install any new hardware. This, plus the fact that no new software is needed, gives the NeverWire an advantage over its main competition in wireless local area network (LAN) configurations. A NeverWire network is also easily expandable, since as many as 16 of the nodes will work together right out of the box. The unit itself comes with all



the necessary power cables plus an Ethernet cable, so no trips to the local computer store for additional cabling are required.

The NeverWire boxes were tested under several configurations and worked effortlessly with all of them. The most complex setup, using a Linksys switch, a Linksys router, a cable modem, and two of the NeverWire boxes was able to provide internet access to three desktop computers (all Windows based) in the back of my apartment and internet access to an Apple laptop, an Xbox, and a Tivo in the front of my apartment. I also hooked up a borrowed Philips MC-i200, a device able to stream radio from the Internet and play MP3s from networked computers. The NeverWire box uses five LED indicators to provide constant feedback on the status of your network. This might be very helpful, since you can diagnose any problems that might occur by just looking at the array of active or inactive lights on the top of the boxes. A NeverWire box also has built-in, one-button setup of 56-bit DES security. This is a major advantage over other ways of setting up a wireless network, as there are no security keys to setup and no soft-

ware to configure on every device on the network.

There is one dull spot though on this otherwise bright product. Network performance between local machines seemed to vary greatly for no apparent reason, running between 25% to 50% of the overall bandwidth in several back-to-back tests. This didn't become a problem in actual use, since this speed translates into an average through-put of 4 megabytes per second to 8 megabytes per second, which is more than enough for just about any home networking application.

Overall, the Phonex NeverWire 14 is a product that is definitely easy to recommend to someone who wants to set up or extend his home network without the hassles of setting up a wireless solution. The small throughput issue aside, the Phonex NeverWire is easy to setup and use in every facet and could easily be a key addition for any home network.

Phonex provides a one-year warranty for its products and is accessible through the internet and phone. Additional units can also be ordered direct from Phonex and come in dark gray.

## NOTES

**Phonex NeverWire 14 Powerline Ethernet Bridge**, \$189.99 for two or \$99.99 for one. Phonex Broadband Corporation, 6952 High Tech Drive, Midvale, UT 84047, phone: 801/566-0100, NeverWire 14 Toll Free: 800/257-0601, Fax: 801/566-0880.

### Associated Equipment

Dell Dimension 8100, Dimension 8200, and CMO Desktop Computers; Apple Titanium Powerbook G4 laptop computer; Microsoft Xbox, Tivo by Tivo Inc., and Philips MC-i200.

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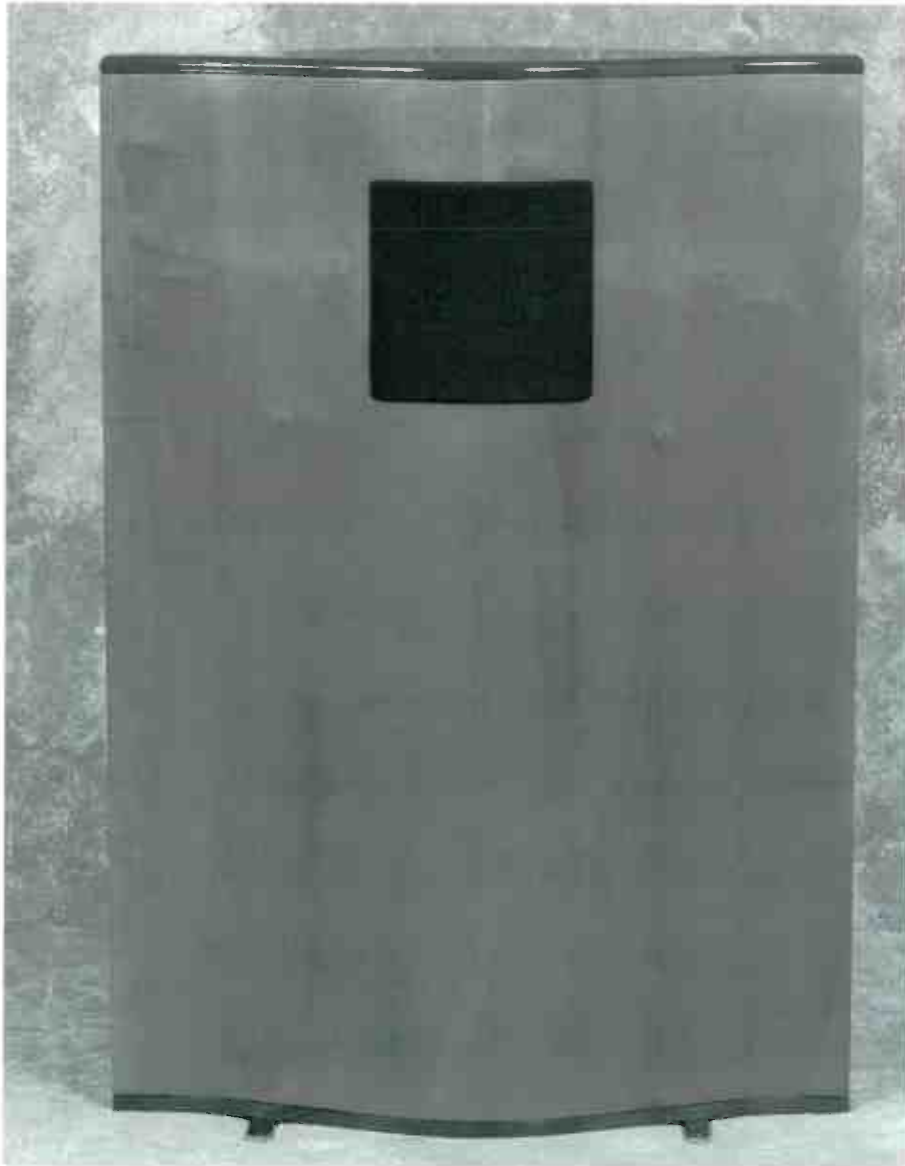
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# Ayon Dragon Speaker



## Peter Breuninger

**I**T'S LIKE THAT first kiss. Expectations of magical things can disappoint. If you, like me, have been reading the alternative press about their journey through a well-populated metropolis of multi-driver speakers into the much more rarified single-driver lis-

tening realm, we may share the same skepticism. My experience with single-driver systems has been somewhat mixed, like hugging my grandmother.

My first exposure to a single-driver system was a Lowther-based

design utilizing an Altec 804 cabinet. It was shockingly flawed with a severe peak in the upper midrange and little or no bass. If that wasn't bad enough, there was abnormal focus on vocals not unlike when you cup your hands around your



mouth and throw your voice. It was, frankly, weird. I next heard another Lowther try with a standard Medallion box and it was far less offensive. Still without bass and with that annoying overemphasis on vocal presence, the overall illusion was unnatural. Why have so many people fallen in love with single drivers? Perhaps it is the focus or maybe owning something different from the pack that grabs the interest.

I cannot imagine a loudspeaker more different or exotic than the \$19,000 Ayon Dragon. It is based upon the AER single driver but with a twist—an added woofer for the low frequencies. It is both unique in kind and extraordinary looking; a thought provoking attack on the state of the art. Visually it is without peer, lifting the art of geometry and shape design to a pinnacle above the most creative Italian wood working artisan. It's striking wave shape and fine veneer is reminiscent of a Cris Craft wooden speedboat from the on-golden-pond bygone era. I am simply blown away by it, and these photos only hint of the speaker's beauty.

Listening to a well executed single driver, or as in this case, a single driver dominant (along with woofer) speaker system can be very seductive.

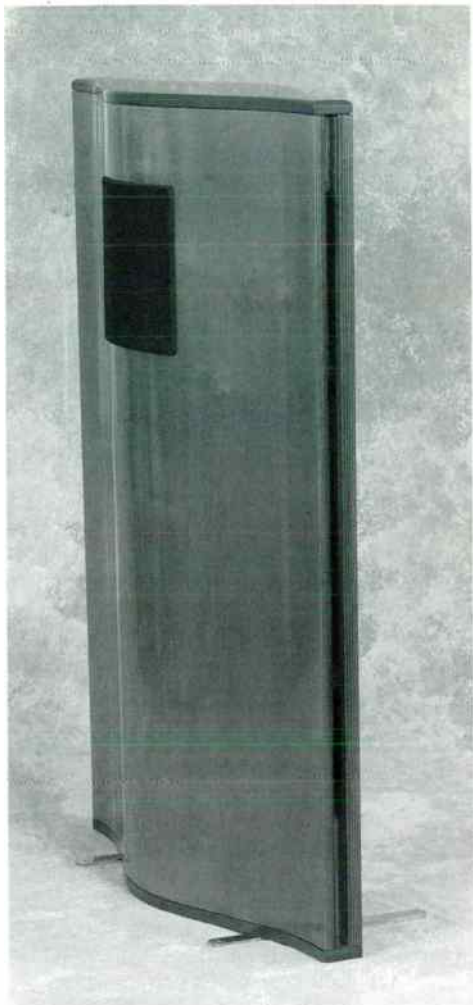
It can also be very different from what you are accustomed to. I surprise myself as to how much I like it. The Dragon is a unique open baffle design, the opposite of a horn. It is a dual drive system designed around the German iteration of the Lowther; the rare earth magnet AER.

The front firing AER sits in the top center of a 36-inch wide wave-shaped baffle. It has a first order crossover coupling it to a 15-inch rear-firing woofer. The smack dab interesting thing is... not only does the AER sit in an open cavity, so does the fifteen. Think about this. A mammoth rear firing 15-inch woofer without a box to rear load the back wave. It surprisingly defies the laws of physics and modern port loaded speaker design with under 30Hz bass. But, the speaker is not completely ruler flat into the low 20s—test tones show it goes that low but not in such a straight line. And herein rests the first subtle criticism. No matter how you design a box or lack there of one, a fifteen inch woofer likes something to firm up the large surface area of the cone

as it retreats from each excursion. Without a box, we have nothing more than a beautiful piece of wood laminate holding the woofer in place. Open to the free air with a long side slot, you have no cone back wave support. This causes the cone itself to resonate at its own surface frequency. In this case about 35Hz +/-5Hz. It's a subtle fog horn effect on select program material. As evil as this sounds in print, it's not that bad in person and if one is willing to accept lower listening levels to curb the humpy prominence on those 1/1000 recordings that excite this particular frequency you can live with it. I placed, in series, a two ohm resistor to the bass binding posts to cut the low frequency amplitude. It helps but does not cure the common cold. My second little nit-pick is not the fault of the cabinet nor crossover, I believe it's the AER driver itself. It has a soft top end roll off. Cymbals lose that shiny sparkle, in fact, I think there may be more to it than upper frequency shelving. I venture to say the driver is polite over all frequencies. This is great for bright and edgy digital recordings. Interestingly, the softness increases the higher in frequency you go, and yes, the critical midrange is free of this. That's it for the criticisms.

The speaker's strengths though overshadow the shortcomings—and this is the hallmark of a great design. The Ayon Dragon has the best midrange focus and pinpoint realism I've yet to hear from any loudspeaker. It single-handedly raises the bar with its ability to place instruments and voices in your room.

How does it do this? What makes for the magic? Two things I suspect.



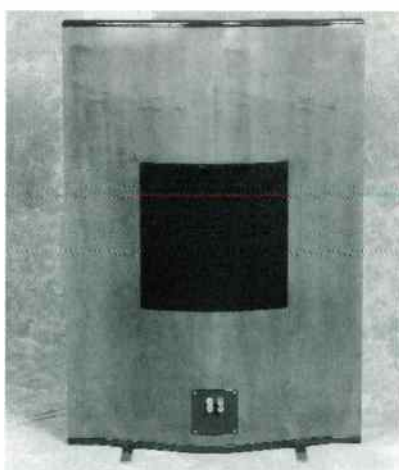
First is the single driver and its near perfect phase launch, second is the cabinet. The designer knows that baffles greatly effect the sound of a speaker. The large frontal surface and its wave shape create an acoustic space between the listener and the room boundaries. This space is like a finger print, it is one of a kind and different from large rectangular sized speakers. As you walk into the listening room you immediately hear this acoustic—before the system is turned on. I've

## NOTES

**Ayon Dragon Loudspeaker**, \$19,000, imported by Acoustic Dreams, RR#5 Box 429, Fairfield, IL 62837, Phone 618 847-7813, [www.acousticdreams.net](http://www.acousticdreams.net).

### Associated Equipment

Komuro 845 amplifiers; Wright Sound 2A3 amplifiers; Convergent Audio Technology Ultimate preamplifier; Balanced Audio CD player; Otari MX 505U reel-to-reel tape recorder; Luxman PD 444, 441, and 121 turntables; Dynavector (3) 505 and 507 tonearms, and Koetsu Rosewood and Pro IV Signature phono cartridges.



never experienced this and it has opened up new doors for me as a reviewer, forcing me to think more carefully about loudspeaker baffle design. And, I do not mean as it affects phase and driver integration. Simply put, this speaker has an indelible character that, combined with the single driver, produces a signature sound that is captivating.

When I play solo piano over this speaker I feel the weight and scale of the piano in my listening studio. Not just the bass foundation, but the tonality and realism within the foundation. I suspect the baffle isolates more of the room's reflective and absorptive boundaries thus making for a cleaner palette from which to listen. Do you follow? It's almost

like you're getting a new listening room with the speaker—and one that has very good acoustic properties. It is a compelling effect and it draws you into the music.

The Dragon is very dynamic with a full bodied sound. The bass, notwithstanding the one-note-hump, gives the speaker a solid foundation to support the upper frequencies. This important attribute is a key to the Dragon's magic. Without the bedrock of the woofer the speaker is anemic, thin and honky sounding like the Lowthers I've listened to. I also noted that the upper bass and lower midrange (which the woofer extends into) is cut from a different cloth than the mids and highs—a little slower and thicker. It's an accepted tradeoff to this listener. As the AER driver comes into play, so does the speaker's biggest strength—focus. The midrange here is very special and what we, as music loving audiophiles, pay the big bucks for. Anybody can go into Circuit City and buy an inexpensive full range speaker with bass and top end! When you're shopping in this price range you are looking for more than frequency response. You want the music to be "believable." That said,

the Dragon has the most believable midrange I've ever heard. Instruments and voices are holographically reproduced right in front of you—it's fantastic.

I use a set of Beethoven Piano Trios by the Beaux Arts Trio on Phillips (one of my favorite labels that's unfairly frowned upon by golden eared audiophiles) to test for midrange focus. The Dragon captures the acoustic nuances (the space in and around each instrument) of the violin, cello, and piano better than any speaker I've heard. It then "projects" these nuances or, timbre signatures into your listening space resulting in a touch-it realism that is simply spectacular. The sound becomes live and electrically charges the room. It is as close to real life as I have ever heard.

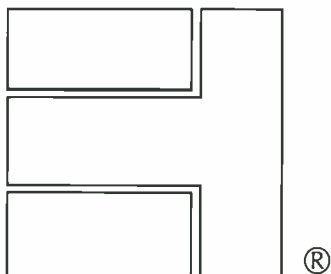
If you turn the lights off and play some Ella, damn if she isn't in the room with you. The Dragon is indeed a tour de force in 3D realism. If you value music over hifi, if you have more than 1000 recordings, if you listen for emotion, if you're awed by beautiful works of art— you have met your match. I highly recommend this speaker if you are a true music and object d'art lover.

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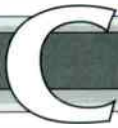
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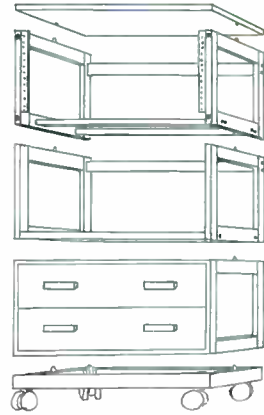
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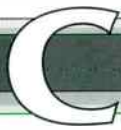
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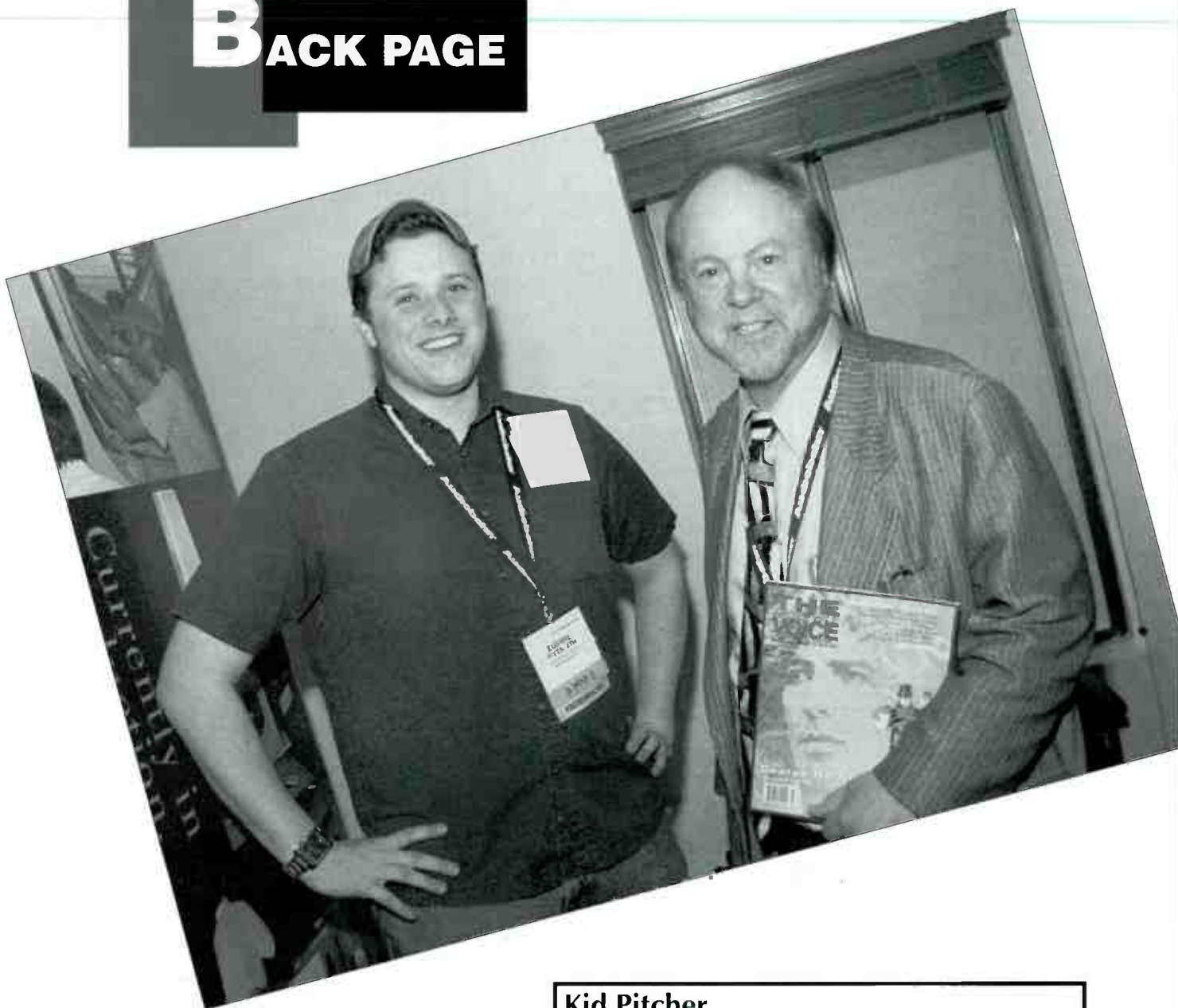
**Ad Index**

Acoustic Dreams / Whitelight . . . . . 19  
Acoustic Sciences Corp. . . . . 4  
Art Audio . . . . . 30  
Atma-Sphere . . . . . 39  
Audio Odessey . . . . . 61  
B & K Components . . . . . Cover 4  
Boston Audio Society . . . . . 62  
Dynaudio . . . . . 27  
Elac . . . . . 44  
Eminent Technology . . . . . 60  
First Impression . . . . . 11  
Flat Earth . . . . . 38  
Hsu Research . . . . . 8  
Immedia . . . . . 26  
Induction Dynamics . . . . . 5  
JVC XRCDS . . . . . Cover 3  
Kimber . . . . . Cover 2  
E.M. Long, Speakers . . . . . 62  
Margules Audio Group . . . . . 43  
Panamax . . . . . 1  
Parts Express . . . . . 4  
PBN . . . . . 57  
Per Madsen . . . . . 61  
Placette . . . . . 52  
Purist . . . . . 11  
Sorice . . . . . 36  
Sunfire . . . . . 31  
Thiel Audio . . . . . 3  
Thule Audio . . . . . 45  
Totem Acoustic . . . . . 48  
Venus Hi-Fi . . . . . 39, 42  
Wisdom Audio . . . . . 6, 7  
Worldwide Music Network . . . . . 37  
Wright . . . . . 38



Obit in 4/10 *Washington Post*:  
Herbert Papier, former operator of Wheaton Music and inventor of the Wheaton Tri-Planar Tonearm, died April 3 at age 83. That tonearm was considered to be competitive with the Graham and SME models. Some of his past experiences include playing trumpet in big bands, working as a watchmaker, and repairing ship's navigational chronometers for the U.S. Naval Observatory. - Greg Weaver

# BACK PAGE



## Photos Never Lie!

### Kid Pitcher . . .

And, no, the guy on the right isn't me on a better day nor is he the father of the Handsome Young Ne-er-Do-Well on the left. Holding a recent issue of *TAV* is Arnie Nudell of Genesis, whose 6.1 speaker we hope to review in a forthcoming issue. Naw, The Kid is my son, Eugene, IV, or Da Fort (in Brooklyn-ese) or The Force, depending on when ... (he's gonna punch me when he sees this!) We were making the rounds at the last Consumer Electronics Show — *Gene Pitts, Editor*

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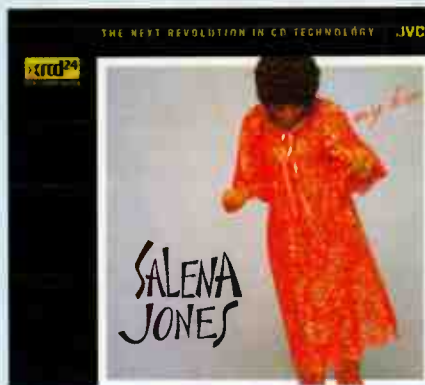
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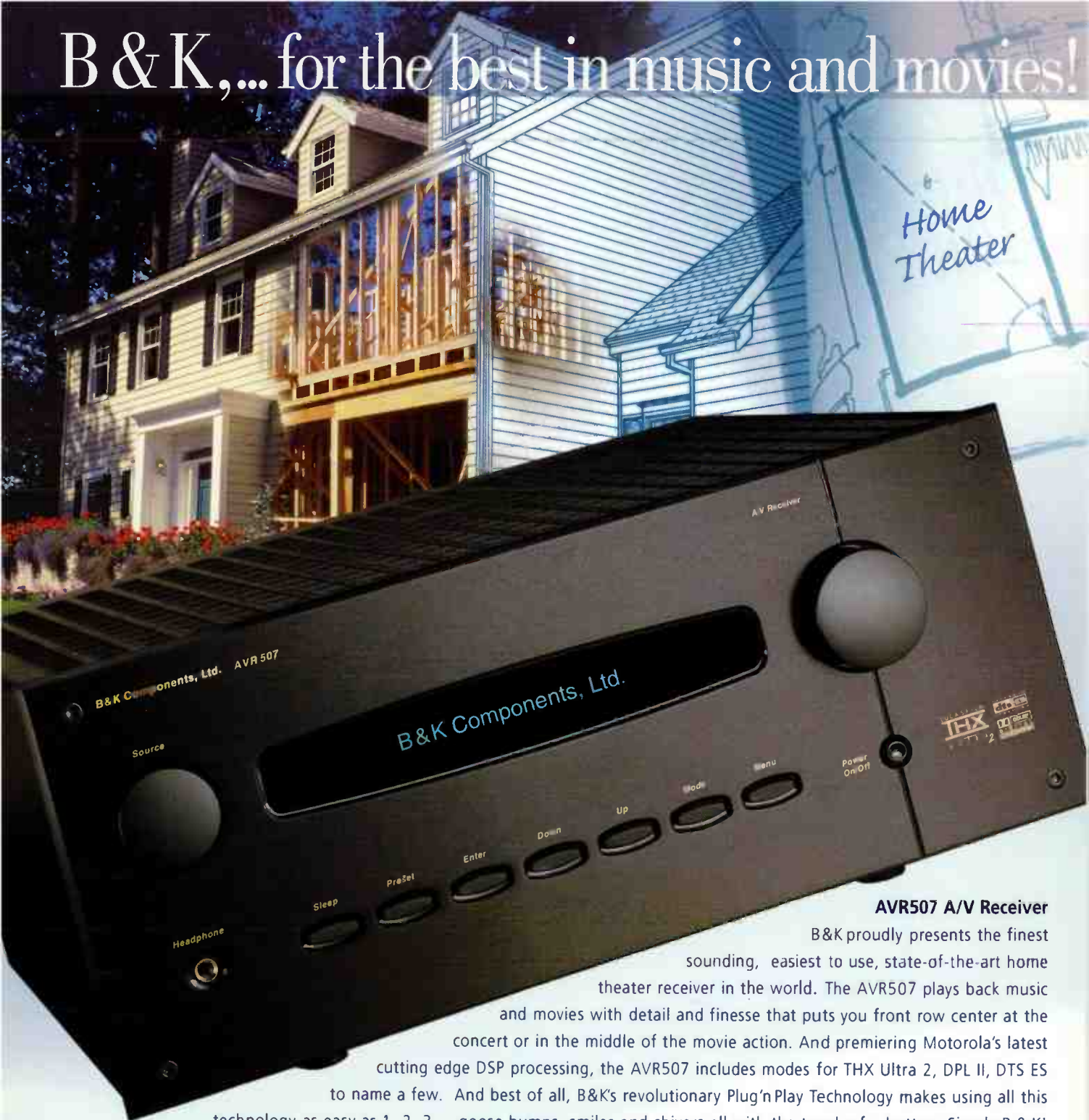
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