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Klaus Heymann on the NAXOS CLASSICAL CD REVOLUTION

Robert Baird on WHAT HAPPENED TO MOBILE FIDELITY?
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I've recently been rereading Mark Lane's and Donald Freed's 1970s screenplay and novel, *Executive Action*, which develops the theory that John F. Kennedy was assassinated by a conspiracy between organized crime, expatriate Cuban Batista is, and Eisenhower's "military-industrial complex." Long predating Oliver Stone's *JFK*, the book is fascinating, convincing stuff, from authors who had done considerable research into what really happened in November 1963. But, like all conspiracy theories, it falls down on the hard rock of reality: the more people and organizations are involved in a conspiracy, the less likelihood there is of anything happening at all, let alone going according to plan.

Thus it has been with the much-heralded launch of DVD-Audio. With so many entities involved in the development of this high-resolution multichannel music medium, progress has been painfully slow, particularly when compared with the speed with which Sony and Philips have brought to market the competing Super Audio CD. The preliminary specification for DVD-A was released for discussion as far back as the late spring of 1997; the adoption of Meridian Lossless Packing was announced in June 1998, and the DVD Forum's DVD-Audio Working Group finalized the DVD-Audio 1.0 specification in October 1998.

But, as Meridian's Bob Stuart told me in August '97, although there was agreement among all the DVD-A Forum members on the key components necessary to ensure DVD-A's success in the marketplace — video, three-dimensional sound, and the highest possible fidelity — these were overshadowed by the recording industry's need for reliable copy protection. It is that need that torpedoed the format's 1999 launch.

As you can read in this issue's "Industry Update" (p.15), Matsushita (Technics, Panasonic), Nippon Columbia (Denon), and JVC were alarmed by the cracking last November by Norwegian hackers of the DVD-Video Content Scrambling System (CSS) encryption scheme. They decided to postpone bringing their players to market until the "4C Entity" — a consortium of Matsushita, Toshiba, IBM, and Intel — develops a new copy-protection scheme for DVD-Vs. It was reported that, as a result, Nippon Columbia had to trash 100,000 discs that had been produced in time for the 1991-Audio launch.

The DVD-Video encryption involves each manufacturer identifying its players with a unique 40-bit string, or "key." Each DVD-V disc includes a short in-the-clear "disk key," which is also encrypted with all the allowed player keys. When you insert a DVD in a player, a considerable amount of handshaking takes place, the player using its key to desramble the appropriate encrypted disc key before playback is allowed. (Perhaps this is the reason DVD players are so slow to load.) The hackers got hold of a unencrypted player key and used it to reverse engineer the system. Their program, widely available on the Internet, allows anyone with enough computer storage space to make decrypted copies of the files that make up a DVD movie.

So now that CSS has been cracked, the DVD Forum had to choose between disabling all keys, thus turning the existing population of DVD-V players into worthless junk, or developing a stronger algorithm than CSS.

But why should the cracking of the DVD-Video encryption have had such a catastrophic effect on the launch of DVD-Audio? From what I've read, the CSS algorithm was never intended to be a strong deterrent to pirates. (Heck, a friend once saw a pirated video that had been made by someone pointing a camcorder at a cinema screen!) Yes, the DVD-V protection may have been hacked, but only a few computer geeks will have the time, patience, and skill to take advantage of this.

Common sense says that the primary protection against piracy is low pricing. At current DVD-V prices, Joe Sixpack has no motivation to do anything other than buy legal discs. And, as Barry Willis points out in this issue, common sense also dictates that satisfying the need of the music and record industries to protect their copyrighted material is a chimera — no matter how robust a DVD's encryption, the unprotected datastream must eventually be exposed in order for the movie to be viewed and the music to be heard.

But when so many entities are involved, it becomes hard to get agreement on anything, even if it's just plain common sense. And the record industry may well have more to fear than the movie industry. The sheer amount of data represented by an MPEG-2-encoded movie makes a DVD intrinsically hard to copy, but a single cut off a DVD-A, even if multichannel and 24/96, is an easily manageable amount of data for anyone with a modest computer to copy. According to Matsushita spokesman Yoshihiro Kitadeya, as reported in a Dow Jones Newswire story on December 2, "since music requires much less data than video, it would be easier to copy individual songs from a DVD-A disc...and distribute them cheaply over the Internet."

That's the real danger behind the music industry's paranoia — that the DVD-V hacking will make it easier for people to distribute their songs on the 'Net. Being paranoid doesn't mean you don't have people out to get you, and it explains the music providers' insistence on encryption, copy protection, and "watermarking" — the embedding of coded identifying data in the music that is sufficiently robust to survive successive D/A and A/D conversions, and even the transmission of analog versions of the music over AM radio.

One of the more depressing experiences I had recently was attending workshops and paper presentations at last September's Audio Engineering Society Convention on the subject of watermarking. The record industry's need for the level of protection to be "robust" means that the watermark must be high in level. The only thing preventing its immediately being heard is that it is encoded to mimic the recording's noise floor, frequency-shaped so as to be masked as much as possible by the music's spectrum. Yeah, right. And now, according to another "Update" story (p.17), TTR Technologies and Macrovision are developing a copy-protection system to prevent "casual copying" of music CDs. In my opinion, the balance between music-lovers and copyright holders is leaning far too much in the direction of the latter.

When it comes to higher-resolution music, my advice is therefore to ignore the ill-fated, protection-hobbled DVD-A. Buy instead the DVD-Video-based DADs from Classic Records and Chesky, or invest in one of Sony's Super Audio CD players and the SACDs to play them on — unless, of course, the music industry belatedly decides that even SACD offers inadequate protection against copying.

1 Late-breaking news at the time of writing this column was that Pioneer intends to go ahead with its late-December launch in Japan of two 1.1-Audio players: the high-end, $5000 1W-AX, which will also play SACDs; and the less-expensive 1W-ST10A 1/W-A player. Pioneer points out that while no DAD-A software exists, these players will play DVD-1s, CDs, and SACDs (1W-AX, 10), and that purchasers will be able to get their machines upgraded when a new encryption scheme is announced. In the meantime, Pioneer might also release copy-protection-free 1/W/A discs; the company has already released a DVD recorder.

Stereophile, March 2000

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Stereophile, February 2000
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Letters

Great work!
Editor:
Great work! I love the variety of information in Stereophile, especially Sam Tellig's and Michael Fremer's columns.
Gaddy Haymov, M.D.
Brox, NY
HCook14179@aol.com

Dissed Wynton
Editor:
I'm glad to see a writer has the courage to diss Wynton Marsalis in print ("Aural Robert," December '99). Although Wynton's technical abilities may be excellent, it has been many years since his music has been able to move me. Reading the unending praise of each new release has made wonder if anyone else also felt the emotional vacuum in his music, especially compared to his less heralded brother Branford.
Rob Bertrand
rbbert@earthlink.net

Home Entertainment Expo 1999
Editor:
Does the Home Entertainment Expo that took place in Newport Beach, California at the end of October '99 replace Stereophile's "traditional" High-End HI-FI Show? If so, I, for one, will be very disappointed. I have attended every West Coast Stereophile show and enjoyed them immensely. I always found these shows were a wonderful way to celebrate the art of high-end audio.
I have purchased hi-fi equipment and greatly enjoyed listening to music in my home for over 40 years. Home-theater/multichannel sound holds little interest for me. It saddens me that the days of HI-FI Shows emphasizing two-channel music reproduction seem to be an artifact of the past.
Roger Millendore
Rumillendo@aol.com

Home Entertainment 2000
Editor:
I am writing to find out if "Home Entertainment 2000" is HI-FI 2000, and if so, when will info be available?
Michael Johnson
opulencemajx2@earthlink.net

Indeed, Home Entertainment 2000 — see the advertisement on p.84 — is the Y2K incarnation of our annual High-End HI-FI Show. But despite the name change, due to a feeling that the "HI-FI" appellation was inappropriate in this new century, the Show will still feature, as it always has, the best in domestic music reproduction: two-channel and multichannel, with or without a picture. Home Entertainment 2000 takes place at the Hilton Rye Town, Rye Brook, New York, May 11–14, 2000. You can check what's happening at www.hifishow.com.

Home Entertainment Expo 1999, by the way, was the latest incarnation of the show primarily sponsored by Home Theater magazine. Though it is also organized by Peterson's Events Division, this show is intended to run in parallel with Home Entertainment events sponsored in the main by this magazine and Stereophile Guide to Home Theater. — JA

The future of music?
Editor:
I have a few comments about Mr. Lawton's second letter in the December 1999 issue ("Letters," p.21), which was a perfect tie-in to "As We See It" in the same issue (particularly in matters of dynamic range, the sound of live instruments, and musical performance). Mr. Lawton, I apologize for the bunch of angry Luddites who clogged your e-mail with unintelligent responses. Rest assured that I am not one of them.
I am not thrilled by "glorious mono" per se, or feel that the pops, ticks, and hiss of black vinyl are an essential part of the musical experience. However, having had an early background in classical music as a teenager, my ear was trained to listen to the entire event. Although I do not play an instrument, I am a very critical listener when I want to be (although I try not to because it is very fatiguing and gets in the way of musical enjoyment, as most Stereophile reviewers have stated).
Allow me to relate a recent listening session to further illustrate: It consisted of Suppé marches/overtures, Rossini, Sousa, the Kinks, and the Who. I started out with a Detroit CD on the London label, and after a few minutes of The Light Cavalry Overture, it was just not having the desired effect (foot-tapping, arm-waving, etc.). So I went to the black-vinyl archives and pulled out the same music with von Karajan and the Berlin Philharmonic, and wow! Yes, there was more hiss, but who cares? This was what God intended the effect of music on us to be.

Listening to Toscanini do the William Tell Overture in mono on RCA Victor is not the best sound either, but it surely is the most exciting performance that I have heard. If you think Sousa with band instruments sounds good, let me enlighten you: Check out the young Leonard Bernstein (when he didn't drag everything out) and the New York Philharmonic on Columbia. A full symphony orchestra may not be accurate for this music, but when The Washington Post march is played this well, who cares?

Is there a more involving live rock album than the Kinks' famous double one? Listen to "You Really Got Me" and "Superman," and if you're not playing air guitar before it ends, you better check your pulse. Lastly came the Who's Live at Leeds. The long version of "My Generation" is the very essence of rock, notwithstanding what Rolling Stones fans may have to say.

J. Gordon Holt's observation on performance and sound quality — that they are usually inversely proportional — holds true today, even with all the digital advances. The absence of artifacts can never take pre-eminence over the event on the recording. If the future of music is listening to boomboxes and/or computer speakers, then it is a very dark one where quality of performance is concerned.

Mr. Lawton's democratization of good sound sounds like the lowest common denominator to me.

John J. Pluta
Wrightstown, NJ
Music & anti-music
Editor:
I was very pleased to read John Atkinson's comments on hi-fi and anti-hi-fi recordings in December's "As We See It." But many people with better hi-fi systems, or even so-called "audiophiles," are not always able to distinguish between musical and anti-musical recordings.

For example, a friend of mine with a decent system recently recommended Sting's new Brand New Day CD as a rather good recording. Listen to it, however, and after a few minutes you notice that the recording is similarly compressed and as unsatisfying as Santana's Supernatural.

I guess most people either do not have enough listening experience or have not learned to recognize bad recordings. JA accomplished one of the principal tasks of a high-end magazine: to define and defend real hi-fi sound. If Stereophile didn't do educational work on this subject, who else would? Matthias Baumgarten
ms.baumgarten@i-online.de

Mistakes make the music
Editor:
Being a 24-year-old, I should be the perfect candidate to write in with an abundance of negative criticism for John Atkinson's December "As We See It." The fact of the matter is, I couldn't agree with him more. Though I have not heard Santana's Supernatural, I know exactly what he was talking about. I own plenty of modern recordings that could be described in the same manner—I feel his pain.

I have nothing but contempt for the major labels and the majority of popular bands affiliated with them. The labels throw tons of money at a given recording, but after the millions are spent, they have a recording that sounds anything but real—or, more important, human. These recordings remind me of video games. It is obvious what they are portraying, but it is also very evident that they are not the real thing.

A lot of lesser-known musicians, bands, whatever, don't have this kind of money, so their recordings sound rougher and sometimes reveal—dare I say it?—mistakes.

How dare they? A flawed recording? Unheard of! Well, I hate to be the bringer of bad news, but humans have been known to make errors in the past. Right, Mr. Clinton? These errors don't only occur in monogamous, committed relationships, but in music too. What a notion. Rarely, if ever, have I seen a live music event where there wasn't some sort of flaw, especially in comparison to these squeaky-clean recordings we are subjected to these days.

If the point of hi-fi is to bring the live experience into our homes, then don't we want just that? Thad Aerts
Lincoln, NE

Excellent
Editor:
Excellent—I identified excessive compression as the thing I hate most about pop music a while back, so I read the December "As We See It" with delight. I saw something interesting when I was making a compilation CD-R with my PC-based recorder. I pulled a couple of songs by Green Day off of their album Dookie—no, this is not representative of my normal taste in music—and looked at the waveform in Cool Edit. The result: an almost solid block of noise! Visually, it was very striking—obviously the result of pretty extreme compression, and probably "bit-shaving" techniques. Thus the crisp but crappy sound of the album.

But it made me wonder if you good folks could publish peak/average levels along with record reviews. This would probably be a very telling spec in predicting how one will like a recording, even though it sounds strange to include a technical spec in a record review.

Agim Peroll
agim.peroll@erols.com

JA's fit of pique?
Editor:
It would seem that John Atkinson wrote December's "As We See It" in quite a fit of pique. The assertion that there is nothing to be gained from playing the Supernatural album on anything much better than a boombox is not reasonable. While the dynamics of the recording may be poor, that is only one aspect of the sound. Other factors such as resolution, freedom from tonal coloration, and stereo imaging are at least as important as dynamics.

Don't forget that this is popular music; the very reason for this recording's existence is that vast numbers of cretins with crummy stereo systems enjoy Santana's music, which has allowed him to become popular and continue releasing albums. I wish more of my own favorite recordings sounded better—many are mediocre at best—but I am still able to enjoy them because I like the material.

I'm not suggesting we throw quality out the window, but I think it's good to remember that perfection in anything is not really attainable; enjoyment, however, certainly is.

Todd Spangler
tsangler@plastomeric.com

Crack a smile, John
Editor:
Always eager to test my mettle against the learned ears of the Stereophile experts, I took a copy of Santana's Supernatural into my audio room for a spin on my $15k high-end system (never mind the parts list, I like it well enough). It came as a bittersweet "Ah-ha!" to me as I found the same dynamic compression and "loudness" that John Atkinson mentioned in his editorial.

I say "bittersweet" because I believe that Carlos Santana would want a blissful musical experience for all listeners to his music, and here I was finding disappointment in its sonic characteristics, especially when compared to my 1957 Ben Webster LPs.

Then it came to me: "Think out of the box, stupid!" I put the CD in the Alpine CD changer in the trunk of my 1990 Miata, put the top down, and headed down the highway as fast as those four cylinders would go. Since it was getting pretty cold, I had to put the heater on, which probably detracted from the lower octaves of the bass. Nevertheless, out poured the supernatural strains of Supernatural in all their terrific loudness—played through an Alpine head unit, an Alpine outboard amp, and Boston separates. Musical bliss!

The moral of the story, I think, is "It's the music that matters." C'mon, John—crack a smile! Michael GuntherMaher
gmaher@softcom.net

The live reference?
Editor:
I recently attended a concert of Holly Cole and her trio performing with the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra. I recognize the touch of heresy in doing so—is it possible to mix the two, or to make a symphony orchestra swing? The concert was at our local Orpheum Theatre, which is known for quite good acoustics. It was with some dismay, therefore, that I noticed that the musicians were heavily miked and there were dilapidated giant speakers hanging at either side of the stage. We were seated fairly close to one of these speakers.

My fears proved correct. Thirty good-quality microphones were used and there was at least a ton of equipment, but the sound was mono, the bass was too loud with no definition, and the highs were shrill. Holly and her trio came through loudly, but the orchestra was background.
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mush. With that many microphones around, there was little choice but to close-make Holly. The result was exaggerated sibilance and explosive p’s.

While I enjoyed the performance, many of its subtleties were lost through the poor audio.

I am sure that this could have been done more effectively, with moderate reinforcement for Holly and the trio and none for the orchestra, but I suspect the roadies never considered that possibility for a moment.

The sound on Holly’s CDs is far superior. What is the point in attending a live concert with amplification when you can get better sound for less money in the comfort of your own home?

Don McIntosh
Port Coquitlam, BC, Canada mcintosh@bc.sympatico.ca

Music reviews that last . . .

Editor:
I don’t spend much time reading record reviews, but over the last several months a few reviews that caught my attention were so well written that I read (and reread) the entire review, and took note of the author — Thomas Conrad in each case. How about more and longer offerings from Mr. Conrad — interviews or articles about artists, manufacturers, or anything that might be found interesting by your readers?

Dennis Schreffler
dennis@madisonaudio.com

. . . but not of Diana Krall

Editor:
Although I don’t recall you appropriating space in “Letters” for commentary on your music reviews or reviewers, I submit that fair and knowledgeable reporting of an artist and their music is important, if not fundamental, to all audiophiles. After all, it is about the music. Reviewer opinions are at best subjective, yet influence many readers in their purchase decisions. At worst, and without forum for rebuttal, a “misguided” review can do unjust harm to an artist.

Ergo, I beg to differ with the conclusions Thomas Conrad draws in his review of Diana Krall’s When I Look In Your Eyes (October ’99, p.227). Mr. Conrad opens with lavish praise of Ms. Krall, even acknowledging that When I Look In Your Eyes “will probably win a Grammy” — a view I certainly share. But following additional accolades, he begins his search for “what needs [the album] leaves unfulfilled,” and it is at this point I must take issue with him.

Mr. Conrad takes license by first asserting that “the jazz art form relentlessly demands that its practitioners push themselves,” and on the strength of this, admonishes Ms. Krall for choosing “to remain deep in her comfort zone.” He supports this with reference to how “Cassandra Wilson reinvents herself with every album,” or “how Patricia Barber dares explore the ragged existential edges of our purportedly prosperous time”— the latter phrase perhaps more for the gratification of the writer than the enlightenment of the reader. He closes his review by stating, “Diana Krall will not become an important jazz singer until she acknowledges that woman can not live by crème brûlée alone,” a statement I find absolutely incredible and deserving of an apology to Ms. Krall!

Does Mr. Conrad not realize Diana Krall is already an “important” jazz singer (and pianist), and has been for some time?

To be sure, I have no quarrel with the talent of the artists he cites, but when I want to relax, I don’t want to contend with intellectual challenges, electronic distortion, harmonic dissonance, or pyrotechnical exercises. Give me “easy listening,” thank you, and save the “I gotta be me” demonstrations for my higher energy cycles.

As with all great artists, Ms. Krall’s style is a matter of choice — hers, not Mr. Conrad’s. It is built upon years of listening, learning, practicing, and performing, and reflects, to the limits of her skill and ability, her musical concepts. The listener has only to hear a note or two from a great musician to recognize their musical signature. That’s importance. And that’s Diana Krall.

John Greenmeyer
Charlotte, NC

Unfulfilled expectations

Editor:
Hello! Is anybody home? Stereophile is supposed to be a high-end journal, not PC Magazine or Stereo Review’s Sound & Vision. You can showcase on your covers some of the most beautiful, luxurious, and sophisticated equipment to come your way. Instead, in December, you chose a Yamaha desktop receiver that looks like a plastic air purifier!

I don’t have any qualms about you doing a short review on this kind of product, but a cover product it is not. A magazine cover should grab your attention, make you do a double take, and entice you to pick it up. This one did the opposite!

If we can’t count on Stereophile to show off the best the world has to offer, who can we count on?

Harvey Bodashefsky
Courtie, Ontario, Canada
harveyb@idirect.com

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Stereophile, February 2000

11
The conrad-johnson Anniversary Reference Triode preamplifier, with its novel composite triode audio circuit, achieved a stunning breakthrough in audio performance.

The ART earned top rankings from every critic who reviewed it. In 1998, the ART won the Audio Video Academy Golden Note award for Best Tube Component of the Year, and Stereophile's coveted Product of the Year award. The composite triode circuit developed for the ART is also featured in conrad-johnson's new and surprisingly affordable Premier 17LS.

In circuit approach, component quality, ease of use, and distinctive styling, the Premier 17LS approaches near state of the ART, but at a fraction of the price.
Exceeding expectations
Editor:
I noticed that the number of dealers in December's Yamaha receiver review was "not disclosed." If any of my fellow readers are interested, this receiver is available from Crutchfield: www.crutchfield.com.

I've been using the RP-U100 for only about a month, but so far my expectations are far exceeded. There's definitely music coming out of my Solid HCM-1s.

Name withheld
Nwedave@aol.com

Unlikely expectations
Editor:
Sometimes a reminder of why you're in this hobby comes from the most unlikely place. Here's my advice: Go out immediately and buy a cheap 200-disc changer. Sony's for $199 (with TosLink digital output)—the best investment I've made in my system in a long time: lots of joy, little audiophile anxiety.

As my CD collection pulls up to the 700-disc mark, there are more and more discs (not to mention tracks) that I've forgotten about, or that don't always occur to me when I sit down to do serious listening. So I've loaded the changer with 200 CDs, and have it shuffle all of them. My Mark Levinson No.39 CD player happily stumps to converting the sub-$200 TosLink data.

Yes, the Sony is not the transport that the Levinson is, but the Levinson can't surprise me every five minutes or so with a new track that I'd forgotten about. It's like having the ideal radio station.

You've got nothing to lose. Go to whichever local mid-fi warehouse offers a no-questions-asked 30-day money-back guarantee, buy the changer, and see if it doesn't reliably make you smile at five-minute intervals.

Fred von Lohmann
fred@vonLohmann.com

Courage?
Editor:
It takes courage to publish a letter like Charles Butler's in the November issue (pp.20–21). It's the one that concludes by thanking Stereophile, tongue in cheek: "We all owe you a debt of gratitude for promoting the most insidious form of ignorance." The ignorance our Ph.D. speaks of is the pseudoscience, charlatanry, etc. with which, in his scarcely unique view, high-end audio components are evaluated and promoted to the gullible.

Butler's is but one of a long parade of objections to subjectivist evaluation, and among the more persuasive. Elsewhere (and about as often), John Atkinson comments on the wisdom of and need for [measurements] to accompany a set of subjective impressions — these two aspects of a single report sometimes being at rather startling odds. In this respect, Butler's objections are somewhat blunted.

I wonder, is it maybe time to declare that, as matters now stand, subjective procedure is both indefensible and irreplaceable? I've every hope that, sooner or later, somebody's going to explain why — definitively why — I, for example, even with these old-guy ears, am able to prefer components and tweak so unequivocally that I'd be distraught at having to do without any one of them? Even from the most half-assed of scientific perspectives, my way of coming to these decisions is invalid. And yet, here I am, living with this sounding agglomerate — system ABCD — believing that I'm hearing better sound than with system WXYZ, even were I under proper test conditions unable to tell you which is better, which less good, amp vs amp, cable vs cable, tweak vs tweak.

This must surely sound lame, but it has to be said, or rather, repeated: I try to make these decisions under circumstances that resemble those under which I listen to recordings. That's validity enough for me (with culinary confession moments ahead).

Butler mentions networked cables. Here, I fear, we encounter something that ought to give pause, at least as a specific example of a larger hazard. Stereophile has top-rated a pair of irrationally expensive networked speaker cables that I used, I admit it, with great satisfaction. It may well have been pride of ownership that provided me my long-term high. (A hell of a thing to admit, I know. I hope the confession does some good. It's also the kind of mistake I'm less likely to make now.) In any event, I liked what I was hearing, secure in the embrace of a Stereophile top-category recommendation — until, that is, I had a chance to compare the cables with a less expensive, un-networked pair (interconnects too, no need to go into it).

One wonders sometimes about one's own gullibility and its phantom satisfactions, along with Stereophile's sustaining enthusiasm for these wires. But then again, over and over, we are admonished in print, here in these pages, to judge for ourselves, presumably subjectively. What could be fairer?

Mike Silverton
Editor, LaFolia.com
Hensteeths@aol.com

Bravo!
Editor:
Bravo Stereophile and Thomas J. Norton!

This is in response to your review of the KR Enterprise Vacuum Transistor amplifier (November '99) and Mr. Kron's particularly sour responses (December '99). Please do not back off or shy away from telling it like it is!

It's easy to publish glowing reviews. It's easy to sidestep touchy issues with products, especially if the product manufacturers are themselves customers of the reviewing entity through advertising. However, your reviewers deserve honest and realistic reviews.

I've been reading Stereophile on and off for over 10 years. Mr. Atkinson's and Mr. Norton's technical measurement and discussion sections of the product reviews are very informative, sometimes much more so than the subjective reviews.

In fact, the subjective reviewers need to be more straightforward with their readers. Don't hold back, goss over, or otherwise diminish product faults or blemishes. They are as important as what the product does right!

Robert L. Wohlers
hwohlers@ede.com

Explanations
Editor:
Riccardo Kron's "Manufacturer's Comment" (December '99, p.191) indicates the need to explain (or re-explain) Stereophile's amplifier test procedure. If an amplifier manufacturer such as Dr. Kron cannot understand them, what are the chances that the average Joe will?

Dr. Kron had difficulty understanding why an amp without a 2 ohm output, such as his, would be tested into a 2 ohm load. The reason for this is that, since speakers do not have flat impedance curves, a "4 ohm" speaker's impedance may actually drop to 2 ohms at some frequencies. Your 2 ohm measurements help predict how an amplifier would handle such a load (very important for those who own such a speaker).

As for the simulated loudspeaker load tests, they test an amp under conditions that are closer to the way the amp is actually used. It really doesn't matter what that simulated load is, because every amp is tested under identical conditions. If one amp exhibits, say, 4dB dips and another exhibits only 1dB dips into the simulated speaker load, the second amp will deliver more uniform power into any speaker it is hooked up to. Thus, it must have a lower output impedance/higher damping factor.

I hope this explanation helps others to better understand Stereophile's amplifier testing procedure.

Alain Rauchwerger
South Hackensack, NJ
alar1@juno.com
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US & JAPAN
Barry Willis
Audiophiles cager to try DVD-Audio will have to wait just a bit longer. Matsushita Industrial Electric Co. and Japan Victor Company decided in December 1999 to hold back their new DVD-A players, in the wake of the widely publicized decryption of the format’s copy-protection scheme by a Norwegian computer hacker. The hacker published his work-around of the encryption on the Internet late last November.

Matsushita will delay its new players for about six months while it attempts to come up with a more robust encryption technology.

Industry Update

The change in plans was particularly abrupt for Matsushita, whose Panasonic division had announced last August the impending debut of a line of DVD-A players. Matsushita had planned to launch two new types of DVD-Audio/Video players in December, one of which was a DVD car-audio machine, the other a DVD-A/V player to be bundled with widescreen TVs. The players being held back are in the $1000-and-up category—many of them pre-ordered by customers, according to the Associated Press.

Pioneer had planned to release two high-end DVD-Audio players late in December, one at about $5000 retail and the other at about $2000. Plans for the release of a new DVD recorder will probably not be affected by the hacking incident, said a Pioneer spokesman.

The Norwegian hacker claimed to have found an exposed “key” in software enabling computers to read files from DVD players. The software was made by Xing Technology Corporation, a company whose DVD license has since been suspended.

The DVD-Audio delay will scarcely be noticed by ordinary music-lovers—there are almost no discs to play on the new machines. Many observers of the copy-protection issue have noted that no matter how robust a DVD’s encryption, the unprotected datastream must be exposed at some point in order for the format to play back. Unprotected data can then be picked off and saved as a file, which can in turn be transmitted to another computer anywhere in the world.

The copy-protection issue is the entertainment industry’s worst nightmare, involving complex engineering problems and hard-to-enforce legal regulations. Most of all, it’s a tough marketing problem: How do you price recorded music so as to generate decent profits while minimizing incentives for pirates? A clue to the solution may be forthcoming this year.

C a l e n d a r

Those promoting audio-related seminars, shows, and meetings should fax (do not call) the when, where, and who to (212) 886-2810 at least eight weeks before the month of the event. The deadline for the April 2000 issue is February 1. Mark the fax “Attention Jonathan Stull, Dealer Bulletin Board.” We will fax back a confirmation. If you do not receive confirmation within 24 hours, please fax us again.

ARIZONA
- The Arizona Audiophile Society sponsors monthly audio and home-theater meetings and events. For information, call (623) 516-4960, or e-mail AzAudioS@aol.com.

COLORADO
- Thursday, February 10, 6–9pm: Moondance Audio (1881 S. Broadway, Denver) will host Mark O’Brien of Rogue Audio for a demonstration of Rogue’s new remote-controlled Ninety-Nine tube preamplifier and the M-120 monoblock amplifiers. For more information, call (303) 777-4449.

FLORIDA
- Tuesday, February 1: The Tampa Bay Listening Society will host Mike Hobson from Classic Records and Joe DePhillips from Clearaudio. Mike will audition vinyl and 24/96 CDs from Classic’s catalog; Joe will demonstrate a Bel Canto DAC-1 and a Birdland Audio Odeon-lite DAC, along with a turntable, tonearm, and cartridge. For more information, call (813) 239-0700.

Stereophile, February 2000
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**UNited States**

Jon Iverson

Audiophiles have been bit hard lately, as DVD-Audio's release schedule has succumbed to piracy concerns and Sony has so far refused to allow digital outputs on its Super Audio CD players. (Only digital outs for CD playback are allowed.) You can listen, but don't touch. But at least there are still no such restrictions on CD players that would inhibit the use of their digital data streams... for now.

TTR Technologies and Macrovision hope to change all that. They announced at the beginning of December an agreement to jointly develop and market a copy-protection product designed to thwart the copying of optical audio media (audio CDs, DVD-As, etc.). The companies say the new product will be based on TTR's MusicGuard technology, and on related Macrovision technology intended to inhibit what the companies call "casual copying" of music CDs using dual-deck CD recorder systems and PC-based CD-Recordable drives.

As part of the new relationship between the two companies, Macrovision says it will purchase, subject to the satisfaction of certain conditions, an 11.4% equity interest in TTR. On making the equity investment, Macrovision claims it will also acquire an exclusive license to TTR's CD and DVD signature technology, and related encoder software used to embed signatures during the replication process.

Macrovision's John Ryan states that "this agreement allows Macrovision to leverage its existing CD copy-protection technology base and more than a decade of experience in developing and marketing copy-protection solutions to the home video and multimedia software industries, to address important problems currently being faced by the music industry on a worldwide basis. This partnership will take advantage of the collective skills, patents, and expertise of our two companies, and should enable us to deliver a commercially viable music-CD copy-protection system..."

There are no restrictions on CD players that would inhibit the use of their digital data streams... for now.

**united Kingdom**

Paul Messenger

"Grab your MP3 files off the Net and cut them onto vinyl!" was the extraordinary claim made in an advertisement that recently appeared in British DJ magazines. CD-burners: Eat your hearts out!

All vinyl fans owe a big debt of gratitude to the DJ scene, which has done much more than the hi-fi sector to keep the vinyl presses busy, even though the less palatable side of that coin is that large numbers of younger, potential hi-fi customers have turned their attentions instead toward the DJ mix scene. This, in turn, is creating a marketplace that is now big enough to develop its own technologies, and that might well outgrow the current traditional hi-fi scene.

Whether DIY vinyl cutting has any real relevance to the hi-fi sector is doubtful, but the very idea of this machine is nonetheless intriguing. It began with the development of a new vinyl compound that is softer than that normally used for commercial LP releases, yet still lasts much longer than acetates. And cutting direct to vinyl simplifies the whole process dramatically, avoiding the need for mothers, metalwork, and the like.

Vestax is a highly regarded Japanese specialist manufacturer on the DJ scene. Their VRX-2000 disc cutter is expected to cost around £5000 ($7500) and to be available early in 2000, though a working, mono-only prototype was demonstrated at the UK's fall '99 PLASA pro-audio show. The technology does work, but clearly still needs some refining. Tentative

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**Calendar**

**GEORGIA**

- Sunday, January 23, 2-530pm: The Atlanta Audio Society is hosting a seminar featuring Dan O'Grady of Nagra Kudelski, with auditions of the PL-P preamp, VPA vacuum-tube power amp, MPA solid-state power amp, and Nagra-D multichannel 24/96 digital tape recorder. Guests welcome. For more information and directions to the Dunwoody location, contact Chuck Bruce at (770) 1493-7105 or chucksaudiocom@earthlink.com.

**ILLINOIS**

- Saturday, February 12: Holm Audio (2050 W. 75th St., Woodridge) is hosting Ted Denney of Synergistic Research for a discussion of Synergistic's "Your Cable for Life!" technologies, and demonstrations of Active and Discrete Shielding and the Lifetime Passport Protection trade-in program. Bring your old cables for trade-in. Call (630) 663-1298 for more details.

**LOUISIANA**

- New Orleans' first and only high-end audio club holds monthly meetings to discuss topics of interest and listen to music. Join the fun by e-mailing stokjoc@hotmail.com.

**MASSACHUSETTS**

- Sunday, February 6: The Boston Audio Society will host Eugene Fitts III, editor of The Audiophile Voice and former editor of Audio, at its monthly meeting. For more information, call (617) 899-5121, visit http://bostonaudio.home.att.net, or e-mail dbssystems@ibm.net.

**MICHIGAN**

- Thursday, February 10: Stereo Center/Front Row (2065 S. Linden, Flint) is hosting Ted Denney of Synergistic
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Vol. 22 No. 7

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minutes per disc, and a £50 sapphire cut-
ting stylus with a life of 80 hours.

US: CALIFORNIA
Jon Iverson
It is with regret that we heard of the
closing of Mobile Fidelity Sound Lab. 
Known to audiophiles since its incep-
tion in 1977, the company provided seri-
ous listeners with hundreds of remastered 
LPs, cassettes, and CDs (see "Aural 
Robert" elsewhere in this issue).

Audiophile companies often live a 
precocious existence, and, with the dem-
ise of a key distributor, MoFi was dealt 
a fatal blow. A press release from the 
company says that in “September of 
1999, the closure of M.S. Distributing’s 
music division resulted in a substantial 
percentage of uncollectable receivables 
for MFSL, plus the inventory it repre-
sented. Without access to the funds or 
the availability of inventory for resale, 
the financial devastation was more than 
our small company could overcome. 
Therefore, as of November 19, 1999, 
the company that changed the way the 
world listened to music, itself has closed 
its doors.” According to the company, 
“extreme, but unsuccessful, efforts were 
made to overcome the financial blow 
dealt by the sale of M.S. Distributing 
Company this summer and the subse-
cquent closure of its music division.”

Herb Belkin, a co-founder of Mobile 
Fidelity and a co-owner until his retire-
ment nearly five years ago, states: “I am 
deeply saddened with the knowledge 
that the employee-owned Mobile Fi-
delity — which for so many years repre-
sented a major symbol of quality in the 
field of prerecorded music — was, in the 
end, a victim of bigness and mediocrity.

I, along with all audiophiles every-
where, will deeply miss the musical 
efforts of MoFi.”

In making the announcement, MoFi 
added that they “sincerely hope that our 
memory and legacy will continued to 
be enjoyed for many years to come 
through the hundreds of classic LPs, alu-
minum and gold CDs, and even casset-
tes that Mobile Fidelity has lovingly 
remastered for the enjoyment of music 
lovers and for ourselves. It was a won-
derful ride while it lasted.”

UNITED KINGDOM
Paul Messenger
Net browsers might be interested in 
clicking on www.wharfedale.co.uk to 
check out Wharfedale’s new E-market-
ing initiative. The company will offer 
the first 50 pairs of each new loudspeak-
er model at a 50% discount (but so far, 
only to European Net customers). Two 
weeks later, the 50 lucky (?) purchasers 
will get to fill in a detailed questionnaire 
that will tell Wharfedale exactly what 
they think of their new acquisition, the 
results to be published (uncensored?) on 
Wharfedale’s website.

US: THE INTERNET
Barry Willis
Loudspeaker manufacturer B&W has 
been extremely aggressive in the past two 
years in reining in abuses of its dealer 
agreements. Last year, the company cut 
off many dealers and stocking distributors 
in an attempt to tighten control over its 
distribution. Now, as a result of a program 
announced November 22, 1999 by 
KnowledgeLINK, many B&W dealers 
will be able to take sales online in com-
plete compliance with their dealer agree-
ments. Rotel dealers are also participating.

Denver-based Listen Up is one of the 
first to sign on with the “affiliate” pro-
gram with GetPlugged.com, an electro-
ronics commerce site. Not just anyone 
can participate: affiliates must have a re-
quisite number of trained electronics 
salespeople, and certain unspecified 
hardware and software. Online sales of 
B&W and Rotel products will be to 
customers to whom the dealers can per-
sonally deliver, or who can pick up the 
equipment in person. “No mail-order 
delivery will be allowed,” an announce-
ment emphasized. Such stern warnings 
would seem to forestall any possible ter-
torial violations by dealers.

Many manufacturers and dealers are 
wrangling with the problems and op-
portunities the Internet presents. 
Problems include how to adhere to 
geographical limitations imposed by 
what was essentially a 19th-century 
model of distribution, while the Inter-
et offers a global marketplace to any-
one with anything to sell.

It seems likely in this reporter’s opin-
iion that within a few years most manu-
ufacturers will go to direct sales over the 
internet, an eventuality that will com-
pletely alter the traditional distribution 
network. Some extremists believe that 
local retailers are an extinct species, but 
others see them coexisting comfortably 
with their Internet counterparts. Affili-
ate programs such as the B&W/Rotel 
arrangement with GetPlugged.com are 
perhaps best seen as transitional steps 
toward a still-uncertain future.

“We view this as a major win-win 
scenario for everyone involved,” said 
Sunil Mehrotra, CEO of Knowledge-
LINK. “We are extremely pleased that 
B&W and Rotel have decided to allow 
their dealers to align themselves with 
GetPlugged.com.”

Peter Wellikoff, president of B&W/

Research for a discussion of Syn-
ergistic’s “Your Cable for Life!” technol-
ologies, and demonstrations of Active and 
Discrete Shielding and the Lifetime 
Passport Protection trade-in program. 
Bring your old cables for trade-in. Call 
(810) 732-2220 for more details.

MISSOURI
● Tuesday, February 22: Best Sound 
Company (227 North Lindbergh Blvd., 
St. Louis) hosts Gayle Sanders of 
MartinLogan for a demonstration of 
the new Prodigy loudspeakers. Call 
(314) 997-7644 for more information.

NEW JERSEY
● The New Jersey Audio Society wel-
comes anyone interested in high-perfor-
mance LP and CD playback systems to 
become members and participate in 
their monthly meetings. Annual dues 
are $20, and include a subscription to 
the society’s newsletter, The Source. 
For more information, please e-mail your 
mailing address and telephone number to 
analogg@aol.com or to markj 
mills@earthlink.net.

NEW YORK
● For information on the monthly 
meetings of the Musicalaudiophile 
Society, the Audiophile Society, and the 
Gotham Audio Society, call David 
Nemzer at (718) 237-1094.
● For information on Audio Syndrome 
(East Meadow), a monthly club catering 
to obsessive-compulsive audio neurotics 
from September through June, call Roy 
Harris at (516) 489-9576.
● Saturday, January 22, 12-5pm: Toys 
From The Attic (203 Mamaroneck 
Avenue, White Plains) will host a semi-

Stereophile, February 2000
"The GCD-750's D/A converter is first-class."
Lawrence W. Johnson, for AudioVideo Interiors (January 1999)

"Vocals were simply terrific with the ADCOM."
Wayne Garcia, Fi (February 1999)

"The GCD-750 simply sounded musical."
Anthony H. Cordesman, AUDIO (March 1999)

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Rotel parent Equity International, said the Internet venture will aid, not hinder, sales for his company's dealers. "B&W and Rotel have always been committed to supporting our specialty dealer network in helping them to build and increase sales. We see Knowledge-LINK's site, www.GetPlugged.com, as another vehicle to do just that, while at the same time adhering to our strict dealer agreement rules."

**US: THE INTERNET**

Jon Iverson

Among the ingredients needed for a successful online consumer-electronics business, having well-known, sought-after brands may be the most important. Just in time for the 1999 holiday season, Hifi.com announced that it has become one of a "select group" authorized to sell Sony Electronics products over the Internet. This announcement comes on the heels of Celestion and Marantz joining the mail-order retailer (see "Industry Update," January 2000, p.27).

As part of this agreement, Hifi.com says it has developed a special shopping area called "The Sony Store@Hifi.com," dedicated to Sony home audio, video, and digital imaging products. While this area does not represent the entire Sony catalog, audio items will include various CD players, receivers, turntables, and cassette decks, as well as portable stereos and MiniDisc recorders and players. Home video products will include TVs, DVD players, satellite systems, and VCRs.

Hifi.com's Michael Sullivan says that "Hifi.com's agreement with Sony is testament to our growing prominence in the consumer-electronics category." The company has also ended the year with an aggressive off- and online marketing strategy, developing what it describes as a "multi-million-dollar brand-building campaign" that includes national television, radio, and print advertising, combined with exposure on several websites.

**UNITED KINGDOM**

Paul Messenger

"Keraform" is the name of a new cone material that speaker manufacturer Mission claims has a greater stiffness-to-mass ratio than any other material used for loudspeaker cones. Keraform is a true ceramic material—much more so than the surface oxide coatings sometimes applied to metal-alloy cones —and has been developed by Audax with Mission's assistance over the past three years.

Keraform is made by impregnating a fiber matrix with a compound of china clay and resin, then curing it in an oven to create a driver cone light enough for a claimed 89dB/W midband sensitivity, yet rigid enough to keep the first breakup mode comfortably outside the required passband. Just how well that breakup mode is damped is, of course, the other crucial question, which will have to remain unanswered until this magazine gets its hands on a speaker using the new cone material.

Keraform is making its commercial debut in the 5.25" midrange driver used in Mission's new 782 prestige floorstanding loudspeaker, which is effectively a replacement for the long-lived and highly successful 753. Keraform also marks the next step beyond the Audax-sourced Aerogel cones that various Mission 75- and 73-series models have used in recent years.

The three-way 782 is the first 78-series model to appear, and the third up a four-rung ladder, with a UK selling price of £700. Its 6.5"-frame bass driver is mounted on the side of the enclosure to maintain the slim front view that has become very much a Mission feature and the height of current loudspeaker fashion. The 782 is surprisingly light (31 lbs) and very compact (3.1" high by 6.5" wide by 11.6" deep). Pairs are mirror-imaged, allowing the user the option of pointing the speakers inward or outward, according to preference and room conditions.

Much more is found in the details: The hardwired crossover has quite gentle slopes, though a mild notch filter helps control the mid-driver's ultimate breakup. The reverse folded cabinet-work is complex, making full use of CNC routing to break up internal standing waves between the 19mm and 30mm panels. The tweeter is Mission's familiar mechanically decoupled soft dome. The entire 78 series will be finished in real-wood veneers.

**NETHERLANDS**

Peter van Willenswaard

CD-recorders have begun selling massively, at a rate even higher than Philips had originally hoped for. In less than two years' time, CD-R(W) had taken 25% of Europe's over-9500 million € ($, pronounced "euro," is very nearly $1 US) digital recording market. Several of Philips' competitors are reported to have begun preparations for the launch of their own CD-recorders to share in this market. (See also Barry Willis' "Industry Update," November 1999, pp.29-30.) Philips attributes the abundant success of CD-R(W) to the fact that the CD is the most universal digital sound carrier of all, and the most widely spread.

Philips introduced its first CD-recorder, the CDR870, in late 1997, and six months later replaced it with the

**C a l e n d a r**

The following events are being listed as a service to our readers. Stereophile does not assume responsibility for any event listed. Inclusion in the calendar does not imply endorsement by the Society. To be considered for inclusion, events must be open to the public.

**January 23, 1:30pm:** The Charlotte Audiophile Society is hosting Dennis Had of Cary Audio at the Presbyterian Hospital Auditorium in Charlotte. Non-members welcome. Fantastic door prizes! For more information on the meeting, or on becoming a member, please contact Tom Moore at (704) 543-0551 or TMoore@American-appraisal.com.

**Washington, DC**

- **Tuesday, January 18:** Northern Audio Exchange (Pittsburgh) will host Per Kirksæter of Kirksæter Speaker Systems for a demonstration of his new Silverline series and re-engineered Prisma series. Call (412) 366-5055 for more information.

**Pennsylvania**

- **January 23, 7:30pm:** The Pacific Northwest Audio Society meets the second Thursday of each month. Usual start time is 7:30pm at 4545 Island Crest Way, on Mercer Island. For more information, call Tom at (425) 481-8512 or Earl at (206) 907-8026.
Industry Update

improved CDR880. In September 1998 the range was expanded with the CDR765 dual-transport model, and the CDR570 for bookshelf systems.

The current line of CD-R(W) products comprises four models, whose prices range from approximately 9300 to 9600: the basic CDR770, the mini CDR570, the dual-transport CDR775, and the top model, the CDR950 recorder. All models feature a sample-rate converter that accepts any digital input between 12kHz and 56kHz; when offered 44.1kHz, the DLR (Direct Line Recording) function activates itself, locking the recorder's clock tightly to the source and allowing a bit-identical copy to be made — which, of course, cannot happen when a sample-rate converter is at work.

A clever improvement over earlier models is the addition of a three-second stereo signal memory. If the user starts the recording process, hears the music, then realizes that it isn't what should be recorded, the machine can then be stopped without having created a new — now useless — track. The three-second delay also allows so-called Synchronized Auto Starts from analog sources. A Synchronized digital auto start is simple: the start of the track is clearly detectable as the signal goes from digital "blank" to "busy." But with an analog source, there is always some noise — and hence digital signal activity — after the A/D converter. The three-second audio delay allows the machine to detect the start of the musical signal and start the recording without missing the first note.

Though earlier CD-R(W) models were already quite easy to use, Philips has further improved the user interface. Now, while the machines are being programmed, their displays show which choices are to be made at the next step. And special attention has been paid to the sound quality of the top-of-the-line CDR950, which includes high-quality components and, at its analog outputs, a patented new anti-imaging filter.

UNITED KINGDOM

Paul Messenger

In anticipation of the trend toward multichannel surround-sound music formats, I was recently commissioned to review eight "5.1-channel" speaker systems for the UK's Hi-Fi Choice magazine. After getting over the shock of discovering that this meant forty cartons arriving at my door, I had to confront some of the practicalities of the project — like getting five sets of matching interconnects and speaker cables.

A more serious difficulty then arose: I needed three more speaker stands to complement my Kudos S100 stands, which I regularly use to support stereo pairs of stand-mounted speakers. The S100 — which combines a cast-resin/ceramic tripod bass with a large, mass-loaded, pre-tensioned central column — turned out to be the best all-around performer in a group test I conducted about five years ago. However, the guy who'd been making them had since emigrated to Australia; one-time UK distributor B&W suggested I contacted Neat Acoustics, a small specialist speaker brand in the north of England.

I rang up Neat's Bob Surgeoner, asked him what he knew about Kudos, and was delighted to hear that Neat (www.neat.co.uk) had bought the Kudos brand and designs and was putting them back into production. The less expensive S50 has already been available for several months, and the first new batch of S100s is just coming off the line. Three of the latter were immediately dispatched to me, and look rather better-engineered and -finished than my earlier examples. Now I've got a full hand to play 5-channel games.

Neat and Kudos products are distributed in the US by Tofasco, who also distribute Exposure and Dynavector.

Neat bought Kudos because the stands gave the best results under Neat's original Petite stand-mount speaker, which has something of a cult following. Petites and Kudos stands are already shipping to the US, but the Neat model currently attracting the most interest on both sides of the Atlantic is the Petite's flooring variation, the Elite (£1195). It uses the same drivers as the Petite, including the planar tweeter, but has double-chambered reflex bass loading — a real honey of a speaker that I recently had the considerable pleasure of reviewing.

There are more enthusiastic Elite fans among the Mana Acoustics crew (www.mana.co.uk), who place them on their special platforms with excellent results. Indeed, the two companies have decided to work together on Mana's new Stealth high-end initiative. Neat has been working on a "labor" loudspeaker design — 5' tall, seven drive-units, 90-odd pounds in weight — for the past couple of years, and this will now be finalized and readied for production as a Stealth loudspeaker, to accompany Mana's new electronics.

Mana claims that its unique support apparatus has provided the subjective framework for the five-year development program that has now resulted in the company's first electronics product, a power amplifier.

The attractively styled Stealth is available in stereo (MA-2) and monoblock (MA-1) forms, at UK prices of "under £4000" and £4800/pair, respectively. The Stealth is based on an essentially simple circuit with careful attention paid to component selection, board layout, and grounding. Output power is rated at 200W into 4 ohms and is delivered by four bipolar transistors per channel, backed up by a massive 500VA, tightly tolerated toroidal transformer and 20,000µF of power supply capacitance. But the numbers game tells you little of real consequence; this amplifier for the ears and the emotions has been tantalizing my psyche for several days now.

Listening to familiar material, my first reaction to a new product usually involves some uncertainty, but as the track gets going I find myself getting sucked further and further into the music. My pre-production pair of MA-1s showed a remarkable ability to unravel and make sense of the most complex rhythms across a very wide dynamic range.

Mana is now concentrating on the design and marketing of its electronics, a "silent partner" of considerable expertise and resources does the actual manufacturing. The amplifiers are made using production facilities that conform to ISO 9002 standards, and Mana is determined that the Stealth's build quality will rival the very best, regardless of country of origin.

Mana Acoustics products are distributed in the US by Flat Earth Audio, (203) 387-0878.

US: WALL STREET

Barry Willis

For the first time in more than 10 years, individual investors have a chance to own a piece of one of the oldest and most recognized names in the American electronics industry. As of November 1, 1999 RCA officially came back on the stock market, when parent company Thomson Multimedia made a
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CS6 / Fi Magazine, October '97

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MCS1 / The Perfect Vision, May/June '99

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successful initial public offering of 21 million shares. The stock (NYSE: TMS) debuted at $22.62 per share and closed Friday, November 5 at $29.25.

Founded in 1919, the Radio Corporation of America was the most successful maker of radio receivers, phonographs, microphones, amplifiers, and other audio electronics in the first half of the 20th century. RCA created the National Broadcasting Company and had its version of color television accepted as the national standard. The company name, synonymous with American technological prowess, was a household word until the rise of the Japanese electronics industry in the 1970s.

Dominance of the consumer electronics market by Asian companies led to the decline of the RCA brand, which in 1986 was sold to General Electric, then in 1987 spun off to France’s Thomson SA, a huge conglomerate partly owned by the French government. GE, RCA, and Zenith formed the triumvirate of American electronics companies through the 1960s. Neither GE nor Zenith now has much presence in the consumer electronics field. Earlier in 1999, Zenith filed for bankruptcy after an ill-advised venture with Divx players.

But RCA is coming back strong. Under the leadership of Thomson Multimedia CEO Thierry Breton, RCA has closed high-cost manufacturing plants in the US and Europe, and opened production facilities in China, Poland, and Mexico. An aggressive new-product development program is underway, and Breton has arranged partnerships with heavyweight corporations like Microsoft and Hughes Electronics, which operates satellite service DirecTV. Thomson SA has pumped almost 11 billion francs ($1.75 billion) into the resurgence of the brand, according to Evan Ramstad in the Wall Street Journal. According to Ramstad, Thomson Multimedia attained operating profitability in the first quarter of 1999, ending “a string of losses that stretched for over a decade.” Thomson Multimedia earned $53 million on $2.99 billion in revenue during the first six months of 1999. In addition to television sets (one of RCA’s most popular product lines), the company also makes DVD players, satellite receivers, wireless telephones, and camcorders. RCA’s MP3 player, the Lyra, is making strong headway in one of the audio industry’s fastest-growing niches.

RCA is coming back strong under the leadership of Thomson Multimedia.

US: NEW YORK
Jon Iverson

Louderpeaker manufacturer Von Schweikert Research closed its doors in March 1999, after a disastrous flood hit the factory. Many thought this was the end of the story, but last November, Dr. Edward Gonzaga, of the Gonzaga Investment Group, announced the formation of a new version of the company, to be named Von Schweikert Audio. The new company will reportedly again be headed by speaker designer Albert Von Schweikert, who has revealed plans for the release of two all-new speaker systems, the VR-5 and VR-7, scheduled to be shipped to consumers beginning January 15. In addition, the company says that service and updates will be offered for all former VSR speaker systems. (Information is available by e-mail at albertvonr@aol.com.)

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It's been three years since the February 1997 issue, when I last talked with Klaus Heymann, founder and chairman of HHN, the parent company of the Naxos and Marco Polo labels. When I heard that he'd be in New York for a visit, I jumped at the chance for another interview.

Meantime, I have a shopping basket full of Naxos recordings to recommend for this "Records To Die For" issue. Two recommendations? Nah. How about twenty-four! Do your "R2D4" shopping here and save money.

True, the price has gone up. Naxos CDs used to list for $5.99 and retail for $4.99. Now the "suggested" list price is $6.99. As usual, I suggest you try to pay less — about $6 per disc on sale. Even at $6, you can often get three Naxos CDs for what you might pay for a full-price disc from the so-called "major" classical labels.

But if Naxos' price has risen, so has their quality — recording quality, that is. (Performance quality has always been good to excellent.) Today, new releases on Naxos tend to be state-of-the-art recordings.

Beginning informally at breakfast, I spent nearly a whole morning with Heymann, and found him in a decidedly upbeat mood.

**Sam Tellig:** Taking a lot of concerts, Klaus?

**Klaus Heymann:** Nah. No time. Restaurants.

**Tellig:** So what is happening in classical music recording? Three years ago when we talked, the sky was falling.

**Heymann:** Well, recording activity, if anything, has gone up over the past three years. While the majors are recording a lot less, there are many small and miniature labels that sometimes record with public funding and sponsorship money. In any event, the industry is still releasing 500 discs a month. This is counting reissues of back catalog. If you're a record collector — and I consider myself one — it's amazing all the stuff that people record and release.

**Tellig:** And sales?

**Heymann:** Sales have come down from their peak. But sales of what? The market, in my opinion, has split. You have the traditional classical record business, as we knew it in the 1970s and 80s — recording interesting repertoire, discovering and developing new artists. That specialist — or traditional — classical market is today dominated by the independents.

Then you have what I consider pop classics, or crossover classics, which is what the majors are engaged in. You have movie soundtracks — the Three Tenors, many of the things that Yo-Yo Ma does, all these funny compilation concepts. That market is actually quite strong.

If you're a record collector — and I consider myself one — it's amazing all the stuff that people record and release.

What has come down is the majors' share of the traditional classical market, because, with few exceptions, they don't record any big projects any more. They seldom discover and develop new artists. And when they do, they drop them as soon as a release doesn't sell. They live on a series of one-offs. You no longer see the majors doing a Mozart piano-concerto cycle or a Haydn symphony cycle, for instance.

**Tellig:** Classical music's market share — including crossover — is now down to the point where it accounts for less than 3% of record sales. Yet in other countries, like your native Germany, the total is more like 7%. Why is the share in America so small, and shrinking?

**Heymann:** It has to do with cultural differences. In Germany, every small city has its own opera house; and every town has a town music school, which gets a subsidy from the city government. Germans are more exposed to classical music training, or at least classical-music appreciation. This is the problem we have to face in the future. We...
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will try to sell to younger customers who have never been exposed to classical music, except for movie soundtracks or maybe background music in a bar.

As a label, we invest a lot of money in educational activities. We have publications, like The A to Z of Classical Music. We published a brochure on how to enjoy a live concert, which we market to symphony orchestras. We have a new series of discs coming out: Understanding the Classics—analysis made easy. We take a symphony, movement by movement, and play excerpts—main theme, development, second theme, exposition, coda, or whatever the structure is. We analyze each movement, take it apart, and then play it whole.

[Heymann then mentioned other activities, including a music-appreciation course for colleges and a classical-music training program for kids, aimed at elementary school teachers and parents of young schoolchildren.]

Tellig: The sound of many recent Naxos discs is of demonstration quality. What's behind the improvement?

Heymann: A number of things. We now have our own mastering and production studio in London: K&A Productions. We are co-owners, actually. K is for Klaus, and A is for Andrew Walton, my partner in the studio.

We are able to record in better venues. Venue costs have come down because the major record labels are no longer occupying the spaces. And we are able to record with a wider range of top-class producers and engineers—the same people who record for labels such as Chandos, Hyperion, EMI, and so on. Plus, we have some of the finest people in our studio in London.

Tellig: Are all Naxos releases edited there?

Heymann: Everything is sent there for a listen, and sometimes a little doctoring. We do all our guitar recordings in Canada—technically and musically, they are to a very high standard. We record a lot of chamber music in Hungary, and send it to London for final approval. Moscow has its own recording team, and so on.

Tellig: One of your best-selling new releases is the Rachmaninoff Symphony 1 with Alexander Anissimov and the National Symphony Orchestra of Ireland. [See "Sam's Personal Naxos Recommendations" below.] How does a Russian conductor end up recording with an Irish orchestra?

Heymann: Anissimov has been Principal Conductor of the National Symphony of Ireland since 1994. We have recorded him in Moscow, too. The Irish orchestra plays a lot of Russian music.

Tellig: One of the most widely acclaimed Naxos series is the Bruckner symphony cycle with Georg Tintner. Any plans for more Tintner recordings?

Heymann: Mr. Tintner has become a very busy man—too busy to record.

Tellig: Such a fine conductor—how come we never heard of him before?

Heymann: He is one of the best conductors of the older generation. He has conducted in Canada, New Zealand, and Australia. But he didn't have much of a career. He's not a smooth, slick, fast-talking, fund-raising conductor. He has his own mind. But he is a very charming man and a wonderful musician. [Sadly, a few days after this conversation, Mr. Tintner passed away at the age of 82.]

Tellig: Are there any conductors today whose recordings sell briskly?

Heymann: I'm not sure there ever were many conductors whose recordings always sold — von Karajan, certainly. Bernstein. A few others.

Tellig: Is the situation with orchestras and conductors better or worse now?

Heymann: If you mean quality, better—much better than 20 or even 10 years ago. Young people graduating from music conservatories today are fabulously gifted, technically very competent—so much so that it scares the wits out of musicians who have been in orchestras for 10 or 20 years.

I was talking with a conductor in Nancy—that's a small city in France, the administrative capital of Lorraine. The population is about 100,000. The director of the regional orchestra there told me that when he has an open position, he has 50 to 70 applicants, all superb, all wonderful players. And this is a provincial French orchestra.

Conductors are more competent, too—a lot more so than conductors of 50 years ago. They are well schooled, and they all have access to the recorded legacy. They all listen to records.

Tellig: But they all sound the same.

Heymann: The idiosyncratic interpretations of the old conductors wouldn't be acceptable today—the Mengelbergs, Furtwänglers, Weingartners. Critics would say, "He's distorting the music."

The greatest influence on music-making was Toscanini. He said, 'This is the way the composer wrote it and this is how it should be played.' Whether or not Toscanini played it as the composer wrote it is open to question.

Tellig: But there were some conductors whose recordings people collected.

Heymann: Yes; von Karajan sold, and still does. He had a sound. But he wasn't the greatest conductor of our time. I think he was a reasonably good conductor when he was a young man. In his old age, there was all this hype and this super-rich Cinemaroma sound he created. But today when you listen to [ahem], it's impossible to distinguish one from the other. I can't tell.

Tellig: So why not Anissimov on Naxos for one-third the price?

Heymann: Exactly. Can you tell the difference? Very few people can. The Irish orchestra is fabulous. There are a lot of young people in the orchestra, fresh from music school and technically very competent. They play in a wonderful hall, and they have a plenty of time to rehearse. They have five or six rehearsals for a concert—which is a lot more than the London orchestras—and then they record the work for us.

Tellig: Naxos is known for unusual repertoire. When you record Cembali [see below], does it sell?

Heymann: Yes, everything sells equally well for the first year. Then the repertory splits into three groups. We have the hits—the Verdi Requiem, which sells 10,000 copies a year. Then we have the cash cows, which sell 3000 to 5000 cop-
ies a year steadily. Then we have the water-carriers, which sell 1000 to 2000 copies a year. With more obscure stuff, sales drop off.

**Tellig:** Are you recording with American orchestras?

**Heymann:** We did our first Berlioz recording with the San Diego Symphony a few years ago, and we've recorded more Berlioz with them. We recently recorded a Hanson symphony with the Nashville Symphony, our hometown in the US. Several other US symphony orchestras are interested in recording for Naxos, because they know our international presence. In a year's time, we may have relations with as many as five or six US symphony orchestras.

**Tellig:** What determines whether an orchestra makes a recording of a particular work?

**Heymann:** Ah, good question. There are sponsors. They want to have gifts to give away, so they pay for the recording. Get their logo on it, then send out 10,000 copies for Christmas. This doesn't interest us. Then there is the vanity of conductors. A conductor wants to document himself doing the great masterworks. That's not reason enough for us to record.

If an orchestra tours internationally and a conductor wants to have an international presence, then recordings are necessary. We can put CDs in record shops around the world. Naxos is the right place to go nowadays.

**Tellig:** I'll tell a conductor of a US symphony orchestra who is desperate to be recorded.

**Heymann:** We cannot afford to pay

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### Sam's Personal Naxos Recommendations

**Telemann:** Born four years before J.S. Bach, Georg Philipp Telemann (1681–1767) outlived him by 17 years. When Telemann died in 1767, age 86, Haydn was 35 and Mozart was 11. And Klaus Heymann is right: Telemann must have written day and night. Music de Table, Tablemusik, Table Music — whatever. This is great stuff — the ultimate dining and baroque musical experience, in four volumes (so far), performed by the Orchestra of the Golden Age. More than four hours of delicious light baroque dining music. If you have a changer, load all four CDs (8.553724, 8.553725, 8.553731, 8.553732), and Telemann will entertain you for the whole evening. Want more? Try the Suites (8.553791), with the Northern Chamber Orchestra conducted by Nicholas Ward. Enjoy. And listen for the influence of Klezmer music!

Ever hear of German composer Christian Cannabich (1731–98)? (That's pronounced Cann-a-beesh, but you can call him whatever.) I hadn't either, until Heymann sent me Symphonies 59, 63, 64, 67, and 68 (8.553960). A lot more great works where those came from, he says. Spirited performances by the Lukas Consort, directed by Victor Lukas.

Often, a Naxos disc can be a revelation. Like *Symphonies, Vol.2,* by Joseph Martin Kraus (1756–92), performed by the Swedish Chamber Orchestra under Petter Sundkvist (8.554472). Kraus was a German-born conductor who made his career in Sweden, entertaining King Gustavus III. (Lars, take note.) The first movement of the Symphony in C is breathtakingly beautiful and superbly recorded: 72.13 of bliss.

So many Swedes — it must be because Klaus sells so many discs in Sweden. Finland, too. Don't let the Swedes and the Finns monopolize this disc. Bernhard Henrik Crusell (1775–1838) is featured on 8.554144 with three clarinet concertos performed by Per Billman, principal clarinetist of the Royal Opera House, Stockholm, accompanied by the Upsala Chamber Orchestra with conductor Gérard Korsten.

Not a Swede this time: Bohemian-born Franz Krommer (1759–1831) was once thought to rival Haydn and Beethoven in popular esteem. Want to hear why? Get *Partitas for Wind Ensemble* (8.553868), performed by the Michael Thomson Wind Ensemble.

If you like clarinet, try Carl Stamitz (1745–1801): *Clarinet Concertos, Vol.2* (8.554339), with Kalmán Berkes, clarinet, and the Nicolaus Esterházy Sinfonia, Budapest. These are among the first clarinet concertos ever written.

While we're in the 18th century, you probably want the violin concertos of Viennese composer Leopold Hoffman (1738–93), performed by Lorraine McAslan (violin), Tim Hugh (cello), and the Northern Chamber Orchestra conducted by Nicholas Ward (8.554233). You shouldn't listen to Haydn and Mozart all the time, you know. Many of this composer's works survived in only single copies.

Do the Viennese have a special way with music? Of course. Take the Vienna Brahms Trio in the Piano Trios Opp.63 and 80 of Robert Schumann (8.553836). This is the finest chamber-music release I've heard all year. The Viennese capture so well what the liner notes refer to as Schumann's "vivid sense of tonal colors."

**Johannes Brahms** arranged some of his finest works for piano duet — four-hand piano music. Get *Vol.3* (8.553654), which contains a four-hand arrangement of my favorite, the Sonata in F, Op.34b, and the Variations on a Theme by Joseph Haydn, Op.56b. Vol.4 (8.553726) is nice too: the two Serenades, with pianists Silke-Thora Matthies and Christian Köhn.

Were there other late-19th-century Czech symphonists besides Dvorák? Well, yes — Zdenek Fibich (1850–1900), who wrote three symphonies, the first two of which are heard on a disc with the Razumovsky Symphony conducted by Andrew Mogrelia (8.553699). I won't say the music is memorable, but it's worth a listen if you like late Romantic symphonies.

"In one ear and out the other" would also describe the music of Alexander Glazunov (1865–1936). Our friend Alexander Anissimov is heard with the Moscow Symphony in *The Seasons* and *Scènes de Ballet* (8.553915). If you like Tchaikovsky, try it. An even better-recorded Glazunov disc is 8.553857, with *Suite Charactéristique, Le Chant du Destin,* and *Préludes,* again with the Moscow Symphony, this time conducted by Igor Golovshin. The *Prélude Op.85 No.2,* in memory of Rimsky-Korsakov, is a must for all fans of Russian music.

We'll skip out of sequence to Sergei Rachmaninoff. Naxos has one of the great Rachmaninoff pianists in Turkish-born Idil Biret. I think this is the finest recording in the catalog of the Piano Sonatas 1 and 2 (8.553003). Ms. Biret is wonderful with Chopin, too.

Two more Biret/Rachmaninoff discs: *Piano Transcriptions & Arrangements* (8.550978) contains Rachmaninoff's renderings of Bach, Schubert, Mendelssohn, and more. A wonderful disc,
American union rates and sell at our price—or UK labor rates, either. It costs $100,000 to make a recording with a US symphony orchestra. We make 75 cents or $1 profit per CD. We would have to sell more than 100,000 copies, and, even at our price, we cannot sell that many.

**Tellig:** So sponsorship makes the recording possible.

**Heymann:** Yes. In the US, sponsorship tends to be private money. In the UK, we have sponsorship from various trusts—the Walton Trust, the Delius Trust, etc. On the continent, the radio orchestras receive grants from the regional or provincial government, and sometimes sponsorship money. The orchestra records as part of their regular work—the musicians are on salary. Of course, the recording fees do not cover the real costs of the recordings.

**Tellig:** At least one American orchestra has started its own record label—the St. Louis Symphony and their Arch Media label. Do you see that happening more?

and worth having just for the 2:11 at the end: the composer’s transcription of “The Star-Spangled Banner.” He first performed it in Providence, Rhode Island on December 8, 1918, a year after he fled Lenin and the Bolsheviks. The younger Rachmaninoff is heard on 8.553004, which includes the *Moreaux de Salon*, Op.10, written in 1894, when the composer was fresh out of the conservatory.

I mentioned Alexander Anissimov’s Rachmaninoff Symphony 1, with the National Symphony of Ireland. This may be the best-played and best-recorded Rachmaninoff First on disc (8.550806). A sweeping performance of the *Capriccio Bohémien* fills out the generous 69:14 playing time. Kudos for this one to recording engineer Tim Handley, who’s engineered quite a few Naxos discs.

**Edward Elgar** is John Atkinson’s favorite composer, and one of mine, too. *Falstaff* may not be Elgar’s greatest work, but 8.553879 might be the finest recording of it in the catalog—the English Northern Philharmonic is heard, conducted by David Lloyd-Jones. The music is a little fattening.

For something leaner, try **Richard Strauss**’s *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, performed by the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Michael Hálasz (8.553379). I find the recording slightly opaque, but the performance is exquisite.

British composer **Arnold Bax** (1883–1953) followed in Elgar’s footsteps. Never did quite fill sir Edward’s shoes, perhaps, but Bax’s music is quite appealing nonetheless. Early in his career he composed a series of tone poems, of which *November Woods* is one of the most famous. It is heard on 8.554093, along with Symphony 2.

The Royal Scottish National Orchestra, conducted by David Lloyd-Jones, the same chap who gives us the splendid Elgar *Falstaff*. Hats off again to producer Tim Handley.

Don’t let the last name fool you—**Gerald Finzi** (1901–56) was one of the most English of composers. Was ever music so gentle, so easy on the ear? His Clarinet Concerto is a special delight as performed by Robert Plane, with the Northern Sinfonia conducted by Howard Griffiths (8.553566). Fillers include *A Severn Rhapsody*. A must for all fans of English music, produced and engineered by Tim Handley.

I mentioned that Georg Tintner died at the age of 82. He should have had a more illustrious recording career, but don’t blame Klaus. With Symphonies 1, 3, and “00” still to be released, Tintner’s complete cycle of all 11 symphonies of **Anton Bruckner** will be well worth owning. Start, perhaps, with Symphony 4, the “Romantic,” in the 1878–80 Haas version (8.554128). Tintner conducts the Royal Scottish National Orchestra.

Hungarian Jenő Jandó may be the most recorded pianist of modern times—possibly the most recorded pianist ever. Klaus Heymann thinks the world of him, as became apparent at breakfast before our interview. Why is Jandó so special? Part of it is the pianist’s full, rich sound. There are so many Jandó discs on Naxos, all commendable; a good place to start might be **Beethoven’s Baguettes and Dances, Vol.1** (8.553795), which starts off with a superb performance of “Für Elise,” one of the best-known melodies in classical music.

This may be an audiophile crowd, but can your system do *Niagara Falls*? Find out with a volume of Naxos’ American Classic series: *Orchestral Works of Ferde Grofé* (8.559007), with the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra conducted by William T. Stromberg. The disc includes three suites: *Mississippi*, the well-known *Grand Canyon*, and *Niagara Falls*, written in 1961, toward the close of the composer’s career. It’s the last that will excite audiophiles—especially “Thunder of the Waters” and “Power of Niagara.” Lars and the Brass Ear flipped when they heard this. Don’t crank up the sound too loud. I warned you! This killer disc could literally take out your system.

While awaiting 16 CDs of **John Philip Sousa**’s band music, I have three other Sousa discs to recommend, Keith Brion conducting the Razumovsky Symphony on all three. *On Stage* (8.559008) features music for the musical theater. Dig band 6 of the 1897 operetta, *The Bride Elect*: it’s called “The Whiskies—Scotch, Irish, Bourbon, and Rye.” *At the Symphony* (8.559013) consists of marches and other pieces, with a great rendition of “The Stars and Stripes Forever.” I sometimes send Marina marching off to work in the morning with this disc. *And On Wings of Lightning* (8.559029) is mostly marches. Great fun.

If I dwell on Naxos releases, it’s because they’re so good, so cheap, and so many of them tend to not get noticed; little hype surrounds their release. And many record stores do a poor job of stocking Naxos, some adding insult to injury by jacking up the price from $6.99 to $79. If you can’t find these discs in your local record store, try ordering from your favorite Internet source. A 50-cent discount is sort of cheesy—look for at least $1 off.

And happy listening! —**Sam Tellig**
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channel surround, which we can adapt to five-channel surround. I am very keen on the long playing times of DVD-Audio in 16-bit/44kHz, because then we could put the Haydn string quartets on 4 DVDs, saving dealers and customers a lot of space.

**Tellig:** Would this save customers money?

**Heymann:** Sure. You have a sliding scale: As time goes up, manufacturing cost goes down, so you pass on the savings to the consumer. You charge for the recordings by the hour, instead of by the disc, and give people a discount: one hour is $7, two hours are $12, three hours are $16, and so forth.

**Tellig:** Do you think most recordings will be two-channel 16/44?

**Heymann:** No, most will go to 24-bit/96kHz. Twenty-bit recordings can be adapted to 24-bit. We have a lot of 20-bit recordings already. From 16 to 20 bits I hear an audible improvement. From 20 to 24, bits, I can't hear any more. But surround sound is a major improvement over two-channel if it's well done — if it's natural, not gimmicky surround.

I remember hearing some demonstrations. Even 16-bit surround blew 20- and 24-bit stereo out of the water. Dramatic improvement.

**Tellig:** Do you think surround sound will succeed?

**Heymann:** This time, yes. Last time we had surround, 25 years ago, there were different formats and a problem of equipment. Today a lot of people already have surround sound in the home for home cinema. Feeding surround-sound audio into those systems is easy.

**Tellig:** You must have recorded everything. Are you scraping the bottom of the barrel, or is it time to re-record everything you recorded 10 years ago in better sound?

**Heymann:** We are doing the latter anyway. We think some of the older recordings should be re-done — new versions of the works. But that's not because we are running out of things to record.

If you look only at the major composers, there is no complete recorded Vivaldi, although we've recorded a good many of the concertos. There's no complete Mendelssohn. I don't think there's a complete Haydn yet. No complete Telemann. We have a lot of Cannabich, Stamitz, and Vanhal to record. Dittersdorf wrote 110 symphonies. If you can consider him the next Haydn, there's a lot of work for all of us. There are other contemporaries of Mozart and Haydn, and much of it is wonderful music.

Telemann wrote 600 suites. Most are lost, but about 200 are still in existence. He must have written day and night for a very long life. You could theoretically have a complete Telemann on 300–400 CDs. We're not going to do it, of course. [I could tell, though, by the gleam in his eyes, that Heymann had at least considered the idea.]

And then you have all those opera composers. There is so much stuff — I shouldn't say "stuff" — so much good music out there. I don't think we will discover another Beethoven or Mozart, but there is still a lot of wonderful music. I've looked at the music catalogs, you come to the conclusion that there are about 1.5 million hours of music composed, but only about 60,000 CDs of unduplicated repertoire out in the market. That leaves 1.44 million hours of material yet to be recorded.

If you look at my recording plan — it's a basket of ideas, really — I have 4000, 5000, or 6000 CDs I could produce right way, if I had the money and the resources.

**Tellig:** It's sad what's happened to most of the major classical labels. Will Naxos remain independent?

**Heymann:** Our plan is yes. I can't be sure of what will happen if I am no longer there. Anyway, I have time. In our business, people live very long. [Heymann is 63.] It's an old people's business. I see another 10 good years ahead for myself, maybe more.

But yes, I am thinking about it: How do we ensure the survival of what we've built? We've sort of revolutionized the industry. I would never sell to a major. I don't want investors who say I can't do what I want to do — can't record this or that because we have to make a profit every quarter.

I'm not an idealist, mind you. But I am not in business just to make money, but rather to do something that's right. I told my wife the other night, "Mummy" — I call her Mummy — "we are so lucky that we can make a decent living off something we love to do."

**Tellig:** You have a son, Henryk. Is he in the business? [The "HNH" in HNH International stands for Henryk Nishizaki Heymann. Violinst and Naxos recording artist Takako Nishizaki is Mrs. Klaus Heymann.]

**Heymann:** Unfortunately, my son is not interested. He is into punk rock. At least he plays and makes music; that's a blessing.

**Tellig:** How old is he?

**Heymann:** He's 22. But we have many talented people within our organization, at the national level, running distribution organizations. I think we are in much better shape than most of the small independent labels.

**Tellig:** New projects?

**Heymann:** Always. We are releasing a complete Schubert lieder cycle — only German singers. We are continuing with the American Classics series — this has been very successful. Barber, Ives, Schuman — and the complete Hanson, including a lot of works that have never been recorded before. We are doing the complete band music of John Philip Sousa — 16 CDs of band music with the Royal Artillery in London, conducted by Keith Brion. The first two volumes have been recorded.

And then the historical stuff. We have just been given access to the Paul Whiteman Collection at Williams College, in Massachusetts — sound recordings and other material that Paul Whiteman himself donated to the college in the 1930s and '40s. This includes a lot of broadcast material that has never been issued. In the meantime, we also decided to release out-of-copyright Paul Whiteman Orchestra and Band material, to be restored by David Lennick, in Toronto.

**Tellig:** That should be a treasure trove of early-20th-century American popular music — Bing Crosby and the like.

**Heymann:** You're excited, huh? [Heymann could see my tongue hanging out.]

**Tellig:** You bet.

**Heymann:** Me too. The material stretches from the 1920s through the 1940s. I have heard the sound of some of the later recordings, and it's quite good.

*And on that happy note, we concluded our interview.*
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Sorry about starting an “Analog” column with an HDCD recommendation, but I was going through a pile of new CDs when the sound of one—Evolution, from Modern Jazz Quartet veteran John Lewis on Atlantic—almost immolated me. The sonic presentation on this solo-piano set, recorded in January 1999, is exceptionally natural: a well-organized, harmonically and physically convincing, three-dimensional picture of a piano within the reverberant field of a real performance space. Clearly, a minimally miked analog job, and spectacular in its simplicity.

I tried to guess who might have engineered this. Jim Anderson? Jon Rosenberg? Joe Ferla? Kavi Alexander? John Atkinson? But when I saw the credit, I thought I was hallucinating: E. Alan Silver. I thought he was dead.

E. Alan Silver and Abe Vigoda are very much alive. For those unfamiliar, Silver was the recording director of the Connoisseur Society label, which, in the mid-1960s, produced and issued some of the finest-sounding LPs of that or any time. Silver produced sensational recordings of flamenco guitarist Manitas De Plata and Czech pianist Ivan Moravec, among others, but as far as I know he didn’t engineer any of them; David B. Jones did that. Silver the engineer? Who knew?

The music—just the introspective, understated Lewis pouring out a lifetime’s worth of keyboard invention—is worthy of a great recording. MQJ fans will dig the solo take on “Django,” which eerily seems to leave the spaces for drums, bass, and vibraphone. A great disc, musically and sonically.

Simply annoying

Have you heard any of Simply Vinyl’s 180gm LPs? This British reissue label has almost 80 LP’s in its catalog, and, according to its website (www.simplyvinyl.com), makes a big issue out of quality control in the lacquer-cutting, pressing, and packaging processes. It’s paid off—in my experience, Simply Vinyl pressings are impeccable.

But there’s not one word about the “quality control” of the most critical ingredient: the source material. That’s like choosing a restaurant because it makes a big deal about china and silverware. What about the food?

Instead of a record cut from a CD or DAT in a perfect facsimile of the original gatefold jacket, I’d rather have a well-pressed record sourced from a master tape, or even a copy of a master tape. I wouldn’t care if it was packed in a brown paper bag. Would you?

There’s almost no way Simply Vinyl gets master tapes for their reissues of original American LPs, of which they’ve released many.

When, a few years ago, a vinyl dealer sent me a copy of Simply Vinyl’s reissue of The Byrds’ Younger Than Yesterday to audition, it sounded so unlike the original pressing—so hard, bright, and flat—that I e-mailed Simply Vinyl to ask about the source. I received no reply.

But there’s almost no way Simply Vinyl gets master tapes for their reissues of original American LPs, of which they’ve released many. Their many Byrds reissues certainly weren’t from masters. State-side, Sundazed used the same original masters for their vinyl reissues of the first four Byrds albums that Sony did for its CD reissues. Both editions were produced by the meticulous Bob Irwin.

And what about Simply Vinyl’s reissue of Dylan’s Blonde On Blonde, far chirissakes—there is no two-channel master tape. It’s lost. Sony has gone back twice to remix it for CD: once for the abortive Master Sound gold CD series (Dylan hated it), and, more recently, again for a CD/SACD release, which should be out by the time you read this (and which vinyl fan Dylan, my sources tell me, does approve of).

So what did Simply Vinyl use? Did they have access to the first-generation dupes Columbia sent British CBS back in 1966? If so, that would be a real coup, one you’d expect them to trumpet. Given the much smaller press runs in the UK, the tape would probably be about as close to the sound of the lost master as you could get. And “fastidious” is the UK’s middle name—especially in its record biz, as any fan of British pressings will tell you. The UK dupes was probably used carefully and stored correctly—but there’s nary a word on the Simply Vinyl jacket, or anyplace else, about the source for that LP or any others in the series.

A few years ago, JVC’s XRCD label announced it was going to reissue The Band’s second, eponymous album, but it never did—no one could find the master tape. Recently, EMI UK issued The Band on vinyl as part of its First Century series. The label says “Analog cutting from analog tapes.” No doubt EMI used the first-generation dupe Capitol sent it in 1969. While the reissue is not quite as good as a mint Bob Ludwig green-label original, it’s still very good, and sounds very analog.

Recently, I auditioned three more Simply Vinyl reissues: John Martyn’s Solid Air (British Island ILPS 9226), Nick Drake’s Bryter Layter (British Island ILPS 9134), and Free’s seminal Fire and Water (British Island ILPS 9120). Even though the originals were pressed in the UK, if you look on many pink-label and “sunny” origi-nals, you’ll see the Sterling stamp and “LH” on the vinyl lead-out spiral. Those were mastered in New York by Lee Hulko. There must have been something special about the plating and pressing in the UK; the American versions with the same stamp sounded pretty awful.

In any case, assuming Island head Chris Blackwell got the tapes back when Hulko was finished, you’d think Simply Vinyl would have had access to the original masters for those releases, and for others sourced from British labels. Yet, again, nothing anywhere about sources. At his invitation, I e-mailed Virgil Waxman—Simply Vinyl’s A&R guy, QC guy, and all-around head guy—and asked about the source material used.

Well, Waxman hadn’t invited me personally, but a message on the website had: “Finally, since we appreciate feedback from vinyl fans, please feel free to contact Virgil anytime about, well... anything, really!” I took the bait. So far, no Virgil.

So I sat down the other night and compared the new Simply Vinyl reissues to an
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original pink-label *Fire and Water*, an original “sunray” *Sold Air*, and a later, orange-and-blue-label *Bryer Layer*. Tonally, the reissues are all very honest renderings of the originals. But—and it’s a big one—all three LPs were spatially flat and sounded kind of “thick,” with none of the focus, air, fine detail, and resolution found on my originals (or, in the case of the Drake, a third pressing). And those particular attributes are what I (and, I suspect, you) prefer about analog! There’s more there there, more detail, more depth and instrumental layering, more information, more to listen to, and much better organization—especially when the music gets complex. Though some are better than others, overall the Simply Vinyl reissues deliver less of all of those attributes than do the original pressings.

So, Virgil, your company’s conspicuous silence regarding its source material seems to translate as “Whatever we can get.” If I’m wrong, please correct me.

“What’s the big deal?” I hear some of you saying. “Thanks for alerting me, I won’t buy any.” Or maybe you’re saying “So what? I can’t find any of the originals, so these well-pressed, well-packaged, decent-sounding facsimiles will do just fine.”

Well, think of this: How many of the 80-odd titles in the Simply Vinyl catalog that you might like to own were actually mastered from original analog tapes—say, Van Morrison’s *Astral Weeks or Moondance,* or Neil Young’s *After the Gold Rush.* Now that the market has been muddied with vinyl cut from who knows what, how likely is it that someone else will take a shot at those titles using *certified* original tapes? That’s why I have a problem with Simply Vinyl. The good news is that Classic Records will shortly be issuing the Led Zeppelin catalog using lacquers cut from the original analog master tapes. They’re supposed to be *awesome*-sounding.

Speaking of alerts: Avoid like a dirty needle the recent 180gm Stones LPs issued by Capitol and pressed at RTI, including *Sticky Fingers* and *Exile on Main Street.* Mud, baby, M-U-D. And don’t buy the excellent new Foo Fighters set on LP either: more mud. Buy the CD (a new first for this column).

Bob Ludwig was responsible for the remastering of these LPs, so I e-mailed him about what I heard. He’s checking out his cutting system.

**Temper Supreme**

Back in July 1996 (Vol.19 No.7), I reviewed the $3800 Transfiguration *Temper* moving-coil phono cartridge from Immutable Music: “Tonally, the Temper was neutral. It was neither warm, nor cool, nor glassy bright, nor dull, nor was it sluggish or fast or anything easily identifiable.” Its “ability to resolve the timbral, textural, and dynamic character of low-level detail was unsurpassed in my experience.” (Immutable Music is distributed by Musical Surroundings, www.musicalsurrondings.com.)

Two years later, in the October 1998 issue (Vol.21 No.10), I reviewed the Lyra Parnassus D.C.t, which, while perhaps a bit more aggressive and not quite as neutral as the Temper, certainly surpassed it in its “ability to resolve the timbral, textural, and dynamic character of low-level detail.” That’s progress.

Working with Graham Engineering’s Bob Graham in the design and development of Graham’s Nightingale—an integral arm tube/cartridge combination—Immutable Music’s Seiji Yoshioka has rethought his Temper design, and now sells the update as the Temper Supreme. The price is still $3800.

The update includes silver coil windings, plus a number of refinements to the yokeless construction. Thanks to a square, laser-cut hole, the former/coil assembly sits *directly* inside the core of a ring magnet. This intimacy allows for accurate, efficient coupling of the magnet and coil, which means fewer windings are needed to generate an equivalent voltage, which means a lower moving mass for the entire system.

The Temper Supreme is still the most neutral-sounding, “characterless” MC cartridge I’ve yet encountered, but the changes have yielded far greater dynamic performance, with more punch and overall sonic excitement. The Supreme offers blacker backgrounds and improved image dimensionality without sounding edgy or “hi-fi”-ish. You get the outstanding detail of a great moving-coil with the relaxed feel of the finest moving-magnet and moving-iron designs.

With its 250µV output, you’ll need a quiet, high-gain phono section, but anyone contemplating spending $3800 on a cartridge will probably already have one. The Supreme tracks extremely effectively at 1.8gm, and should be in anyone’s short list of the finest MC cartridges you can buy. The Supreme’s tonal neutrality and freedom from edginess and artificiality, while still delivering incredible detail and low-level resolution, are unique in my listening experience.

You can trade in your Transfiguration Temper for a Supreme, but it’ll cost you $1600. While you’ll appreciate the

**In Heavy Rotation**

1) Amadou et Mariam, *Sou ni tile*, Tindor CD
2) John Lewis, *Evolution*, Atlantic HDCC
3) Tāb Smith, *Top 'n' Bottom*, Denmark CD
6) Sibelius: Violin Concerto (Jascha Heifetz, Fritz Reiner/CSO), RCA/Classic LP
7) Built to Spill, *Keep It Like a Secret*, Up LP
9) The Clash, *From Here to Eternity: Live*, Columbia import, 2 LPs
10) The Police, *Outlandos d'Amour*, Vivante Products, 180gm LP

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*Stereophile, February 2000*
At Madrigal®, the term Reference carries special meaning. In the literal sense, Mark Levinson® Reference products serve as benchmarks. They are designed to be the best available in their product category — regardless of price. All Reference components feature a modular architecture that allows them to be updated as technology evolves. Our commitment to Reference product owners is now a matter of record. Audition Madrigal's benchmark components at your Mark Levinson dealer soon. It will change your point of reference.
improvement, I'd wait until I needed a retip before making the move... unless, of course, cash isn't a concern.

For a more in-depth description, read my original Transfiguration Temper review—the differences between it and the Supreme are not profound, but the improvements are easily audible. If you audition the Temper Supreme and it doesn't move you as it did me, you might consider the Lyra Parnassus D.C.t, which sounds a bit more vivid. According to the October 1999 “Recommended Components,” my friend Paul Messenger apparently finds it a bit too “hi-fi.” I don't. I don't see how anyone could be disappointed with either one.

The EMT cartridges

Perhaps after hearing a few of these exotic, bodiless designs from Germany, you'll reconsider the desirability of “neutrality.” While these EMT cartridges are not dead neutral, their subtle deviations yield some of the most plausible, intoxicating listening I've experienced in quite some time.

I've spent a few months shuttling among four versions: the medium-output (150mV) TU-2 with Super Fineline stylus, the low-output TU-S (11μV) with van den Hul stylus (both with aluminum cantilevers), and two low-output (210μV) TU-3 models, both with boron cantilevers. One version features the Super Fineline stylus, the other a special Swiss-sourced Geyer S stylus made of sapphire instead of diamond, and which undergoes multiple polishings before being attached to the boron cantilever.

All of these hand-built “nude” cartridges share a basic design based on the classic Ortofon SPU, and all use a cross-coil, soft-iron-magnet generator wound with copper wire. The aluminum body—what there is of it—is not milled but die-cast, which the manufacturer claims is more difficult and costly to do, but offers better sound with fewer resonances.

The mounting flanges are not tapped, so you have to use nuts. This makes installation—and even removal from the wooden box—tricky and somewhat dangerous, given the very strong magnetic field. Speaking of which, the recommended tracking force for all of these cartridges is 2–3gm. That doesn't stop Clearaudio fanatics from spending $7500 on an Insider and tracking that heavily, so I didn't let it stop me either. After all, valuable, vintage, out-of-print LPs can always be replaced. (Just making sure you're paying attention.)

The blue-bodied, higher-output, basic TU-2 sells for $1795 and didn't sound particularly impressive. It lacked the kind of detail and resolution I consider essential—especially at that price—but its frequency balance was lush yet detailed, and it produced a really big soundstage.

Switching to the ultra-low-output van den Hul version of the TU-2S ($2195; also available with a Super Fineline stylus) greatly improved detail and resolution while maintaining the big stage, but you'd better have a high-gain, ultra-quiet phono stage. The TU-2S has a 1dB dip extending from around 500Hz to 5000Hz, and then a typical MC boost rising almost 4dB from the dip at 15kHz. But the TU-2S sounds neither warm and soft like an original Koetsu, nor bright like some MCs with steep, rising top ends—even unloaded at 47k ohms. This analysis is not only the result of acute listening: each cartridge comes with an individual print-out.

With the TU-2S you get deep, full-bodied, very solid bass; lush, sweet mids; and outstanding detail and snap on top without brightness or edge—all on a noticeably wide, deep, airy soundstage. There is an overall feeling of liquidity to the sound, and a soothing background quiet that creates a buoyant, gliding sensation. Like many great loudspeakers, this truly interesting-sounding cartridge trades a bit of analytical perfection for intoxicating “musicality”—yet its ability to deliver inner detail and delineate instruments from within complex arrangements was outstanding. And despite the ultralow output, if you've got a high-gain, low-noise phono section, you'll find you're not trading dynamics for detail.

The TU-3 adds $555 (with Fineline stylus) or $800 (with Geyer S) to the $2195 price of the TU-2S, as well as almost doubling the output. TU-3 coil windings are hand-picked. Based on their traces, both of these cartridges are somehow flatter than the TU-2S, the 1dB dip falling between 2kHz and 6kHz. Both also feature 3dB rises between 15 and 20kHz relative to the mid/mid-high dip. Yet neither TU-3 sounds bright, and both sound like more refined versions of the TU-2S, with greater midbass solidity, overall three-dimensionality, and high-frequency clarity without added edge.

The Geyer S version was a sonic knockout right out of the box. I played a Living Stereo version of Puccini's Turandot, recorded in Italy by Lewis Layton, and the cartridge's portrayal of individual and massed voices was absolutely stunning—as was the cartridge's capture of the hall sound and the distance between the chorus and the soloists. I listened to four out of six sides—and I don't particularly like opera (though I think I may be finally growing into it).

In either version, but especially the Geyer S, the TU-3 ended up being among the most enjoyable cartridges I've had the pleasure of auditioning. The "gliding" sense evident with the TU-2 was even more present in the 3: ultra-relaxed yet extremely detailed, the TU-3 was as effective with the Clash's new live two-LP set (From Here to Eternity, Columbia import) as it was with Classic's three new superb-sounding Heifetz reissues (Sibelius and Brahms violin concertos, Bruch's Scottish Fantasy).

How well the Geyer S stylus treats my precious vinyl when tracking at 2.5gm, and how many hours one can expect to get from a sapphire stylus, I don't know—but if I can convince the importer, Lauerman Audio Imports, to let me be their next guinea pig, I'll be happy to find out and let you know.

Next month: Crown Jewel SE (Follow-Up), Transfiguration Spirit, Grado Statement, VPI 17F vs Nittry Gritty 2.5Fi, and (I hope) a multi-cable DIN/RCA shootout.

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Sometimes I envy women who marry mere mortals. To receive adoration, they need only locate a misplaced car key or a pair of eyeglasses.

Life is not so easy for those of us married to audiophiles. We're asked to help locate everything from electronic stylus gauges to interconnects. A recent scene: The lost article is a tube, and my audiophile is in high-end anxiety.

"I thought I stuck them in the linen closet, but maybe I put them in the hall closet. The guys are coming over soon, and one of the tubes in the phono section is going microphonic."

I look on the dining room table: CDs piled all over, magazines strewn around, bookmarked with various sizes of screwdrivers, all tiny. But what's this buried under the audio brochures...?

"I found one!"

My audiophile looks at me as if I've just confused the Gap with Gucci. "No no no no no. That's a Chinese tube. I need a Bugle Boy."

I move to the coffee table and look in the big glass bowl where I keep my matchbook collection. I find some Tiptoes, a tape measure, and... "Hey, honey...? What are these?" I hold up something that looks like a big bullet.

"Beaks." Clearly, this should explain everything.

"You put them under components?"

"No, Boobs. You put them on top of speakers. The Claws are for underneath."

Before he has time to discuss the appropriate installation procedure, I retreat to the bedroom, where I look next to the TV and between the VCR, laser-disc, and DVD players. No tubes, but I discover a taped episode of The X-Files that I've never seen.

I pile up all the remotes on top of the TV: seven remotes for four remote-controlled components. I'm about to try to figure out which with which when I hear a thump from the living room. I run in to find my audiophile sitting on the floor, surrounded by piles of LPs.

"Is something wrong, honey?"

"I was looking for the tube on my record shelves and I noticed that my RCA LSC-2346 of Respighi's Pines of Rome was stuck in the EMI Rachmaninoff section! I have to check the whole shelf. It could be worse than I thought—my entire classical section could be misfiled."

Under the kitchen sink is the air pump for our old tonearm. This was the perfect location for it, my audiophile explained when he installed it—the whine of the pump wouldn't interfere with his system. The plastic tubing that once wound along the kitchen baseboards, down the hall, into the living room, and up to the tonearm is now coiled up and crammed into the Rubbermaid kitchen organizer, along with boxes of Baggies and Reynolds Wrap.

I look inside the refrigerator. No tubes, but a container of record-cleaning fluid. Having trained his hearing to identify any ambient noise, my audiophile shouts, "Hon, as long as you've got the fridge open, could I have a Diet Coke?"

I bring the soda to my audiophile, who by now has stacked even more LPs on the floor. "I thought I'd better check the rock section too..."

Time is running short—the guys will soon arrive. Our search heats up. I throw open my clothes closet and rummage through the bottom, which is piled high with audio magazines stored there "temporarily" about five years ago. No tubes, but I find a pair of black pumps I thought I'd lost.

Maybe the tubes are... under the telephone table? Well, why not? I move the spare equipment platform that leans against the table and—

"Oooh, honey, look—I found your packing-tape dispenser." The packing-tape dispenser is probably the most important piece of equipment an audiophile owns. Mine looks up. He's reorganizing his CDs, but somehow manages to find something that needs immediate taping. The dispenser is ripped from my hands.

Three hours later, I take inventory:

Found: X-Files tape, packing-tape dispenser, black pumps, three extra remotes.

Consumed: Bag of taco chips, KitKat bar, Diet Coke.

Still missing: Bugle Boy tubes.

Exhausted, I collapse on the couch. My audiophile sits down next to me. We listen to music for a minute. Then he gets up, makes a few adjustments.

"Hmmm. Guess it was a false alarm. The system sounds just perfect now."

I smile sweetly. I'm thinking of where I should hide his car keys and eyeglasses.
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In the second part of this article, Stereophile’s German correspondent, Markus Sauer, offers some turn-of-the-millennium musings on what is important when it comes to music reproduction.

In the first part of this article I developed the argument that the typical methodology and mindset of audio reviewers cause them to lose sight of what it is the equipment they write about is actually supposed to do. That by deconstructing a component’s...
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performance in terms of how it does in various defined areas, its ability to convey music’s message is overlooked. An audiophile cannot tell what his or her emotional response to a component’s sound will be from a description by a critical listener, because that response is independent of the conscious perception of its sound.

I can’t claim originality for my observations. Other journalists seem to have had the same gut feeling, even in the pages of this learned journal, which otherwise prides itself on its no-nonsense stand toward sound reproduction. Starting with this magazine’s founder and chief tester, here are some quotes (and yes, I know that you can prove just about anything by quoting out of context; I wish to make it clear, therefore, that although these quotes were not made in the context of a train of thought similar to my own, I do think that they are valid):

**Larry Archibald:** You’re saying that there’s a complete disjunction between pleasure and accuracy?

**J. Gordon Holt:** Yes.1

1) The only way to judge audio equipment is to use it to play music which you love, no matter how ‘poorly recorded’ you mistakenly think it is, even if you’ve never seen it mentioned by an elitist audio reviewer from Stereophile or TAS. Especially if you’ve never seen it mentioned by an elitist audio reviewer from Stereophile or TAS.

2) There is no music, no matter how well recorded, that will tell you what you need to know about a piece of gear as well as something you’ve listened to hundreds of times and still dig the most—whether it’s Booker T. and the MG’s, the Grateful Dead, or Shadowy Men from a Shadowy Planet. Familiarity trumps recording quality every time.

3) The harder you listen, the less you hear.

4) Amanda McBroom sucks. — Corey Greenberg 2

Because audiophiles care about sound quality, we are often more susceptible than usual to allow interfering thoughts to get in the music’s way. These thoughts are usually concerned with aspects of the sound’s characteristics. Does the soundstage lack depth? Does the bass have enough extension? Is the treble grainy? How does my system compare to those described in the magazines?

“Unfortunately, this mode of thinking is perpetuated by high-end audio magazines. The descriptions of a product’s sound—its specific performance attributes—are what make it into print, not the musical and emotional satisfaction to which the product contributes. The latter is ineffable: Words cannot express the bond between listener and music that some products facilitate more than others. Consequently, we are left only with descriptions of specific sonic characteristics, a practice that can leave the impression that... being an audiophile is about dissection and critical commentary, and not about more closely connecting with the music’s meaning.

“...this experience precipitated a catharsis that forced me to reexamine what music listening—among other things—was all about... Better sound does result in more music, but paradoxically, only when the sound is forgotten.” — Bob Harley 3

There could be more quotes, but I hope my point is made.

**Sacred cows will get you nowhere**

Let’s try to shoot some holes in a few favorite topics of hi-fi reviewing. One of my pet hates is soundstaging. For some people, this seems to be very important. For me, it isn’t. When asked if the hardware he sells images well, Colin Hammerton—an expatriate Brit working as British amp manufacturer Exposure’s importer in Germany—says, “I don’t want to hear where the musicians are on stage. I want to hear why they are on stage.” I couldn’t agree more. Please don’t get the impression that I’m against soundstaging—it’s nice to have. It just doesn’t matter for my emotional reaction to music.

Out in the real world, however, soundstaging is very important. If a review would state that a component makes wonderful music but can’t image, sales would be practically nil, at least among the very large part of the clientele whose buying decisions are influenced by what’s said by magazines and dealers (who rely on magazines as the most important sales aid).

The expression “sonic fireworks” is a recurring theme in hi-fi journalism. It seems also to describe the listening expectations of a certain type of hi-fi customer: “Ooh, look there... and there, to the right, outside the right-side speaker... ooh, and there, six yards behind the speakers... and there, over the speakers—isn’t that beautiful?”

This listening style could be called visual-oriented listening, because it tries to describe sound in terms of visual experience. Visual-oriented listening is attractive because it allows a quantitative analysis (“The soundstage reproduced by the device under test was this broad, this deep, and this high.”), which must be a big help in developing, and describing the sonic performance of audio components.

It is also a defensible listening experience: We all know that the so-called objectivists try to knock the so-called subjective

3 Stereophile, November 1992, Vol.15 No.11, p.7; Bob’s “Listener’s Manifesto” is also worth rereading; Stereophile, January 1992, Vol.15 No.1, p.111; it is also available in www.stereophile.com’s “Archives” section.

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Stereophile, February 2000
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listeners. The latter have responded by turning into observational listeners (another visual term), relating an experience that other listeners can duplicate if the test conditions are identical—a prerequisite for gaining recognition as a scientific, and thus reputable, branch of engineering. (It must be hard to live your working life without the recognition of your peers.) Everyone with intact hearing will agree to reasonably identical dimensions of the soundstage, and the location of instruments in that soundstage.

However, there is no way yet to objectify the musical pleasure a component gives. A different listener will approach the same sonic demonstration with a different mood, different reactions to a musical stimulus, and so on. The emotional experience is not as easily transferable as the observational one.

A bonus of visual-oriented listening is that it is economically attractive. It allows listening irrespective of psychological and physical condition, and thus opens up a much larger part of the day to the accomplishment of meaningful work than if you could listen only when you were really in the mood for some music. For people who make their living from sonic judgments—designers, dealers, and journalists alike—I can see that it may be imperative. Problem is, this is in direct opposition to the listening experience of the paying customer, who wants to unwind from a day's work with a little musical entertainment.

Since visual-oriented listening is something at which a reviewer tends to get very good, it usually makes up a large part of a review's content. Magazine-reading audiophiles will be influenced in their listening habits by those reviews (the "learning" part that Jürgen Ackermann was talking about in Part One). They choose their systems and set them up so that the visual-oriented listening experience is emphasized. Many such systems, to me, sound boring. There's no meat on the bone.

An experiment: Disconnect one speaker from your setup and listen to the sound of just the remaining speaker, preferably with a mono source. I'm sure that few so-called high-end speakers (and systems) will survive this test. Many will sound bland and anemic. Two such speakers sound just the same, but probably a little fuller, because with the usual practice of mixing bass sounds straight down the middle, doubling the radiating surface of the bass drivers and doubling the available amplifier power gives a perceived 3dB rise in relative bass level. But the speakers don't become more interesting.

Another experiment: Listen to recorded voice. My favorite material for this kind of test are comedy records (Eddie Murphy, Bette Midler, and Bill Cosby spring to mind). Good comedy works on much the same principles as music. Timing is crucial, as are small inflections of the voice, speed of delivery, and so on. You'll be surprised by how few systems preserve intelligibility, an essential prerequisite for this kind of stuff. Dynamics and low-level resolution are much more important than timbral fidelity here.

While I'm at it, I'd also like to diss timbral fidelity. Of course, timbral fidelity is the essential prerequisite for the accurate reproduction of music in the home. It is also nigh on impossible to achieve, for sound scientific reasons. Modern multimediek recordings tend to employ a microphone for every instrument or, at most, small group of instruments. The sound put down on (digital) tape is that of instruments at close proximity.

In the concert hall, one tends to listen from a much greater distance. Even if one were to sit at the conductor's feet, only a few instruments would be this close, the rest farther away. Thus, what is recorded on tape can never be heard in a real-world situation.

There is also the question of radiation patterns. In the concert hall, the sound one hears from a solo violin is a mixture of sound waves radiated by the strings and the top and bottom plates of the violin body, the latter two usually much lower in frequency than the strings to which they resonate and thus radiate with a broader radiation pattern. The close-proximity mike picks up a greater proportion of the string sound than would be heard live. The sound the microphone "hears" is only a fraction of the instrument's total sound that would be perceived by the typical listener, who sits much farther away than the typical microphone. This fraction will be prejudiced toward the higher frequencies. If the microphone's output is faithfully reproduced by all subsequent elements in the chain, the resulting sound will be unnatural. (In contrast, rock, pop, and blues music is usually amplified even when performed live. The sound you get from a recording is, on a certain level, faithful to the original.)

THX has drawn our attention to the fact that room size influences perceived tonal balance. Listening rooms tend to be much smaller than the halls or studios in which music is recorded (this is even more true in Europe than in the US). Thus, if a recording is true to the original event but is reproduced in a smaller room, it will sound too bright—which, again, seems to indicate that a truly flat system will sound bright.4

These factors have long been known to audio designers. Having spoken to a number of manufacturers of drive-units, I know that it's relatively easy to make a tweeter with a flat on-axis amplitude response. But the loudspeaker designer knows that flat is not necessarily right (a point I'll return to later). Celestion's SL series, particularly the SL 600, was an international sales success and very well reviewed in all leading audio magazines, including this one. Its tweeter was shelved down 2dB vis-à-vis the woofer, but it sounded pleasingly natural in typical living rooms.

Conversely, many speakers have an on-axis rise in the tweeter's output to compensate for radiation pat-

4 Which brings to mind J. Gordon Holt's famous "Down With Flat!" essay, also to be found on www.stereophile.com.
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terms and give a flat room-averaged response, and to heighten the apparent level of detail a speaker can reproduce. To my ears, such speakers have always sounded way too bright. Summing up, I think it nigh on impossible to design components, especially loudspeakers, that will sound anything like their input in a variety of settings.5

The third sacred cow waiting to be slaughtered is measurements. This magazine is working very hard to correlate the listening experience with measurements. I remain to be convinced that conventional measurements tell us much about whether a hi-fi component reaches the heart or not. In loudspeakers, there seems to be a fairly good correlation between a reasonably flat amplitude response and fidelity of timbre. In my own experience, low loudspeaker distortion and a reasonably flat phase response make for ease of listening, in the sense that I can listen for long periods of time without listening fatigue. Power bandwidth, perhaps more so for loudspeakers than amplifiers, will tell you if a component is apt to change its sound when the listening level goes up.

I think that good measurements are often an excuse for the designer: It measures well, so I haven't done anything wrong. Not doing anything wrong, however, does not automatically mean that the component under test will do enough right. To put it another way, I have yet to find a measurement that tells me if I'll want to listen to a component.

A final pet hate is detail. A proposal for the international language of hi-fi reviewing: There should be a distinction between detail and nuance, just as a fact is mere data without an interpretable context, which only meaning can transform into information, a detail is meaningless without its context of musical direction, which transforms it into a nuance of interpretation.6 Dwelling on details like the audibility of a microphone falling down, the direction taken by a London underground line below the recording venue, or the chirping of a bird somewhere outside the recording venue, seems counterproductive: Such aspects take my attention away from the music and its meaning; they don't lead me to the music itself.

I remain to be convinced that conventional measurements tell us much about whether a hi-fi component reaches the heart or not.

to carry their musical meanings.

A typical observation seems to be that for classical music, timbral fidelity, low-level dynamics, and, yes, soundstaging are considered important. (The soundstaging part I have never really understood; yes, I know, in the concert hall, the violins are seated on the left and the double basses on the right, but hey, they have to sit somewhere, and I have yet to read that a composer—Stockhausen excepted, and you never know if he's joking—specifies a certain seating arrangement for artistic reasons.) For rock music, essential aspects seem to be loudness, speed, rhythm and pace, and a tonal balance that conveys power in music.

These prejudices are so widely held that there must be something to them (although I submit that if you listen to Ansermet conducting, pace and rhythm are very important for his readings). And the dichotomy is so deeply anchored in the minds of music lovers that it seems almost insurmountable.

Yet it seems to me that for the reviewer, the way out need not lie in falling back on a sonic description of the audio experience. He should instead try to incorporate as many different styles of music into the review as possible, and describe the emotional impact these different styles have made. That means that the reviewer must educate himself in the appreciation of these different music styles.

In my estimation, the writing style that prevails in current hi-fi journalism is an attempt to describe the sonic presentation as an abstraction from the listening experience, in an attempt to produce results that do not depend on a certain kind of music, but can be related to the perceived requirements of a given style of music. If a review states that a speaker has abrasive highs, it matters little if this observation was made while listening to massed violins or to a rock guitar. The assumption is that the reader then translates this observation to his own listening experience and decides if this particular aspect of music reproduction is important to his enjoyment of music or not.

But how do we know this assumption is true?

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Magazines

A reviewer who relates his listening experience in terms of the emotional impact a component made on his enjoyment of music has a hell of a time getting his point across. As is evident from this magazine's "Letters," a lot of readers out there don't have a clue what he is on about. I can understand why: If the writer uses a type of music the reader can't relate to, it's hard to translate the review into a context relevant to his own preferred music. "Yeah, but how would it sound on my kind of music?" is a question often heard when discussing such reviews with readers. The prevailing impression seems to be that different music styles depend on different aspects of reproduced sound.

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5 For a more detailed discussion of some of these points, read J. Gordon Holt's "Space...the Final Frontier" in Stereophile, March 1994, Vol.17 No.3, p.61 (and especially p.67): www.stereophile.com "Archives."

6 "God is in the detail," said Mies van der Rohe. When I look at his architecture, which to my eyes is cold, full of harsh black-and-white contrasts, decidedly inorganic, and well-meaning but brutal in its treatment of the buildings' inhabitants, he seems like just the man to suffer from this misapprehension. Maybe God is in the nuances.

Stereophile, February 2000
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The way forward?
This article would be pretty pointless if it didn't at least try to find a way out of the dilemma we have brought upon ourselves. A magazine, after all, has to be useful (and entertaining) to its readers if it wants to survive. Here's the question we have to answer: Are there aspects of sound that are more important for emotional appreciation than others, and if so, which? It's clear that, however much I have derided sound per se up to now, somehow emotional response must be related to the waveform of the sound reaching our ears. There is no secret medium other than sound emanating from our speakers.

Let me introduce you to the thinking of another search for a new direction: Jean-Marie Piel, a 45-year-old journalist living in Paris, France. At the age of 15 Piel built his first hi-fi chain, consisting of a tube amp and Supra-vox speakers with a single chassis per channel. After earning his baccalaureat, the French equivalent of a high school diploma, he began to study literature and philosophy. He taught himself how to play the flute, which he taught for 13 years — beginning at age 23 — at the Conservatoire de Fontainebleau. From the age of 20 he also worked as a journalist for hi-fi and music magazines, among other achievements writing and editing the “Arts Sonores” section of L'audiophile, the influential French underground magazine. Since 1985 he has been responsible for the sound section of Diapason, the largest music and sound magazine in France, as a joint editor-in-chief. He also writes regularly for Paris-Match. Jean-Marie Piel receives and listens to practically every CD that is offered in the French market, selecting two to four of these each month as musically and sonically outstanding. His knowledge of music, instruments, and musicians is encyclopaedic. He can eloquently explain the differences between instruments of different periods and why they evolved in a specific way. He writes: 7

“With his familiar ironic humor, Paul Valéry once said that ‘the vice begins when one gives up the whole for the part’ — a sentence that could be applied to a lot of hi-fi enthusiasts and that well describes the perversity that grips us when we take our pleasure by listening to music with those devices called loudspeakers. Modern miking techniques, which have a tendency to run amok on technology and to favor the detail at the expense of the ensemble, further push us in this direction: that of fragmented listening, even if one has to guard against overgeneralizations. But the fact is, if 20 microphones are used for recording an orchestra, there is little chance for the cohesion of the ensemble to survive. We are then reduced to hearing details, to take interest in nothing else. But the music escapes the detail; if the detail takes precedence, it is nothing but sound, a piece of sound. The music passes through it—if you stop to examine the detail, the music has already moved on. Of course, sound is the necessary medium for music. It’s the sound that makes the music, not the notes. Still, by a mysterious paradox, fidelity to sound does not always coincide with fidelity to the emotion, which is the soul itself of music.

“Therein lies the rub: If one wants to judge a hi-fi system, one tends to erroneously concentrate on purely sonic details — are the lower mids good and are the extreme highs easy on the ear? As if one would ask such questions in a concert. In a concert, there is no woofer, no tweeter, there are only musicians playing. When listening to a hi-fi system, it is they and only they one should be listening to. It is true that a lot of components, in all price brackets, do not invite us to do this, and direct attention to the sound. We then have every occasion to think that the invisible link between notes that gives them musical meaning is not being reproduced. There's no necklace, just pearls... they may be beautiful, just as sounds made by certain sophisticated systems, which reproduce sounds superbly and with a certain implacable coldness, yet miss the soul of music, can be beautiful.

“All the difficulty lies in analyzing what is missing in the sound when living music is not happening. For the beginning of an answer we may turn our attention to certain chains, sometimes somewhat colored, missing the bottom or the top octave, which nevertheless reproduce the life and magic of musical movement. A certain timbral fidelity may be missing, but in a broad midrange where the essence of musical energy is concentrated (between about 200Hz and 4kHz), they are capable of perfectly reproducing nuances; i.e., the intensity interrelations between sounds; or, to be more precise, the fluctuations of intensity within a single sound. This is where the life is. It's enough to analyze a note held by a musician to gain consciousness of this fact. You know that this held note comes from a musician and not a machine because there are infinitely small instabilities. The sound does not have a constant intensity. Sure, the variations are very small, but they exist. In the ability to reproduce these infinitely small nuances is the answer to the question of whether a chain will let through the life, without which, evidently, the music is just dead notes.

“Another example: Listen to the way a violinist like Salvatore Accardo lets sounds develop in the Beethoven Concerto. He attacks certain notes hard, with a broad vibrato (variations in pitch and volume), then progressively reduces the intensity, tying the whole down (which in itself creates several levels of nuance) until he flirts with silence. The way he lets the note finish, or die, is so subtly progressive that one doesn't quite know where the note ends and the silence begins. From this uncertainty, which makes

7 Quoted with Jean-Marie Piel's permission; translation by Markus Saucy.
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One of the more intriguing facts about old tube radios is the way they make use of their enclosures, which are allowed to resonate with the music.

One of the more intriguing facts about old tube radios is the way they make use of their enclosures. These are not designed to be as acoustically inert as possible, as are most modern speakers, but are allowed to resonate with the music, a character trait shared with many old loudspeakers. The wood panels’ size and density are judged so that those inevitable resonances are consonant with the music. Music seems to pass through them unscathed. If you listen to the output of modern speaker cabinets (using an ear pressed to the box; or, for a more dignified approach, a stethoscope), most sound horrible. The sounds emitted by an Altec Voice of the Theatre’s cabinet can be much less objectionable.10

Another facet of this phenomenon is the way the room is energized by a loudspeaker using a noninert enclosure. Sound, especially the lower frequencies, is radiated from the entire surface of the box, not just the chassis. This seems to accomplish much the same thing as using multiple drivers or dipoles. One of the most convincing loudspeakers I have ever heard is built according to principles having more to do with the making of musical instruments than with orthodox hi-fi loudspeakers.

Another aspect of old loudspeakers is that they tend to have dimension ratios diametrically opposed to those of modern speakers. Modern speakers typically have very narrow fronts, the enclosed space needed for a reasonable bass-driver alignment being found by making speakers tall and deep. By comparison, old loudspeakers tended to be wide but shallow. This has profound consequences for sound dispersion. Once the baffle is narrower than the wavelength of a tone emitted by one of its chasises, the emitted sound is no longer reflected by the baffle and projected by the speaker toward the listener, assuming the listener sits in front of the speakers; instead it will travel around the speaker and radiate to all sides.

Typically, low and middle frequencies are dispersed quite evenly in the room, while high frequencies are projected in a

Learning from our ancestors

I think it is no coincidence that Jean-Marie Piel would turn to “old” technology for inspiration. Some old gear can still hold up surprisingly well today. The American press, with the occasional exception from Sound Practices, has concentrated so far on triode amplifiers as “the new thing.” Loudspeakers receive a lot less attention. I have given my opinion on triode amps and their qualities in this magazine,9 and of late there have been a number of articles on single-ended triodes. Instead of further amplifying this addiction to triode amps (which, contrary to what you may have been led to believe, are no panacea; if we have to talk about amps, I’d prefer to emphasize the role of the preamp), let me concentrate first on another piece of the hi-fi chain in need of a reevaluation: the loudspeaker.

Let’s start with an unexpected item of old technology: vintage tube radios. Those of the 1940s to 1960s often have an astonishingly good sound quality. The frequency range of their single driver is severely restricted, but they have a magical coherence that more than compensates. All the really good ones seem to have a single-ended tube, not necessarily a triode; an EL86 pentode can sound wonderful in a single-ended topology. (By the way, Jean-Constant Verdier, designer of the best turntable I have ever had the pleasure to hear, has a huge collection of old tube radios.)

8 To quote Keith Jarrett (Stereophile, April 1994, Vol.17 No.4, p.59): “Silence is where music comes from.” Jarrett meant this from an artistic point of view, not from a sonic one, but the parallel is striking.


Stereophile, February 2000
“Steal this system.”

Matt Polk, Speaker Specialist

“$2,699 for a complete system this good is not just a ‘good value,’ it’s an outright steal!”
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narrow angle. Thus the energy concentration at the listener's point in the room is tipped toward the high frequencies. Many designers compensate for this by introducing a slight clockwise tilt in the speaker's frequency response, a gentle fall from low to high frequencies. The indirect sound, which in nondead listening rooms makes up an important part of the overall gestalt of the sound, the perceived tonal balance, will then be perceived as lacking in high-frequency energy. The speaker sounds dull. To prevent this, there will often be an on-axis rise in the tweeter's top octave. Unfortunately, two wrongs don't make a right. Old loudspeakers, which have wider baffles, project more energy at lower frequencies toward the listener and have a more natural balance between mid and high frequencies without that tilt in the frequency response.

I think that this factor, tonal balance, is another key aspect in which old gear has an advantage over modern equipment, and is as important as the low-level dynamics Jean-Marie Piel was talking about. Jean Hiraga, a French journalist whose writings appear mostly in the *Nouvelle Revue du Son*, has often cited the "Law of 400,000": The product of a loudspeaker's -3dB points should always be 400,000. If a speaker is down 3dB at 20Hz, it should be down 3dB at 20,000Hz; if a speaker is down 3dB at 40Hz, it should be down 3dB at 10,000Hz; and so on. This law is simplistic, because it is applied only to the on-axis response. Ideally, it should be applied to the room-averaged response. Many modern speakers are flat or even tilted up in the final octave, as we have seen above, without an adequate bass fundamental to counterbalance this top-end extension.

Another aspect of old loudspeakers that seems important to me is the drivers they employ. Old loudspeakers are all about pneumatic coupling. When a loudspeaker chassis' membrane is propelled forward by voltage and/or current applied to the voice-coil, the air in front is pushed away. Depending on membrane size and the length and speed of the excursion, the air in front of the loudspeaker will react more or less willingly to the input (the technical term is acoustic impedance). There is a fairly precise point when the air will more or less fail to be impressed by the driver's stimulus, with an inverse ratio between frequency and loudness on one hand and membrane size on the other hand. (Loudness is a function of the air you move; to achieve a greater loudness level, you have to increase either the surface or the excursion of the membrane.)

Put simply, to reproduce a bass tone loudly, you need a fairly large membrane; for a treble tone, a much smaller surface will suffice (in case you wondered why your tweeter is smaller than your woofer). Above a certain frequency, the air will effectively follow the membrane's movements, vibrating forward and backward. Below that point, the air's inertia is too great to be influenced by the driver—compare the effect of waving your hand with waving a ping-pong bat. There is also a point where excursion cannot be substituted for membrane size, because the air will no longer couple efficiently to the driver.

This acoustic impedance stuff is one of the reasons why horns were once so popular. A horn can be seen as an acoustic impedance transformer: The air in front of the driver cannot escape to the sides when stimulated by the membrane, but will faithfully follow the stimulus. By gently broadening the canal through which the sound waves travel, these air movements will be imposed on an ever greater amount of air, until you come to the end of the horn. In a certain sense, the air that is present at the horn's outlet can be seen as the effective driving surface of the horn driver, because it is this air that couples to the rest of the room. The larger the surface, the less excursion is needed to play at a certain loudness level; and in speakers, the less excursion, the better.

A large bass driver needs a large cabinet behind it, which makes it impractical for many people. I think it's no coincidence that the small infinite-baffle speaker was invented when stereo became available. One big enclosure, for mono, can be tolerable enough, but two such behemoths are beyond what most people will tolerate in their living rooms. Fine, I say. Just be aware that there is a sonic price you pay for the small woofer.

There's one other component of the hi-fi chain I want to comment on: the phono cartridge, for those of us who still listen to vinyl. Some time ago I reviewed (for a German magazine) the latest iteration of the EMT cartridge, a design that started out in the early '60s. Listening to this cartridge after a spate of newer designs made me realize anew that certain classic designs (whose number includes the Denon DL 103 and the Ortofon SPU series) have an emotional rightness that speaks powerfully to the heart and soul of the listener, even if his head can discern some not-very-subtle deviations from linearity. The EMT has a much more colored sound than many modern cartridges do. Yet it is a heck of a lot more fun to listen to than those modern, oh-so-flat, tread-carefully designs. When was the last time you read that a cartridge could really get down and boogie?

Yes, I'll listen to the future

Please don't think that I'm anti-progress, anti-technology, anti-digital, or whatever. Far from it. I hate the expense and complication I have to go to to obtain good sound—which to me means satisfying sound: the rigors of speaker placement (a surprisingly accurate first approximation for speaker place-
"The Answer to an Audiophile’s Prayers"

It was just over a year ago (Vol. 21 No. 12) that Stereophile called the Arcam Alpha 10 integrated amplifier "the answer to an audiophile's prayers". That statement was based on both the Alpha 10's sonic performance and its unique modular construction, which allowed the Alpha 10 to evolve and adapt to your changing needs.

One might think that Stereophile was going out on a limb. You see, at the time of the review, none of the upgrade modules had actually gone into production. Of course those in the know (which does include the reviewers at Stereophile) were well aware of Arcam's twenty plus year history of delivering on their promises. It turns out that the Alpha 10 was no exception. Here we are, one year down the road, and Arcam has delivered, and delivered in spades.

Since early last year Alpha 10 owners have been able to add Dolby Digital® and DTS® home cinema capabilities. Since fall they've been able to enjoy music throughout their home with the Alpha 10's multi-room module. And now, with the introduction of the new Arcam FMJ series, that same modularity is available in an elegant new package that delivers even higher levels of musical performance. In the FMJ A22 improved preamp & power supply stages combined with the added...continued at www.asigroup.com/february/fmj.htm

Up Yours!

We know, it just doesn't seem possible. For some time now we've been telling you about the dCS Purcell Upsampler that can take standard 16-bit/44.1kHz CD data and upsample it to 24 bit/192 kHz with astonishing results. Imagine being able to get performance from your entire existing CD collection rivaling that promised by DVD Audio and DSD.

We can't blame you for being skeptical. But, one by one, all of the magazines are coming out in support of the claims made by dCS. For example, in the November issue of Stereophile Jonathan Scull...continued at www.asigroup.com/february/dcs.htm
ment is to put them where they do the most visual damage to a room; that's probably where they'll sound their best), cables that positively invite you to trip over them, the seemingly unstoppable proliferation of small or not-so-small electronics boxes, and so on. My ideal hi-fi rig consists of a small and preferably inexpensive appliance that sits quietly and unobtrusively in some corner of the room, but fills the room with sweet music. Now that's what I'd call progress. I'm also not saying that triodes are the only way to go. I remain unattached to any specific technology. I would like to see more single-ended transistor amplifiers. These should provide quite respectable specs, a low output impedance, a flat amplitude and phase response, and so on. Judging from my experiences with tube designs, I would caution against the use of parallel transistors in the quest for higher power outputs. Anyway, the compromises inherent in this technology tend to show up much more clearly in single-ended topologies than in circuits that split the signal.

Single-ended designs are necessarily class-A, so they'll never be as energy efficient as I'd like my hi-fi to be. It could be argued that it doesn't matter much on a global scale. I don't yet see a Japanese electronics giant bringing out inexpensive single-ended integrateds, so for the foreseeable future this exciting technology will remain the expensive preserve of the dedicated few. But I have to say that I'd be happier if all of humanity could follow my path to audio truth without vaporizing the polar ice caps. This aspect truly troubles me.

**The High End has become too technocratic, too sure of itself, maybe even a little arrogant.**

I also have great hopes for the Super Audio CD and DVD-Audio formats. The present CD format, after all, was laid down in the late 1970s and relied on technology that was then cost-efficient to manufacture. If you compare a present-day computer to its late-70s counterpart, the latter appears to be a relic of the Neolithic. The CD standard seems just as antediluvian when compared with the new digital technologies.

**A change in direction?**

I'm sure that I've raised more questions in readers' minds with this two-part article than I have provided answers. However, I hope to ignite a discussion that may lead to a better understanding of how sound influences emotion, and how equipment that doesn't get in the way of the emotion can be designed. The High End has become too technocratic, too sure of itself, maybe even a little arrogant. In my estimation, we have only scratched the surface of this whole matter of music reproduction in the home. Some humility would give a more accurate perception of our achievements in this worthwhile field. Personally, I'm usually very unhappy when someone tells what I should and shouldn't enjoy.

In lieu of a conclusion, I offer this observation: There is a paradigm shift underway in the world of music reproduction. For the last 40 years or so, the High End's aim could be summed up in Quad's famous motto: "the closest approach to the original sound." But there is a growing movement underfoot that refuses to adhere to this motto, creating its own instead: the closest approach to the original emotion.

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Stereophile, February 2000
Don’t even think of listening to another loudspeaker until you hear this amazing story...

This story is true. The people, the events and the astounding conclusions are real.

My name is Jim Smith. I've been a music lover and audio perfectionist since 1970. Most of that time, I ran a high-end shop devoted to providing musical accuracy. I also made hundreds of live recordings. And that's how I discovered...

Live Music Was Causing a Problem

Compared to live concerts or recording sessions, high-end sound was a pale shadow of the live music experience. Even the very best high-end demonstrations I heard didn’t come close to the emotional impact of a live musical event.

As audiophiles, we struggled to replace the natural emotional response to live music with (expensive) improvements in “focus,” “transparency,” “soundstage,” “slam,” etc. But it never seemed to be enough. Being an audiophile had become a lot like work. Where was the fun?

Then, in the fall of ’98, a friend told me about a former client who had gotten off the “improvements” merry-go-round. He was actually having fun! When a conservative guy makes radical claims, you listen. We drove down to Gainesville, Florida, so I could hear it for myself.

A Night to Remember

My former client still had his reference turntable, but a pair of stunning horn speakers from Germany now replaced his expensive monitor speakers and their matching woofers. And the mega-watt, mega-dollar electronics had been replaced with a flea-power integrated amplifier.

I put on one of my LPs. The music hit like a tidal wave. It just washed over me. Even CDs.

For the first time, I was experiencing the emotional impact of live music—from a high-end audio system! Fascinating and involving, every piece of music spoke to me vividly, in a way I’d never experienced before.

The Big Shoot-out

Next day I called Bill, my partner. We decided to get a pair of these German speakers to see how they compared to Bill’s “killer” high-end speaker system.

When the Avantgarde UNO Hornspeakers arrived, we set them up immediately. Stone cold, with no break-in, they blew away his big ($78,000) system! At $8,970, this wasn’t supposed to happen. Bill was flabbergasted. I was stunned.

AUDIO ART—With six vibrant colors available in German automotive metallic finishes, you’ll enjoy just looking at them.
Everyone who heard them was dazzled. Finally, I GOT IT. Music played through the Avantgardes made people smile, made them dance, made them FEEL the music. Just like live!

I Know Exactly What You’re Thinking

Listen, I know what some “experts” say. I was one of those guys who disliked horns. To me, they were hopelessly colored. But not the Avantgardes...

They’re wonderfully transparent, astonishingly quick, detailed and smooth. They can create an incredible soundstage. They’re the only high-end speakers I’ve heard that realistically reproduce live music’s dynamic nuances—the major source of music’s emotional impact.

In fact, they do all the “audiophile tricks” supremely well. But once you hear them, you’ll forget about that audiophile stuff, because with the Avantgarde Hornspeakers, It’s About the Music...

But Don’t Take My Word For It...

The Avantgardes—UNO, DUO, and TRIO—are receiving rave reviews worldwide from experts who never even liked horns before. Check out excerpts from just three:

UNO—“The way the UNOs reproduce music is so exciting and full of life that soon I forget the loudspeaker and just enjoy the musical event.”
—M. Eichelsdorfer, Stereo, Germany

DUO—“So, to conclude, these speakers are simply the best I have ever heard in my domestic system. Nothing else has come close to recreating the power and finesse of a full organ, or bringing a full orchestra into the living room, and conveying the emotion of a solo performance.”
—Chris Beeching, Audio Quarterly, UK, Issue Q3 1999

TRIO—“They are unquestionably the finest loudspeakers I have heard in my home and, without any doubt, one of the best loudspeakers in the whole blooming world...and from an engineering standpoint the most remarkable.”
—Jonathan Valin, Fi, USA

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If there’s no demo site nearby, please visit me here in Atlanta, Georgia. Call the Toll-Free number above to set a time and get directions. In the Atlanta area, call 770-777-2095. Dancing attire is optional. Thanks for listening.

Jim Smith

Jim Smith, President

It’s About the Music...
February 2000 — We are now comfortably past all the millennial hype, which, by New Year's Eve, really had risen to a nauseating fever pitch. But it's hard not to look back to the times, the places, and, most of all, to the faces and personalities that populated the last hundred years.

Johnny Thunders, Chesty Morgan, Bill Wyman, Wilt Chamberlain (tie), Jimmy Stewart, Leroy Neiman, Jackie O, Winston Churchill, Alf Landon, Spike Jones, Ratso Rizzo, Wendy O. Williams, Ed Norton, Blaze Starr, Fred Garven (male prostitute), the clever and now-rich person who invented the CD opener, and, of course, Stereophile's intrepid, innovative, and stylish writing staff all have had immeasurable effects on the 20th century.

When it comes to the contributions our staff have made to human history, our annual "Records To Die For" feature looms large. This year it takes on added significance: for 2000, "R2D4" illustrates what music the writers would drag with them into the brave new future. Their only restriction was to confine themselves to records that were in print during the last 30 years of the 1900s. Any genre or musical style was fair game, although we did encourage them to steer clear of the Pokémon soundtrack and records with titles longer than 90 words. (Sorry, Fiona, the new one is out.)

So here, for your reading and, hopefully, listening pleasure, are the discs for which we'd die.

— Robert Baird

Note: If a recording listed here has previously been reviewed in Stereophile, the volume and number of the pertinent issue appear in parentheses at the end of the review. For example, a listing of "XVIII-10" means that a review appeared in Vol.18 No.10 (October 1995). These citations include full reviews and the shorter "R2D4" and "Quarter Notes" capsules.
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As I look back over the 75 or so new CDs I've heard this year, I see that reissues account for about half — and the more interesting half at that. When this performance was first issued some 15 years ago, I thought it as fine as any I would ever hear. The balance between drama and lyricism was superbly struck, and the playing was beyond criticism. The performance overall is unrushed and deeply moving, particularly in the slow movement, where Schubert's unique union of beauty and desolation are perfectly captured. Later recordings, even the Emerson/Rostropovich, have failed to dislodge this one from my favor. This is Schubert at his absolute best, played as well as you will ever hear it. The recording comes from the early '80s, hardly a golden age for digital recording, and the violins sound a little harsher than on the LP, but this disc is good enough for my desert island. A short CD (with no exposition repeat, I'm happy to say), but given the choice, wouldn't you take quality over quantity? (XVII-2)

BRAHMS: Sacred Works for A Cappella Choir & Organ
Jörg Straube, Norddeutscher Figuralchor; Ulfert Smidt, organ

When you think of most performing media — orchestras, string quartets, opera singers, etc. — the level of accomplishment today is not much higher than it was 30 years ago. Indeed, some would feel the level has fallen. In choral singing, however, today's best groups are far superior to what we heard in the previous generation. This disc of Brahms sacred works from Jörg Straube's North German Figural Choir are superb in intonation and control, with no loss of involvement or passion. Compared to rival recordings, chiefly those from the Berlin RIAS Chamber Choir and the Arnold Schoenberg Choir, these are on the low, contemplative side, particularly in "Wärnum ist das Licht gegeben." In Straube's hands, the choral blend and beauty are top-notch.

The second disc is given over primarily to the organ works, beautifully played by Ulfert Smidt. He plays the 1885 Ladegast organ at St. John's Church in Wernigerode — a fairly thick-sounding instrument. (We should note, however, that Brahms admired the Ladegast organ in the Musikverein concert hall in Vienna, so the heavy sound here is probably consistent with Brahms' vision for organ music.) Smidt plays with lots of rhythmic freedom and registral changes (not indicated by Brahms) to give the music a wide range of color. This is a lovely collection, and preferable to rival versions by Bowyer, Danby, and Nordstoga.

Both discs are well recorded in an unobtrusive way. The organ recording gets about the right reverberation and hall feel, but be warned that no Brahms organ recording is likely to be the best demo disc for your new speakers. The choral recordings balance the conflicting goals of clarity and blend quite well. If your knowledge of Brahms is limited to the orchestral music and the German Requiem, this would be a logical next step.

JOHN ATKINSON
ELVIS COSTELLO with BURT BACHARACH: Painted from Memory: The New Songs of Bacharach & Costello

It's easy to become so familiar with greatness that you fail to recognize it. Thus it was with Elvis Costello when he blossomed out of the English pub-rock scene in the mid-'70s. Sure, I'd heard the carefully crafted Attractions singles, but it was just AM-radio fare, know what I mean? Then I heard Elvis's "Shipbuilding," sung by ex-Soft Machine drummer Robert Wyatt, and his "Girls Talk," sung by Dave Edmunds. To my shame, I had missed a major talent. I hastened to play catch-up, following Mr. MacManus' ventures through the next 20 years into country, string quartets — you name it, he tried it.

And then came this collaboration with one of the finest tune craftsmen of the second half of the 20th century, a CD that has hardly left my player since I bought it. Bacharach's intricate yet hummable melodies and Costello's thoughtful lyrics are allied to sparse, intelligent arrangements that couple an understated rhythm section with occasional highlighting and coloring instruments, and a sympathetic recorded sound quality. But it is the vocal risk-taking that had me coming back for more. Whatever musical talent Mr. C. has in his genes, he didn't inherit the voice of his dance-band singer father. But he wends his way along these melodically wide-ranging vocal lines, sometimes only just in tune, with surprising sophistication. My only regret is that the duo's superb excursion on Bacharach-David's "I'll Never Fall In Love Again" is not on this album. For that, you have to buy the soundtrack to the awful The Spy Who Shagged Me.

MARY CHAPIN CARPENTER: Party Doll (and other favorites)

It was the 12-string guitar in "The Hard Way," recorded live at the Wolf Trap Farm Park in Virginia, that grabbed me first: punchy, jangly, but essential to the song's development in the way that George Harrison's and Tom Hicks' Rickenbackers punctuated so many Beatles and Hollies tracks. And the '60s comparison is apt: as I dug deeper into this collection, the light dawned that I was wrong these past years to have dismissed Carpenter as yet another Nashville nightingale. This is not country music, but pure 1990s pop with lyrics that transcend the inherent limitations of the form and content, sung by a woman in full command of her instrument. Her handling of "10,000 Miles," orchestrated and produced by Mark Isham and excerpted from the Fly Away Home soundtrack, raises goosebumps even after repeated listening.

Considering that every track on Party Doll was recorded and mixed by a different engineer between 1989 and 1999 — though the songs are familiar, these are all live, soundtrack, or alternate takes — there is a uniform excellence to the recorded sound that I assume is a tribute to mastering engineer Bob Ludwig. In general, the balances are more open than the studio mixes, with a more realistic handling of dynamics, particularly regarding the drums. The 1994 BBC Radio recording of "Stones in the Road" is one of the most honest balances of singer, guitar, and piano I have heard — deceptively, sensitively simple, yet over-
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whelmingly powerful as a result. And "Down at the Twist and Shout," her 1997 Super Bowl XXXI collaboration with Beausoleil, has me reaching for my dancing shoes every time I hear it!

ROBERT BAIRD

TELEVISION: Marquee Moon

I didn't choose this disc previously because, for one, I expected other writers — many other writers — to get there first; and second, it seemed like too obvious a choice. But after not seeing Marquee Moon pop up in the last few "R2D4's", I decided it was time to sally forth and preach the well-worn gospel of Tom Verlaine and this seminal session.

Besides Verlaine's songs, what's still amazing about this eight-song collection of mid-70s guitar rock is its creative rightipe. It smooths out the rougher punk-rock corners that made Television's live shows so great with inventive pop song structures and gobs of tinily, knifelike guitar innovations, while rising miles above the then-fashionable and sappy new-wave genre with risky stylings. Verlaine's hound-dog voice, and dashes of punklike urgency. It was Frank Sinatra meets the WCW in a Fender factory, and it was, in a word, influential. Talking Heads and David Bowie — along with, years later, hundreds of poorer alternative bands — have incurred mountain's worth of bad karma for the years they spent shamelessly mining this disc and its 1978 followup, Adventure. Sonically, while not pristine by any stretch, this Seventeens milestone has enormous presence and life.

LOU ANN BARTON: Read My Lips

If there's one thing that makes this naysy, put-up-yer-dukes collection of white-hot Texas electric blues singing essential, it's the way Barton, once the female half of Stevie Ray Vaughan's Double Trouble, pronounces certain words like "thang," "hips," and, especially, "man." That, and the fact that no white woman blues singer has ever possessed the dirty, growling, sexy-as-hell tone that Barton routinely lays on tunes like the Excello classic "Sugar Coated Love," the rocker "Mean, Mean Man," and Slim Harpo's epic grind, "Shake Your Hips" — in the last one, her snarl blows the more famous Rolling Stones version off the map. Of course, having players like Kim Wilson (harp), Derek O'Brien, Denny Freeman, David Grissom, Jimmie Vaughan (guitars), and David "Fathead" Newman (sax) behind you doesn't hurt. While the occasionally murky, undefined sound could be better — even though it seems like blues records should sound like this — this session is sweet oil to pour on the flames of any riotous party.

LES BURKELY

FAIRPORT CONVENTION: Babbacombe Lee

ANONYMOUS 4: 11,000 Virgins

1999 was a bad year for the arts in general. Many things threatened the very foundations of creative endeavor: left-wing deconstructionists, right-wing religious, and, of course, Thomas Kinkade, The Painter of Light®. Despite this, and the more serious threat posed by competing media and nanosecond attention spans, the good stuff continues to endure.

Babbacombe Lee was Fairport Dave Swarbrick's concept album: the story of the celebrated Victorian convict John Lee of Babbacombe. Sentenced to hang for a crime he probably committed, Lee was brought three times to the scaffold, and three times the mechanism failed to work, even though it functioned perfectly without him. Out of his story, Fairport Convention fashioned a moving and beautiful suite of music. I don't think it sold very well — it was probably too far out even for the folk-rock crowd — but I've played it countless times over the last 25 years, and it never fails to catch my interest. The original A&M release had gorgeous gatefold packaging, a long historical account of the original events, and glorious, warm sound. The reissue keeps most of the sound quality, anyway. If you see this at a flea market (I did recently), grab it.

I knew I was going to put an Anonymous 4 recording in this list eventually; the only question was which one. "Go for the virgin!" I told myself, and so I have. 11,000 Virgins is not necessarily the best of Anon 4's efforts, but it's the one I like best, and contains some absolutely stunning versions of works by Hildegard von Bingen that really should be heard. Sound is as good as HM has produced, which puts it right at the top. If you're wondering what all the Anonymous hype is about, this will show you. (XX-10)

LARRY BIRNBAUM

BETTY CARTER: Inside Betty Carter
Betty Carter, vocals; Harold Mabern, piano; Bob Cranshaw, bass; Roy McCurdy, drums

Although she launched her career in the '40s, it was not until the decade before her death in 1998 that Betty Carter was finally recognized as a premier jazz diva, a musician's musician whose instrument was her voice. This reissue of a 1964 LP (itself reissued on CD in 1993, together with seven previously unreleased tracks from a 1965 session) captures Carter in her early prime, with brighter vocals and milder mannerisms than on her better-known later recordings.

While relatively muted, Carter's stylistic trademarks — elongated syllables, hornlike bends, phrases that rush or lag behind the beat, suddenly soaring or swooping notes — are all on display here as she turns a set of Broadway show tunes into a hypnotic guide to the agonies and ecstases of romance. Highlights include "My Favorite Things," transformed from a genteel waltz to a breakneck 4/4 gallop, and "Spring Can Really Hang You Up the Most," a stilted ballad reconstructed as an emotional roller-coaster. Mabern, Cranshaw, and McCurdy provide exquisite accompaniment.

JUNIOR WELLS: Hoodoo Man Blues

This landmark 1965 recording helped introduce a young white audience to a generation of modern electric bluesmen, sparking the blues-rock boom of the late '60s. Two years after Wells' death, Hoodoo Man Blues still stands as one of the finest Chicago blues albums ever, brilliantly showcasing not only Wells' gritty vocals and soulful harmonica, but the icy-cool guitar of his longtime partner, Buddy Guy.
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Backed by the glove-tight rhythms of bassist Jack Myers and drummer Billy Warren, Wells and Guy demonstrate telepathic empathy on material ranging from Sonny Boy Williamson’s “Good Morning Schoolgirl” to Kenny Burrell’s “Chittin Con Carne.” Wells chor- 
tles, moans, whoops, and growsl, with and without his harp, while 
Guy masterfully combines lead lines and rhythm chords. Although the mood is generally low-key and laid-back, the music 
sizzles with an intensity not found on shriller, brasher productions. (XIV-1, XXI-2, XIX-12)

LONNIE BROWNELL
DAVE ALVIN: King of California

Dave Alvin first appeared on the musical landscape as a member of L.A. roots-rockers The Blasters. Although a flashy lead guitarist and the group’s primary songwriter, he left the singing duties to brother Phil. (If you had a brother who sang like Phil, you would, too.) Once solo, he had to face the music and sing. Although he’s no Phil, his croaky baritone works well with these tales of near-

winners and noble losers. This is his “unplugged” album, and even though he can be a roaring rocker, it’s nice to have Dave’s detail-rich lyrics and precision picking front and center, all the more so because the recording is so damnaged. Check out “Barn Burning” and see what I mean. Then put on “Blue Wing” and just try to keep from crying in your beer.

DANIEL LANOIS: Acadie

If you’ve heard of Daniel Lanois at all, most likely it’s as a producer (U2, Peter Gabriel, Neville Brothers, Bob Dylan). Surprise! He’s also a talented musician, and this was his first solo album. His trademark as a producer is the ability to create a strong aural atmosphere, and here the air is positively thick. Lanois hails from Quebec, and this album was recorded in his studio in New Orleans, so he’s got connections to both ends of the Acadian/Cajun continuum that figures so prominently in these songs. He sings sometimes in French, sometimes in English—sometimes both in the same song. The somber tunes are positively spooky, but even the upbeat ones put you just a two-step away from the swamp. There’s a mysterious charm to these songs that mere words cannot convey—as Screamin’ Jay Hawkins might say, they’ve put a spell on me. (XIII-1)

DANIEL BUCKLEY
DON CHERRY: Brown Rice
Don Cherry, trumpet, electric piano, vocals; Frank Lowe, tenor sax; Ricky Cherry, electric piano; Charlie Haden, Hakim Jamil, acoustic bass; Moki, tamboura; Billy Higgins, drums; Bunchie Fox, electric bongos; Verna Gillis, vocals

In the wake of the global jazz-fusion experiments Miles Davis released on Big Fun, former Ornette Coleman trump- 
eter Don Cherry, fresh from world-music encounters at Woodstock’s Creative Music Studio, turned out this semi- 

nal masterpiece under the keen ears of Philip Glass engineer Kurt Munkaci and Carla Bley’s trumpeter husband Michael Mantler. Predating and pointing toward Cherry’s later collabora-

tions, under the name Codona, with percussionist Nana Vasconcelos and multi-instrumentalist Colin Walcott, the four 
strong jams on Brown Rice pull every corner of the planet together with pulsing energy. The title track is a masterpiece. 
Over a funky wah-wah bass line, sizzling electric bongos, unearthly modal female vocals, and driving ostinato electric 
piano, Cherry whispers nursery-rhymelike lyrics while Frank Lowe sends it all to the stratosphere with scorching tenor-sax 
screams. Primal, groovy, and mysterious, it is among the best of an exciting era in jazz, and there’s plenty more where that came from.

KING CRIMSON: Larks’ Tongues in Aspic
Robert Fripp, guitar, Mellotron, devices; David Cross, violin, viola, Mellotron; John Wetton, bass, vocals; Bill Bruford, drums; Jamie Muir, percussion

In the early ’70s, a variety of bands—from Yes to Genesis, Gryphon, and Gentle Giant—flew the “classical rock” banner, creating extended electric soundscapes that were a far cry from rock’s R&B roots. But it wasn’t until this crop of King Crimson members — and this album in particular — that works of that genre finally achieved a level of sophistication to be placed alongside the best in the contemporary classical literature. The title track is a monster instrumental, building from soft, tinkling kalimbas and metallic percussion through brooding guitar and string interludes to sudden and crushing tidal waves of sound and fury. The virtuosity, textural richness, and broad-scope architec-
ture of most of the six extended works on this disc make it among the ‘70s’ best in any genre. Lyrically, the three songs are as strong as the instrumental tracks. For ferocity, sheer genius and fine recording quality, this is a landmark recording.

JASON COHEN
PRIMAL SCREAM: Screamadelica

You won’t see it on any lists in this country, but across the pond, Screamadelica is a cich as one of the top three records of the ’90s, and with good reason. How is it that the only record of the decade to successfully wed ambient, techno, and house tropes to classic rock ’n’ roll structure came out in 1991? Primal Scream were also way ahead of the curve when it came to samples, collages, remixes, and riffs — the very things that most ’90s music is about. Screamadelica has it all: Muscle Shoals-inspired pop anthems and gospel-tinged disco futurism, psychedelic chill-outs and groovy weird funk trips, a housed-up Ricky Erickson cover, and a heart-

breakingly perfect ballad chopped off of the Rolling Stones’ “Winter.” It’s a party record, a drug record, and an art record, but it’s also a song record — unlike so much that has come in its wake.

YOU AM I: Hourly, Daily

Stereophile, February 2000
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You Am I began life as a ‘60s-influenced combo with just enough punk, psychedelic, and garage elements that it never quite settled on a unified sound. On *Hourly, Daily*, its third effort, the Aussie trio unzipped the fly of its pop obsessions. Bandleader Tim Rogers describes this fab little disc as a “beat record,” and though it’s possible he meant the Easybeats and not the Beatles, that’s exactly what it is — a jaunty, horn-and-string-laden skiffle collection chock-full of hooks, tremolo, and “whoo-ooohs.” From the stuttering chorus of “Opportunities” (“ba-ba-ba-ba-ba-big opportunity?”) to the wiseful “If We Can’t Get It Together,” Rogers’ high voice and craftily innocent tunes are as confectionary as (The) Raspberries and precious enough to seem British. The record’s overall demeanor is so genial and teenaged that one thinks of the Monkees — or, closer to home, the Swingers, famous for their role in the brilliant “hey-kids-let’s-put-on-a-new-wave-show!” musical, *Starstruck.* Of course, *Hourly, Daily* coincided with You Am I’s departure from Warner Bros. — subsidiary Sire gave it a perfunctory release — making it one of the decade’s utterly minor, utterly wonderful lost pop gems.

**THOMAS CONRAD**

**CHARLES LLOYD: Voice in the Night**

Charles Lloyd, tenor sax; John Abercrombie, guitar; Dave Holland, bass; Billy Higgins, drums


In his 60th year, Charles Lloyd has reached a level of expressive musicianship that communicates deep feeling from spare lines and fragmentary gestures. (Picasso didn’t get there until his 90s.) It all begins with Lloyd’s sound, a direct welling-up of the spirit, dark and rapt, with a sheen of overtone on the surface like hope.

*Voice in the Night,* the sixth and latest in Lloyd’s extraordinary series of recordings for ECM, presents a new quartet. Pianist Bobo Stenson — Lloyd’s kindred spirit and co-pilot on many a sublime space flight — is replaced here by guitarist John Abercrombie, and the all-star team of Dave Holland and Billy Higgins is the new rhythm section. This new ensemble requires no learning curve. As one, they go directly to essentials.

*On Voice in the Night,* Charles Lloyd reaches the music behind the notes — the music that has always been there.

**JOHN LEWIS & SACHA DISTEL: Afternoon in Paris**

John Lewis, piano; Sacha Distel, guitar; Barney Wilen, tenor sax; Pierre Michelot, Percy Heath, bass; Connie Kay, Kenny Clarke, drums


*Afternoon in Paris* is not exactly a masterpiece, and it’s a typical low-budget Koch Jazz reissue. So why is it a “Record To Die For?”

It has an aura. Recorded in Paris in 1956, it emanates a luminous innocence and joy of discovery. For Frenchmen Sacha Distel, Barney Wilen, and Pierre Michelot, the jazz language was still pristine and unspoiled. John Lewis, always the most “Euro” of major American jazz musicians, revels in their company. The single notes of his piano lines gliss ten like individual pearls.

**BRIAN DAMKROGER**

**LUCINDA WILLIAMS: 7 Car Wheels on a Gravel Road**


Lucinda Williams has one of those unique voices that, once heard, can never be expunged from your mind. It sounds kind of like one part Carlene Carter, one part Warren Zevon, and maybe a bit of Chrissie Hynde and Tom Petty thrown in, but most of all it sounds like a direct connection between her soul and her vocal cords. In *Car Wheels on a Gravel Road* she’s crafted a series of evocative, sharply focused stories of loves and lives gone by, each one as engaging as a well-written short story. The arrangements vary from country to country-rock, but it’s about as far from the safe, mainstream fare of today’s country pinup queens as is imaginable. The supporting cast is simply outstanding: Steve Earle, Roy Bittan, and Emmylou Harris. The band is tight; every note is dead on, and Williams’ performance is amazing — completely honest and unaffected. Last but not least, the sound is wonderful as well: detailed, warm, and rich — the sort that makes any system sound good, and a good one sound fantastic. (XXI-10)

**RICKIE LEE JONES: Naked Songs**


Rickie Lee Jones is one of those artists who needs to be heard live to be fully understood and appreciated. It’s not that her studio recordings aren’t good, but that so much of her art is in how she performs the songs, not just the songs themselves. Rather than being liberated by studio tools and techniques, she seems bound by them, truly coming to life only on stage.

Played on a good system, *Naked Songs* is as close to the live concert experience as I’ve ever heard from a recording. Jones covers gems from throughout her career, but brings in new twists and turns on the fly, trading stories and songs with her audience for a little over an hour. Except for Rob Wasserman’s bass on a couple of tracks, this is a solo acoustic set; the performance is intimate, and the incredible sound will bring to life all of it — performers, ambience, stage, audience — in your listening room. This is definitely one thing to listen to with the lights out; it’ll remind you why you got into high-end audio in the first place. (XIX-3)

**ROBERT DEUTSCH**

**ALICE RIPLEY/EMILY SKINNER: Unsuspecting Hearts**


The musical may be going through some rough times, but it’s certainly not because of a lack of talented performers. Alice Ripley and Emily Skinner are two of the best. They starred as Siamese twins in *Side Show,* and their voices blend so well you’d swear they are sisters. Ripley can sing in a sweet, legt soprano style, which she demonstrates in “My White Knight,” but she can also belt with the best of them. Skinner’s voice has a center of gravity that’s about a third lower than Ripley’s, which is just right for singing harmony. The songs chosen for the CD are an eclectic mix of Broadway classics and more obscure musical-theater pieces. “Unsuspecting Hearts,” from the legendary flop, *Carrie,* gets its first recording here, and, as performed by Ripley and Skinner, it’s powerful enough to make you wonder why that show flopped. Unusual choices that work to great effect include songs originally intended to be sung...
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Jonathan Scull, Stereophile, January 1998

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Ken Kessler, HiFi News, March 1998
by men, like "Pretty Women" (which, incidentally, Ripley and Skinner are), and "Live With Somebody You Love," from Martin Guerre. Each singer has some outstanding solo moments— I loved Skinner's "Alto Friend," a very funny song that turns unexpectedly touching—and when their voices unite, in a number like "Old Friend," it's pure magic. Værøe Sarabande's sound is still in the up-close pop style, but, perhaps partly because of the HDCD encoding, it's cleaner, less hyped than is usual for them.

THOMAS HAMPSON: Operetta Arias

Widely considered to be today's foremost American operatic baritone, Thomas Hampson has made numerous forays into the lighter musical-theater repertory, but his efforts have always struck me as too stiff, too studied. However, he appears to be entirely comfortable and relaxed singing Viennese operetta, and seems less intent on making sure that he sounds like a serious artist. His high baritone is ideally suited to the music of Lehár, Johann Strauss II, Kálmán, et al, allowing him to sing some arias written for tenor as well as the usual baritone pieces. He does a lovely job with "Dein ist mein ganzes Herz," floating the last note of the middle section in the best Richard Tauber style, and sounds properly dashing in "Als flotter Geist" (known in English as "Open Road, Open Sky"). He gets fully idiomatic support from Welser-Möst and the LPO.

EMI's sound is wide-ranging and offers a good balance between singer and orchestra. Operetta is viewed by some as too sweet, too romantic, and too far removed from reality. So be it. If you can use some sweetness and romance, and if reality has got you down, then this recording could be just what you need.

SHANNON DICKSON
YO-YO MA: Solo

Solo is a real treasure for cello lovers, and one sure to convert those not yet initiated into the breadth, power, and subtlety that instrument can convey in the hands of one so skilled as Yo-Yo Ma. This title is a collection of five carefully selected pieces reflecting divergent cultures, each infused with a universal thread of tone and texture that ties the album together into a seamless sonic delight.

First is an adaptation for solo cello of Mark O'Connor's wonderful Appalachian Waltz, originally composed for solo violin, followed by Seven Tunes Heard in China, Bright Sheng's lovely collection of refined and intricate melodies that blend oriental and western flavors. English composer David Wilde contributes his powerful, moving The Cellist of Sarajevo, while Russian Alexander Tcherepnin's Suite for Solo Cello—one of my favorites—is a rich tapestry of influences from both occidental roots and his long teaching stay in mid-century China. Zoltán Kodály's well-known Sonata for Solo Cello rounds out a disc that brims with Yo-Yo Ma's awesome virtuosity and range.

Sony Classical employed the new Direct Stream Digital (DDD) process for this recording, then converted it to CD format using their new Super Bit-Mapping Direct noise-shaping technique. The result speaks for itself. The cello perspective is slightly larger than life (as is often the case on solo recordings), but the clarity, consistency, and incredible dynamic range of the new encoding system serves the music beautifully. I found it interesting how very close in quality the stand-alone CD version sounded to the DSD version on the SACD, once I'd properly matched the levels of the two discs—more evidence that most of the inherent benefit from the new high-resolution formats is captured at the recording/recording end of the chain.

LORNA HUNT: All in One Day

Though comparisons to Joni Mitchell and Rickie Lee Jones come easily to mind, singer/lyricist Lorna Hunt stands on her own in this evocative and moving collection of songs about pain, loss, and the vagaries of life, conveyed with the emotional intensity of one who's lived much longer than her relatively few years. Save for killer covers of "Piece of My Heart" (popularized by Janis Joplin) and Gregg Allman's "Whipping Post," Hunt wrote all the lyrics and music to here. The three-day, June 1998 session was recorded direct to two-track by accomplished recording engineer Paul duGré in the excellent acoustic of the old LomPoc movie theater, north of Santa Barbara. To help bring Hunt's creations to life, duGré assembled not only his quiver of vintage mikes and tube recording gear, but also the services of the outstanding session musicians listed above.

The 24-bit/96kHz DAD version shows off the sonic advantages of the new DVD format, and offers one extra tune. However, the levels on the CD version are 2dB louder than on the DAD disc, and the LP is a good 4–6dB louder than the DAD; you'll need to adjust for this before making any comparisons. All in One Day has become an invaluable reference disc for me, yet one that I treasure most for its seductive and engaging melodies.

DANIEL DURCHHOHL
NITTY GRITTY DIRT BAND: Will the Circle Be Unbroken

When I was a high school student back in the late '70s, one of my part-time jobs was as a Saturday-night deejay at a country radio station in rural Missouri. Country's Top 40 was utter dreck then, as it pretty much is now, so every week I'd dig into the station's archives for a few things to play that would make it seem worthwhile coming in for another week.

I was delighted when I discovered Will the Circle Be Unbroken, the album that perfectly matched my reverence for classic country music with the idea that a younger generation might be receptive to it. Circle, of course, is the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band's 1972 triple album (now available as a double CD), on which they connect musically and spiritually with their elders, an imposing cross section of country music history including Earl
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Stereophile, February 2000
Scruby, Mother Maybelle Carter, Doc Watson, Roy Acuff, Jimmie Martin, and Merle Travis. The album is important for introducing songs such as “You Are My Flower,” “Nine Pound Hammer,” and “Tennessee Stud” to the Dirt Band’s young audience, but also for proving that they could hold their own among such stellar company.

SOUTHSIDE JOHNNY & THE ASBURY JUKEs: Hearts of Stone
Epic JE 35488 (LP); Epic/Legacy EK 35488 (CD). 1978. stevie Van Zandt, prod.; Jack Malenken, eng. AAA/AAD. TT: 34:24

Growing up in the Italian section of South St. Louis, Joe Garagola was a major-league talent, but still only the second-best baseball player in his neighborhood: A few doors down lived future Hall of Famer Yogi Berra. Southside Johnny and the Asbury Jukes faced a similar situation in the barrooms of New Jersey, always playing second fiddle to Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band. The Jukes leaned on Springsteen through their first couple of albums, recording such Boss songs as “The Fever” and “I Don’t Want to Go Home.” In fact, Hearts of Stone consists solely of songs by Springsteen and guitarist/producer Miami Steve Van Zandt. But what songs they are—fiery tracks such as “Talk to Me,” “Take It Inside,” and “Trapped Again,” and the title tune, a killer ballad. Southside Johnny’s soulful delivery and the Jukes’ brassy arrangements are perfect, making this an album for the ages.

MICHAEL FREMER
JASON FALKNER: Can You Still Feel?

In the world I grew up in, the handsome young Mr. Falkner, a former member of Jellyfish, would be declared a sexy pop/rock genius, would be on the cover of Rolling Stone, and would sell a million copies of this superb, self-produced album, for which he wrote all of the songs and on which he plays almost all of the instruments, and well. But this is a different world, and since Mr. Falkner does not sport visible tattoos, dress like a professional wrestler, rap, or pepper his songs with the F-word, this tuneful, ingeniously entertaining, lushly produced set has not set the musical world on fire. The album title says it all. If you value melody, hooks, intricate production craft, lyrical intelligence, and listening to music that makes you feel good, even inspired—in other words, if you like The Beatles—get this and you won’t be disappointed. If Falkner’s achingly gorgeous “Revelation” doesn’t make you “feel” something, your answer to Falkner’s challenging question of an album title would have to be “No”—in which case, you should seek professional help. For the rest of us, there’s this great pop album. The CD, mastered by Alan Yoshida at A&M, sounds decent, but don’t expect audiophile fireworks. For the usual unexplained reasons, the LP, mastered from DAT, is much better-sounding, and features two tracks not found on the CD, one of which is Falkner’s take on Eno’s “Burning Airlines Give You So Much More”—and there’s different cover art. Order online for $8 at www.lovitt.com.

HIM: Sworn Eyes

With labels like Perishable, Thrill Jockey, Touch and Go, Quarterstick, and Drag City leading the way, Chicago has quietly become the unlikely center of American musical innovation and experimentation. Best known for blues, the Windy City today hosts such post-avant-garde luminaries as Tortoise, Gusto del Sol (David Grubbs and Jim O’Rourke), Isolete 217, June of '44, and many others. This mostly instrumental music is an enticing mix of jazz, percussion, and electronica, with some folk thrown in for good measure. Best of all for audiophiles, thanks to another local hero, recording engineer and analog purist Steve Albini (also a member of the rock group Shellac), the sound quality of almost all of the releases by these groups is absolutely superb, with many of them available on vinyl as well as CD. HIM revolves around drummer Doug Scharin and cornetist Rob Mazurek, who, along with guitarist Jeff Parker and bassist Bundy K. Brown, produce here what can best be described as “post-Bitches Brew” jazz-rock, or maybe Miles meets Eno. Though the emphasis is on rhythm and there’s lots of sampling and electronics, the overall vibe has a flowing, organic, minimalist quality that is soothing, mesmerizing, and utterly pleasurable. The five tunes work equally well as background and foreground music. If you liked Tortoise’s TNT, you’ll like this too. If you don’t know from either, this is as good a place to start as any. The two-LP set, available directly from Bubbcore (www.bubcareer.com) for $12, stumps all over the good-sounding CD.

LARRY GREENHILL
EMMYLOU HARRIS: Spyboy

It helps to read this magazine. I have to thank Robert Baird for choosing this CD as his December 1998 "Recording of the Month." Since then, it has become my standard musical source. Why? Harris’s “birdlike soprano, fragile as spun glass,” and the “spaciousness and pristine quality of this live recording” —RB’s words—pull me into the music.

Examples of this CD’s magic abound. The sinistely throbbing, churning bass/synthesizer vortex that opens “Deeper Wells” thrills me. Which is the real Harris: the open translucency on “Prayer in Open D?” the dark, rich, slightly nasal timbre on “Calling My Children Back Home?” or the weary, too-thin, broken notes heard on “The Maker?” I don’t know, but they all pull me into the music. Right now, I’m most taken with that final track, on which drummer Brady Blade erupts into one of the most explosive percussion solos I’ve heard on a live album. Yes, this one’s a keeper! [XXI-12]

JEROME HARRIS QUINTET: Rendezvous
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Shannon Dickson, Stereophile May, 1999

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Stereophile, February 2000
Call me a company man, but I love this CD. Featuring the Jerome Harris jazz quintet, it’s John Atkinson’s first nonclassical recording for the Stereophile label. Rendezvous has extraordinary instrumental timbre and resolution of fine musical detail, due in part to John’s expertise and to the warm acoustic of Chad Kasem’s Blue Heaven Studios in Salina, Kansas. My favorite track is Duke Ellington’s “The Mooche,” which I’ve used to evaluate five different loudspeakers so far. Depending on the speaker, “The Mooche” can sound somber, dark, and distant — like a train passing in the night — or focused, up-close, energetic, and dramatic. The opening cymbal work shines on the best equipment, but sounds like static on the others. Different tensions of the tom-tom heads in Billy Drummond’s kit can be heard. Trumpet and trombone solo blossoms into a bitting, “brassy blattiness.” Soundstage width can be awesome, with vibes far stage left to stage center, trombone just right of center, sax far right, bass guitar and kick drum center, and drums spread across the room.

But don’t take just my word for it that Rendezvous is a great CD — it’s been shortlisted for a Grammy nomination in the “Best Engineered Album (nonclassical)” category.

JOHN LENNON: Anthology

There’s no way a music lover can pick only two albums each year for the annual “R2D4,” so I thought a four-CD set might be a way of sneaking some extra notes under RB’s radar. This monumental set appeared late in ’98, but nothing I heard in ’99 could dislodge it from the top spot. This is as much a sentimental choice as anything else, and by now most folks know whether they like John Lennon or not. I was just old enough when the first of these original came out to catch the various points Lennon was making, and assumed that his brutal honesty was the typical songwriter’s standard. I had no idea how wrong that would turn out to be. Hearing these alternate takes and almost-released tracks reminds me how far away from truth most songwriting has strayed. It’s no wonder that millions were devastated when he died 20 years ago — these songs work right into you, with such sincerity and simple logic that Lennon becomes virtually a close, trusted friend. Some of the takes are as lo-fi as you can get, but there are a couple of dozen tracks that were recorded clean as a whistle in 2", 16-track analog glory. The intimate perspective of much of these early-’70s recordings (before gobs of digital reverb was available to drench vocalists) puts you right in the studio watching as the sessions unfold. “He tried to face reality,” it says on the cover. Priceless.

SAMi WIMME SAARI: Gierra
Sami Wimme Saari, vocals; Tapani Rinne, woodwinds, keyboards, percussion; Jari Kokkonen, keyboards, programming; Matti Wallenius, ukelele, mandolin; Pauli, keyboards, programming; Rajasto, keyboards

Out of the cold Nordic reaches of Finland comes one of the most successful meldings of ancient and modern musical forms to date. This is Sami Wimme Saari’s second album, and features his stellar use of an ancient vocal technique known as yoki. Couple this shamanistic chant style with a wide instrumental dynamic ranging from pounding drums and electronic bass to frosty ambient stretches of acoustic sound, and you’ve got a solid set of tunes that grab you by the ears and keep you locked in place. I’ve been doing an alternate-music radio program for the last 20 years at the local National Public Radio affiliate here in San Luis Obispo (shameless plug: Tuesdays, 10pm-1am, KCBX, 901 FM, San Luis Obispo and Santa Barbara Counties), and this disc never failed to light up the phones. In fact, I tried it last night, and it still works: “What is that?” came the chorus. So if your tastes run a little to the outside but you want to try something solid that will push your audio system a tad, here it is. But don’t ask me to explain what that is on the cover.

HYPERION KNIGHT

BENNO MOISEIWITSCH: Great Pianists of the 20th Century
Piano music of Chopin, Kabalevsky, Liszt, Medtner, Mendelssohn/Rachmaninoff, Prokofiev, Rachmaninoff

Benno Moiseiwitsch, piano; conductor/orchestra in Rach. Concerto 2

SERGEI RACHMANINOFF: A Window in Time
Piano music of Bach, Chopin, Beethoven/Rubinstein, Gluck/Sgambati, Henselt, Mendelssohn, Paderewski, Rubinstein, Tchaikovsky

Sergei Rachmaninoff, Ampico piano rolls

Two highly ambitious projects of piano reissues were realized in 1999. First, Philips completed its behemoth 200-CD Great Pianists of the 20th Century series, almost inevitably sparking resounding controversy regarding its choice of pianists, selection of repertoire, and quality of remastering. While many of Philips’ decisions made during this project may have been dubious, a number of volumes were successful on all counts, in particular the set devoted to Benno Moiseiwitsch (1890–1963).

Due, perhaps, to his great humility, Moiseiwitsch never sought or achieved the fame of peers like Rachmaninoff and Horowitz. But judging by his elegant, individual, and technically stunning recordings, many collectors today rank him among the top dozen pianists of the century. Shrewdly catering to both seasoned collectors and the uninitiated, Philips has included rare Chopin recordings from the late 1950s, showcasing Moiseiwitsch’s grand romantic style in good sound reminiscent of Rubinstein in its melting loveliness, but with the added spice of 19th-century musical insight and freedom.

Of equally great importance is producer Wayne Stahnke’s second volume of restored piano rolls by Rachmaninoff on Telarc. While Ampico piano rolls (a vastly superior “player”-piano technology on which most of the great turn-of-the-century pianists recorded) have been known to collectors for decades, the mechanical, often jarring effect of the original reproducing pianos left unfulfilled the dream of hearing a living, breathing ghost from the past. Until now. By transferring the rolls electronically for use by the Bösendorfer Reproducing Piano, Stahnke has made it possible to feel Rachmaninoff’s presence — or at least a very close facsimile — in one’s own living room. This is truly a breakthrough for musical necromancers. I hope that Telarc will continue this series by resurrecting all of the great pianists of the past!

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Finally reissued after 15 years in limbo, Leon Fleisher’s recordings of Brahms’ Piano Concertos 1 & 2 (from 1958 and 2 (1962) strike, for me, the best balance between passion and austerity, freshness and maturity. Fleisher’s rich tone, flawless technique, and sepiatoned Romanticism are perfectly counterpoised not only by conductor George Szell’s rhythmic rigor and bracing verve, but also by the Cleveland Orchestra’s tightly astringent ensemble playing, remarkable even by today’s standards. In earlier releases, the sound was typical of Columbia’s wretched early-’60s engineering style, but the remastering sounds like real music: a convincing sense of venue, an amazing absence of harshness, and, wonder of wonders, believable bass. This generous, sumptuous package also contains mono recordings from 1956 of Fleisher performing the Waltzes Op.39 and the Variations and Fugue on a Theme of Handel—both in fleet, sprightly, idiomatic readings—as well as Fleisher’s recollections of the sessions, and reproductions of the original Epic LP covers and inner sleeves. A terrific set. (XXI-5)

FRIFOT: Frifot
Per Gudmundsson, fiddle, octave fiddle, Swedish bagpipes, vocal; Ale Möller, mandola, natural flutes, hammered dulcimer, folk harp, shawm, vocal; LenaWillénmark, vocal, fiddle, octave fiddle, wooden flute

I couldn’t bully RB into making this “Recording of the Month,” so an “RZD4” badge will have to do. Even if you’re among the few who know Swedish folk music, I doubt you’ve heard anything like Frifot, a trio of Swedish musicians from various disciplines (jazz, folk, Greek blues) who have returned to their roots and seem to have dug deeper than anyone knew was possible. This dark, elementally northern music comforts even as it harrows. It’s played and sung with genre-defying, world-class musicianship, and was recorded in sound of a resonance sumptuous even by ECM’s own lofty standard, however genetically engineered.

PAUL MESSENGER
MASSIVE ATTACK: Blue Lines
Wild Rice WRCD1, Virgin 7 66228 2 (CD, also originally released on LP). 1991. Massive Attack, Jonny Dollar, prod.; mix. ADD TT: 45:09

Today’s dance-music geniuses seem to be becoming increasingly ephemeral, disposable, and self-referential, but Massive Attack’s handful of albums provide a soundtrack to the 1990s that stand out as beacons of class and originality. Usually referred to as “trip-hop,” MA’s music has only a passing resemblance to hip-hop, rap, big beat, drum’n’bass, and other dance styles. Smooth, subtle, and fundamentally laid-back, this is one for the chill-out room—to put your feet up, relax into the groove, and actually get into listening to music that, by pop-music standards, is unusually well crafted.

I’ve picked Blue Lines because it came first and was enormously influential, but the subsequent Protection and the most recent, the altogether darker Mezzanine, deserve just as close attention, and might be easier to track down. The “band” is a flexible unit, varying personnel from track to track around the songwriting hard core of “Daddy” G. Marshall, A. “Mushroom” Volles, and R. “3D” del Naja, though there are lots of guest appearances. (Neneh Cherry is credited on “Hymn of the Big Wheel.”)

The sheer variety of the music here makes it difficult to pin down a style or pick favorite tracks. The heavy-duty Unfinished Sympathy is the album’s widely acknowledged “classic,” but I just love the cheeky backbeat that drives “Daydreaming” along at a beautifully purposeful walking pace—a real truckin’ track for the ’90s. Nine years on, Blue Lines remains fresh and fun musically, and that alone justifies an “RZD4” appearance.

CHRISTY MOORE: Live (at The Point)
Christy Moore, vocals, guitars, bodhran

I don’t regard myself as a particular fan of folk music, or ethnic music in general, but I’ve developed a very strong enthusiasm for the music of Irish mumsel Chrissy Moore. His career stretches back for decades, and this comes through both in his stagecraft and in his ability to work with a live audience. Of a long string of albums going back 30-odd years, Live (at The Point) (The Point is Dublin’s premier venue) is my favorite, followed closely by its immediate predecessor, Smoke and Strong Whiskey. Both are exceptionally well recorded, live tending toward the dry and thin, while Strong Whiskey has a rich, fat sound. I love the atmosphere of a genuinely live recording and the tension this brings to a performance, though some of the performer/audience repartee gets a bit tiresome when you’ve heard it a hundred times, and some of the humor in the songs (eg, the exploits of the Irish soccer team) has passed its sell-by date.

But there are still plenty of songs here that will stand up on their own for years to come. Christy’s a great performer but an even better songwriter, especially at the top of his form—which is usually when he’s having a go at the English. His wit can be as sharp and barbed as anything Dylan wrote, and he knows how to spin a yarn with an effortlessness that comes from three decades on the road, and an Irishness that makes you want to head for the Emerald Isle.

MICHAEL METZGER
MONTE WARDEN: Monte Warden

Monte Warden must tire of the endless comparisons to Buddy Holly, but he brought them on himself with this sweet-snarly collection of infectious roots-rock and country, released on here-again, gone-again Watermelon Records. Using tried and true rhymes about stars, heartbeats, dreams, eyes, the skies above, and the like, all wrapped around basic, ever-effective, strummed rock-guitar chords and hooks, Warden resurrects the rock’n’roll that was once a voice of exuberant innocence—without sounding trite or hackneyed. Ballads like “’Til She Walked In,” “Just to Hear Your Voice,” “Everyday We Fall in Love,” and “All I Want is You” revisit the
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adorations and aches of first loves and first rejections, presented in spare arrangements and restrained vocals that prevent melodrama from ever taking over. When Warden kicks up the tempo on "Give My Heart a Break," "Feel Better," "All I Want Is You," and "Car Seat," he keeps it clean and simple, allowing the urgency of the backbeat and his sugary growls to grab and shake you. It's rock'n'roll as it was once meant to be — and worth the effort to hunt down this elusive disc.

**MISSISSIPPI JOHN HURT: Today!**

In the context of today's music world, Mississippi John Hurt makes no sense. He was an old man singing old country blues and playing an old acoustic guitar. His three-finger, bass-over-rhythms picking style was simple and elegant. His warm voice was unhurried and unsentimental. Even when Hurt sang "dirty" blues, as he does on Today! in "Candy Man," his delicate pluckings on acoustic guitar and understated vocal phrasing imbues it with stateliness. This is music to be relaxed into: one man's voice and one man's guitar for a quiet, late night or a hot afternoon when you're as unlikely to move as a cool breeze is to happen by.

Whether it's the suggestive ode to Maxwell House in "Coffee Blues," the story of murder in "Louis Collins," the expectant redemption of "Beulah Land," or the jubilant yearning of "Corrinna, Corrinna," Hurt shapes the lyrics with uncommon ease and palatable warmth, making them into song-stories sung by a singing grandfather of the blues. His graceful music makes no sense in today's world. That could be its greatest charm.

**DAN QUELLETTE
**
**THE BEATLES: Revolver**

Imagine a 12-year-old kid weaned on mid-'60s AM radio unwrapping this baby and putting it on his parents' record player with the 10-year-old needle. Who cared about the sound quality emanating from the tinny speaker (yes, one speaker for the cheaper-priced "monophonic microgroove recording")? Bigger than any shot-heard-round-the-world since the JFK assassination, *Revolver* prepared me for a life of fascination with unorthodox musical colors, shapes, textures, and styles. I still get chills listening to John musing on the mind-blowing "Tomorrow Never Knows" (one of my all-time favorite Beatles tunes), Paul wall on the horn-riffed "Got to Get You Into My Life," George espousing love on the star-and-table-drenched "Love You To," and Ringo happy-go-luckying his way through the jaunty fantasy of "Yellow Submarine." To this day, I never tire of spinning *Revolver*, the classic album that made me hunger to swing open the doors and explore new musical vistas.

**OLIVER NELSON: The Blues and the Abstract Truth**
*Oliver Nelson, alto & tenor sax; Eric Dolphy, alto sax, flute; George Barrow, baritone sax; Freddie Hubbard, trumpet; Bill Evans, piano; Paul Chambers, bass; Roy Haynes, drums Impulse! IMPD-154 (CD). 1961/1995. Creed Taylor, prod.; Rudy Van Gelder, eng.; Michael Cuscuna, reissue prod. AAD? TT: 36:35*

Jazz in the late '50s and early '60s was golden. In 1959, John Coltrane recorded *Giant Steps* and Miles Davis offered *Kind of Blue*, while Ornette Coleman shocked with *The Shape of Jazz to Come* in 1960. A year later, Oliver Nelson recorded *The Blues and the Abstract Truth*. While saxophonist-composer-arranger Nelson may not figure in the top echelon of jazz artists, this album is one of the idiom's best. Not only did Nelson enlist magnificent sidemen — including Eric Dolphy and Freddie Hubbard, and the stellar rhythm section of pianist Bill Evans, bassist Paul Chambers, and drummer Roy Haynes — he also premiered two of his greatest compositions: the much-heralded and oft-covered "Stolen Moments," here delivered as nine minutes of pure bliss; and the rousing "Hoe-Down," as fun and sophisticated an uptempo number as you're likely to hear. (XVII-2)

**WES PHILLIPS**

**IAN TYSON: Old Corrals and Sagebrush & Other Cowboy Culture Classics**

Ian Tyson has produced the classic cowboy record here. His renditions of "Leaving Cheyenne" and "Whoopie 'Ti Yi Yo" sound definitive, but the disc's true strength lies in Tyson's own songs about life as a working rancher in the West today (which he is), as well as some well-chosen covers on the same subject. The West Tyson sings of is defined by hard work and low wages, and his love of the land and of the lore is overwhelmingly obvious. He makes cowboying seem like a higher calling — and reminds me of my six-year-old dreams of life in the saddle. The sound is as filled with natural glory as the landscape Tyson sings about. This one's reference quality.

**DAVID BROMBERG BAND: Reckless Abandon/Bandit in a Bathing Suit**

The David Bromberg Band never did garner the respect it deserved. Quite simply, the band could play anything, from Irish fiddle tunes to Western Swing to low-down dirty blues — each concert encompassed an amazing range of music.

Eclectic as their records were, no single release was capable of reflecting the breadth of their stage shows — at least not until Fantasy paired two of the best Bromberg Band studio outings on this CD reissue. This one's got it all, from Jim Ringer's hilarious take on the Staggerlee legend, "Mrs. Delion's Lament," to Bromberg's delightful audience-response classic "Travelin' Man" — and with reels, jigs, and jams galore. And it sounds good, too.

**ROBERT J. REINA**

**HOLE: Celebrity Skin**

Although I've admired Courtney Love's previous work, I found it lacked originality; it was too derivative of late husband Kurt Cobain's material. Not so with this, her latest, in which Love has created an intricately orchestrated and varied web of simple but sophisticated pop tunes cloaked by her usual dark and cynical lyrics. This CD is currently in permanent rotation on my car audio system. I can't drive any distance without hearing that power-pop attack on musician sellout, "Playing Your Song"; or Love's power ballad, an apparent ode to her late beloved, "Northern Star"; or
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the infectious attack on Hollywood phony," “Celebrity Skin," the catchiest pop tune I've heard in a decade. Sound is relatively unprocessed, considering the genre.

FRED FRITH: Eye to Ear

Fred Frith has been an icon of the downtown New York new music scene for the last 20 years. Whether wailing a high-energy guitar in a Bill Laswell power group, engaging in free improvisation on "prepared" electric guitar in small ensembles, or providing a bass continuo to Naked City, John Zorn's erstwhile rock band, he's demonstrated that no other guitarist has more catholic taste. Since relocating to Germany in the early '90s, he has made his mark as composer for European theater, art films, and TV. This showcase for Frith's versatility covers his favorite works for various media recorded over the last decade. The delicate brass and woodwind chamber works for TV melodramas weave a sophisticated interaction of melody and harmony in the manner of Bernard Herrmann, while Frith uses electronic synthesis, loops, and percussion to create a bath of sound for the film pieces. On the other end of the spectrum, the theater pieces jar the listener with dissonant, distorted guitar-percussion attacks over static electronic backdrops. All of the works stand up very well on their own without the visuals, and the sound is uniformly rich and natural.

RICHARD J. ROSEN
THE COMPLETE STAX VOLT SINGLES: 1959–1968

When I bought the Stax box in 1991 — as soon as it came out — I realized that it was time to give in and get a CD player. In fact, so many of my friends went digital because of this collection, it might as well have come shrinkwrapped with a player as a matched set. It still boggles my mind that the entire output of the first nine years of the hallowed Stax Studio in Memphis can be comfortably carried in the crook of my arm. To me, that's like putting the Library of Congress on the head of a pin, except way more important. You get the essential recordings of Rufus and Carla Thomas, Sam and Dave, Otis Redding, et al. And then, almost as a bonus, practically every track is backed by Booker T. & the MG's — one hell of a house band! Where else are you going to get a copy of Eddie Floyd's "Big Bird," the official song of the Empire State Soul Club? It's an instant record collection. As my friend Hound so succinctly puts it, "Rock'n'roll happened on 45s. It just did not happen on LP." The only way to get all of this indispensab music has been to spend

your life scrounging through dusty crates of singles. Until now. (XIV-9)

UP BUSTLE AND OUT: One Colour Just Reflects Another
Señor Roody, flutes, field recordings; Vicki Burke, saxes; John Donegan, piano; Clandestine Ein, drums, Rhodes & Hammond organs

"It's organic!" I'd given up any hope of finding any trance/triphop/house/acid-jazz/ambient music that didn't leave me absolutely cold. Almost all of that crap breaks my cardinal rule of music: It's gotta sound as if human beings had at least some hand in creating it. One Colour... is different. It's a mix of field recordings from Bolivia, Peru, and Turkey set to modern, driving beats, and combined with saxophones, timbales, flutes, bicycle horns, flamenco guitar, and other real instruments played by authentic musicians. Heck, it's got drum sounds created by using atonal drums! What a concept. It's full of serious grooves, musical ideas, jazz, funk, soul, Latin...it's a mélange that works, and has kept its freshness well past the usual shelf-life of current music.

KALMAN RUBINSON
MAHLER: Symphony 9
With Commentary Disc by Benjamin Zander
Benjamin Zander, Philharmonia Orchestra

While there's still a lot of time left, this magnificent recording is an appropriate millennial nominee for "RZD4." First, the Ninth is Mahler's final completed symphonic statement on fate and human existence, and, at the end of his century, there is not yet a more trenchant musical commentary. Second, this recording represents the first release with a large independent label and a major orchestra by Benjamin Zander, an American conductor who is becoming a premier interpreter of symphonic music. Third, the recording of the symphony is accompanied by Zander's illuminating guide to performing and listening to the Ninth. Finally and, without doubt, most important, this is a moving and soul-shattering performance.

My introduction to the Mahler 9 was Bruno Walter's NYP recording; Zander achieves a similar engrossing continuity, and with a much wider dynamic and expressive range. Bernstein/Concertgebouw, my standard, treads dangerously close to fervent excess. But while Bernstein forcefully pulls the listener along, Zander's balance creates an even greater momentum. Instead of transitions, one feels an inexorable progression of intensity that, ultimately, leaves one enraptured but clarified.

The Philharmonia performs heroically, providing the execution one missed in Zander's otherwise fascinating earlier recordings. Telarc's transcription from the public performance and dress rehearsal at the Barbican Centre is better than Teldec's Inbal series with the Philharmonia, and very much as I remember the orchestra sounding in concert. A bit of reticence in the treble is noted, but, if memory serves, is somewhat welcome; and the dynamic range, matching the emotional one, is staggering.

DICK CARY'S TUESDAY NIGHT FRIENDS: Catching Up
Directed by Dick Hamilton

I would not have picked this one off the record shelves. I had never heard of Dick Cary until Klavier sent this to me, and now I'm amazed. Dick Cary, termed a "musical centipede" by a Swedish journalist, produced over 3200 arrangements — performed on piano, trumpet, and alto horn on more than 100 Dixieland jazz recordings — and still found the inspiration to compose more than 1800 original works. Following his passing in 1994, "this recording is an attempt to 'catch up' with the remarkable Dick Cary — a musician's musician," and, while it may be an homage, it is also infectious and delightful.

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three arrangements, many of which, to my great surprise, are quite familiar: "The Albatross," "Black and Blue," "December Song," "Sea of Cortez," etc. But I didn't know I knew them, probably because they've never grabbed me and really forced me to tap my toes before. The solos, fully attributed in the notes, are perfectly inflected variations and comments on the melodies. Most detectable, and wonderfully apparent on "Recado," is the interplay of rhythms that Cary wove into these arrangements. Everything seems so natural and so right.

The sound is rich and detailed, with every instrument given an appropriate presence but not a spotlight. For example, I love the brrrr of the brass, but I never lose the sense that this is a cohesive ensemble. There's good balance and weight, too, although I would have liked a little more tightness and delineation in the bass.

MARKUS SAUER
ELIASDES OCHOA Y EL CUARTETO PATRIA: Sublime Illusion

PASCAL COMELADE: Haikus de Pianos

Lately I've been thinking a lot about time. Living in reunited Germany, I'm acutely aware that one aspect that separates the collective life experience of people from the western and eastern parts of Germany is the perception of time. Easterners used to live a slow life in which change was subtle and gradual: The same cars were produced on the same machines and painted in the same colors for decades, making for an extremely stable visual environment. The same was true of clothes, advertising for eastern brands of goods, etc. Personal lives, too, were stable: many workers never left the companies where they got their first jobs. Only the divorce rate was slightly higher than in Western Germany; women mostly had their own jobs, so we were not held back in unfulfilling relationships by economic dependence. But in Western Germany as in the US, the pace of life has been subjectively accelerating since the '60s. So, in more senses than one, reunification has meant bringing the Eastern part of Germany up to speed.

The western world has its own unease about the accelerated lives we force ourselves to lead. Milan Kundrea's The Disorder of Slowness has been a bestseller in a number of countries; trip-hop music has been a hugely successful counterpart to the accelerated beat of modern dance-music styles. People are becoming aware that life has a rhythm, that different cultures have different rhythms, and that there will be times when the rhythm of one's own culture is not the rhythm that one's soul needs. And, of course, age plays a role: the obsession with speed and the obsession with youth are interrelated.

Which may partly explain why old men from Cuba have been such a hit with music audiences in the West: their music radiates a different concept of time. Buena Vista Social Club, one of my 1998 "R2D4" selections, has recently spent several weeks at the top of the German pop charts, thanks to Wim Wenders' film of the same name. The album has spawned a number of spin-offs and follow-ups, but the best recent addition seems to me to be this album by Eliasdes Ochoa, a member of the Buena Vista grouping. His mastery of different styles of Cuban music is perfect, his guitar technique flawless; even when notes fly thick and fast, he sounds relaxed and in control. His band is tight, the guest musicians (including Ry Cooder on the closing track) adding variety without diluting the spirit of this masterful record: joy, maturity, serenity, and confidence. (XXII-11)

My second choice is very different musically, but it, too, disorients the listener time-wise, and in a positive way. A Japanese haiku seeks the most succinct and elegant expression of a thought. Pascal

Comelade is a French jazz musician whose Haikus de Pianos appears on a Japanese label, appropriately enough. He goes to the heart of the music you know in a very different context, stripping it of artifice, often slowing it down and revealing its substance. For example, the riff from Deep Purple's "Smoke on the Water," played on a toy piano, surprises with its fragile beauty. Comelade's original compositions combine elements of French folklore, imaginative, jazz, classical music, and pop. A record that warms your heart in winter and refreshes in summer.

JONATHAN SCULL
RUN LOLA RUN: Original Soundtrack Recording
Music by Tom Tykwer

Techno Art of Noise marries Morcheeba as David Lynch and Angelo Badalamenti give away the bride under the watchful eye of a moody German director thrown in just for laughs. There's definitely some primeval connection between sound and emotion, and every time I listen to this recording, I feel it deep. It vividly recalls the experience of seeing the film, which is just as utterly compelling as the music. Powerful driving bass, a wonderful and engaging midrange that physically pulls me into the music, with gorgeous highs beckoning seductively from above — always an immersive and goosebump-inducing listening experience. Commercial releases should all sound this good. Recorded in Germany and the States, with Bernie Grundman working his usual mastering magic. Just before the three-minute mark, listen for a bass crescendo that begins its rise through to a stunning sonic boom at around 3:54. The "instructions" read as follows: "Track 1, 'Believe,' is the essence of the Run Lola Run soundtrack. To re-experience the movie, listen to tracks 2–9. For an alternative experience, listen to tracks 10–16. Enjoy!" There's even a bonus track not heard in the film. It's the pounding, international alternate-take universe, erotic and bursting with the creative energy of the 21st century come to call at your door. Open up with welcoming arms, you'll love it.

KRUDER DORFMEISTER: The K&D Sessions

Incredible — I love this two-CD set. Kruder and Dorfmeister are a couple of very cutting-edge and very talented mixmasters working out of Berlin. Their music 'n'mixin' is beyond reproach for anyone who likes an easy, flowing, sensual, and rhythmic trip-hop/electronica/dance/dub kinda vibe. It's very international, with English, German, and French lyrics peppered throughout. I'm listening to it now...
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on my office system, and I can't stop my head and upper body from noddin' and groovin' along with the beat. The flow, the connectivity, the easy but interesting musical exploration take me far and wide in my imagination. It's so easy to fall into the hypnotic, compelling, utterly attractive flow of sound. It's easy to take, but it's real music at the same time. I fear I'll overlay these CDs and lose interest, but I keep playing them, and continue to find them as fascinating and fresh as the day I found them at Etherea in the East Village.

The recording is audiophile in every way: The encompassing bass creates a powerful foundation over a lush 'n' lovely midrange and sweet highs with lots of detail. I don't know about the majors, but the recording values of these new-music recording houses popping up in lower Manhattan are right up there with the best. The soundstage, artificial though it may be, wraps way around the listener — so very involving. Open a bottle of champagne or a good vintage wine, plop either disc in the player, and stare deeply and meaningfully at your Love Interest of the Moment. I absolutely guarantee you a fluid, sexy, groovin' good time.

**DAVID SOKOL**

**STEVIE WONDER: Songs in the Key of Life**


Staggering as it is, Stevie Wonder was barely 26 when he released this musical monolith, a 21-song exploration that bridged the pop and soul worlds with compassion and spirituality, was the rage in the mid-70s, and continues to sound utterly fresh today. Although Wonder was already a major star (this was his 16th album, after all), the scope of Songs earned him a spot beside Dylan, Lennon, and McCartney as one of the great songwriters of his time. From "Isn't She Lovely" (a love song to a newborn daughter) to "Sir Duke" (a love song to the great Ellington) to "Black Man" (a love song to human accomplishment) to "Knocks Me Off My Feet" (a just-plain love song), Wonder uses strings, brass, all kinds of percussion, a church choir, his own divine voice, and an army of other instrumentation to paint his masterpiece. One of those rare Gerald Ford/Jimmy Carter-era recordings that still yields new subtleties and joys with every listen, this is one to die for, again and again.

**PAM TILLIS: Sweetheart's Dance**


Country music has become so generic and homogenized lately that it's hard to believe that just five years have passed since Pam Tillis released this gem and was subsequently crowned the Country Music Association's Female Vocalist of the Year. The daughter of Music City journeyman Mel Tillis, Pam grew up within spittin' distance of the Grand Ole Opry, but early in her career discovered how to respectfully take the traditional country that's in her blood and make it thoroughly contemporary. With her sweet, righteous twang, she's untouched in her ability to convey heartbreak, compassion, and good-natured fun, and Sweetheart's Dance bursts with conviction and warmth. Half of its songs were hits, though "I Was Blown Away" had the misfortune of bulleting up the charts at the time of the Oklahoma City bombing, and was voluntarily pulled off the radio. This collection assembles an all-star team of players that, besides guitarist Brent Mason, steel guitarist Paul Franklin, and fiddler Sam Bush, also includes Daddy Bluegrass Bill Monroe in a gorgeous mandolin cameo. All this, plus guest vocals from Kim Richey, Mary Chapin Carpenter, Vince Gill, and Mel himself, make this the best mainstream country album of the 1990s.

**CHIP STERN**

**HERBIE NICHOLS: The Complete Blue Note Recordings**

Herbie Nichols, piano; Al McKibbon, Teddy Kotick, bass; Art Blakey, Max Roach, drums


"Herbie Nichols was my hero," Cecil Taylor said to me of this jazz original, and it's more than likely that Nichols would have found his audience, much as Taylor did. But leukemia claimed this gentle giant at the age of 44, in April 1963. Nichols was a bridge between Jelly Roll Morton, Teddy Wilson, Art Tatum, Mary Lou Williams, Thelonious Monk, Elmo Hope, and Bud Powell on one hand, and Mal Waldron, Herbie Hancock, Andrew Hill, Hasaan Ibn Ali, Cecil Taylor, and Gerri Allen on the other. With deep roots in New Orleans, Harlem stride, and the European concert tradition, Nichols' music also reflects a profoundly African rhythmic aesthetic. His melodies derive directly from complex root syncopations, and his innate ability to orchestrate rhythm inspires heroic interplay with drummers Blakey and Roach, who treat his songforms like little drum concertos. Rather than run changes, Nichols always deconstructed and recast his thematic ideas in a loping, two-handed orchestral style. His improvisations are aglow with edgy, elliptical harmonies, depicting a dissonant, asymmetrical brand of counterpoint and an oblique melodic focus. His left-hand punctuations inevitably find the cracks in time—it's like watching mercury float. What's more, like Monk's, Nichols' tempos—whether on a medium stroll such as "Lady Sings the Blues" or a minor gallop like "Fuff Primatif"—are as distinctive a stylistic signature as are his angular harmonies and melodies. The overall effect of these excellent recordings from 1955-56 is darkly romantic and hypnotically swinging — it seems as if Nichols could keep extending and elongating his melodic elisions for eternity.

**JO JONES: The Essential Jo Jones**

Jo Jones, drums; Emmett Berry, trumpet; Benny Green, Lawrence Brown, trombone; Rudy Powell, clarinet; Lucky Thompson, tenor sax; Freddie Greene, guitar; Nat Pierce, Count Basie, piano: Ray Bryant, piano; Tommy Bryant, Walter Page, bass. Vanguard 101/2-2 (CD). 1955-56/1995. John Hammond, prod. AAD: TT: 78:30

Jonathan David Samuel Jones' place in jazz history would be sacrosanct and secure if for nothing other than his role as the drummer in the "All-American Rhythm Section" of the great Count Basie Orchestra. On the first of six joyous selections here from a pair of August 1955 sessions, the rhythm team of Jones, guitarist Freddie Greene, and bassist Walter Page is reunited one last time with pianist Count Basie for a rousing rendition of "Shoe Shine Boy." Their collective dynamics, canny blues sensibility, coy minimalism, and telepathic brand of interplay is the very essence of swing, but — as the hilarious laughter that greets their witty improvised coda suggests — there is a shared sense of people, places, and things that is peculiar to them alone. Pianist Nat Pierce carries on ably throughout the rest of the session, which reprises the elegance and locomotion of the Basie band with great spirit, particularly in the person of tenor saxophonist Lucky Thompson. But it's the second session, a piano-trio date from April 1958, that is altogether timeless and remarkable. Philadelphia brothers Tommy and Ray Bryant, on bass and piano, respectively, prove the perfect foil for Jo Jones' graceful, commanding melodic gestures and orchestral percussive scope.
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Stereophile, February 2000
Jones’ impeccable rhythmic intuitions and cultivated senses of time, timbre, tempo, and touch are unequaled, if one is to judge by his subliminal groove on the agonizingly slow “Spider Kelly’s Blues,” or his Picasso-like brushwork on the fiery tempo of “Bicycle for Two.” Of course, you’d be inspired too if you were playing with the great Ray Bryant, a pianist of formidable technical gifts possessed of seemingly endless reserves of down-home blues and sanctified soul — and a superb composer to boot, as witnessed by the joyous Afro-Cuban changes of “Cubano Chant” and the driving rhythm changes of “Splittin’.” But for all their collective elegance and mentholated swing, the piece de résistance has to be the sustained invention and grandeur of Jones’ feature on “Old Man River,” perhaps the greatest recorded drum solo in the history of jazz — a storytelling marvel of epic proportions. To hear is to peep why all the drummers in the know call him Papa Jo.

ZAN STEWART
BILL HOLMAN BAND: Brilliant Corners
Bill Holman, arr.; Carl Saunders, Ron Stout, Bob Summers, trumpet; Andy Martin, Bob Erevelsken, trombone; Lanny Morgan, Pete Christlieb, Bill Perkins, saxes; Rich Eames, piano; Dave Carpenter, bass; Bob Leatherbarrow, drums. NCXRD AVCD-0028 (CD). 1997. Akira Taguchi, prod.; Allen Sides, eng. DDD. TT: 69:09

The title track, “Rhythm-A-Ning,” “Straight, No Chaser,” and others — all crackle with Bill Holman’s unique genius. He takes someone as strong as Monk and makes the music his own. But when all’s done, I keep coming back to “Bemsha Swing.” Max Roach played trap drums and timpani on Monk’s 1956 Riverside original; here, Holman keeps that low-end drum thump via Bob Leatherbarrow’s crisp, fat whaps, but inserts an ear-catching device: a quasi-New Orleans second-line wobble, an infectious beat that drives this piece through the roof. The number keeps building as pianist Rich Eames, trumpeter Bob Summers, and altoist Bill Perkins let loose; then comes the killer; a shout chorus with screaming trumpets that is, absolutely, to die for. This XRCD remastering has a wide soundstage filled with massive orchestral sounds that never muddy, in which soloists can always be heard and where you are definitely square in the middle.

DUKE ELLINGTON: Togo Brave Suite
Duke Ellington, piano; Cootie Williams, Johnny Coles, Mercer Ellington, trumpet; Chuck Conners, Bootsy Wood, trombone; Russell Procope, Paul Gonsalves, Harold Ashby, Harold Minerve, Norris Turney, saxes, flutes; Joe Benjamin, bass; Rufus Jones, drums

This minster masterpiece was recorded live in England in 1971 and features some ace Ducal comrades. Tenorman Gonsalves charges through “Cotton Tail,” adds a gritty cadenza, then slows down for the ethereal, crying-toned “Happy Reunion.” Trumpeter Williams emits his trademark growl on “C Jam Blues.” Ashby offers big-toned tenor on the four-part title track, and Norris Turney’s flute has bright moments there as well. The maestro puts the piano in the forefront on the succulently lyrical “Let’s Blossom,” a paean to his departed alter ego, Billy Strayhorn. Then there’s “Addi,” the cut that got to me years ago, and did it again this morning. This simple minor blues showcases the unheralded but magnificent altoist “Gezzel” Minerve, who delivers ripe, almost bursting notes and right-on-the-money ideas that make my head spin, my heart thump, and always leave me stone cold on the floor. The CD sounds extra-ordinarily clear and rich for a live recording, with a front-row soundstage and impressive detail.

DAVID VERNER
BENJAMIN BRITTEN: Britten the Performer

We are very fortunate to have such priceless musical treasures as this document, recorded live, of one of this century’s most fruitful and mutually inspiring artistic partnerships. That something very special is going on in these performances is unquestionable; that the performers happen to be this century’s greatest composer and one of its more atypical tenor voices only adds to the mystique of their enduring collaboration. The music is wonderful, and Pears is at the absolute top of his form — especially evident in the four English folksong arrangements by Britten, where Pears’ rapport with his late-1950s Aldeburgh audience reaches across 40 years to rope in anyone within earshot of your speakers. And Britten knows every cue, every nuance of phrasing that makes for perfect communication and a perfect concert. Does this sound too close to artist worship? What can I say? Timeless, transcendent music-making speaks for itself.

TYE: Three Masses: “Euge Bone,” “Peterhouse,” “Western Wind”
Paul Trepte, Ely Cathedral Choir

You know those recordings that somehow seem to perfectly capture a time and place — even an era? Dylan’s Freewheelin’, Hendrix’s Live at Winterland, The Beatles’ Sgt. Pepper’s (you know how old I am now). Well, here’s one that convinces me I’m hearing the sounds that Ely Cathedral choirmaster/composer Christopher Tye heard way back in the 16th century (I’m not that old). There’s an aura surrounding this recording that’s attributable to the sublime singing of the modern-day Ely Cathedral choir — but most of all to the ethereal music of these three masses, in which the centuries-old Latin texts are infused with an otherworldly beauty that few composers other than Byrd, Josquin, and Palestrina have accomplished. The true test of timeless, classic music is that you can listen over and over and never grow tired or bored. This music has got all the characteristics of a classic, and it’s recorded in the kind of huge, eternally resonant acoustic space that lets it bloom forever. Even if you’re not the religious sort, this music — and the glorious sound of this choir and space — will win you over.
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PETER VAN WILLENSWAARD
TCHAIKOVSKY: The Nutcracker
Valery Gergiev, Kirov Orchestra
This is the most analog-sounding classical CD I know. It was recorded on Jaap de Jong’s vacuum-tube equipment using a minimal mike setup. (For history and details, see Stereophile, September 1999, pp.25–26.) String sound is very subtle, never screechy, and you can almost touch the acoustics of the Baden-Baden Festspielhaus. There are a few better performances of The Nutcracker, all from eastern European orchestras—maybe Gergiev has been away from Russia a little too long—but the Kirov still teaches all western orchestras a respectable lesson in how to play Tchaikovsky.

ARVO PÄRT: Fratres, Cantus in Memory of Benjamin Britten
Tamás Benedek, Hungarian State Opera Orchestra
The first time I heard the Cantus in Memory of Benjamin Britten, at a concert by the Rotterdam Philharmonic, I sat nailed to my seat. I then went to a record shop, compared the available recordings, and chose this one. The Fratres, also new to me, came as a pleasant gift—very, very emotional—but what the Hungarians do with the Cantus is so moving that I can hear it only on special occasions. Sonics are acceptable—not bad, but not better than average. They don’t stand in the way of the music.

BARRY WILLIS
JON IVERSON: Altermesia
Jon Iverson, Stereophile’s webmaster—or “webmonkey,” as he prefers to call himself—is not merely an excellent writer and computer whiz. He’s also an artist, musician, and composer whose first commercial disc deserves a spin by anyone who loves musical substance coupled with great sound. On Altermesia, JI (aided by a couple of friends) plays his own compositions on a variety of traditional Indonesian instruments. The compositions, however, are anything but traditional. Some are even “structured like pop songs,” he says. Part science-fiction soundtrack, part hypermodern ballet score, and part sonic dreamscape, Altermesia was recorded in real time on a modified MCI JH100 2” 16-track analog tape machine. The disc will challenge your musical complacency and your audio system, but may be hard to find. M-A Recordings can be reached at (818) 907-9997. (XXII-9)

FIONA APPLE: Tidal
Certain artists seem to magically absorb all that came before them, claim it as their own, and create something new, authentic, and real in the process. Fiona Apple’s influences pop up here and there in her music—she thanks poet Maya Angelou in the disc’s accompanying booklet—but never more than as echoes half-heard down a dark, damp street. Tidal, a collection of her own compositions, demonstrates that she has attained independence and maturity as an artist. Waif with an old soul, Apple takes her brooding emotional complexity and self-doubt into dark, subterranean territory with songs like “The Child is Gone” and “Never is a Promise.” Remorse over an intentionally lost love is the core of the ironically hard-driving “Criminal,” a song that got a lot of well-deserved radio play last year. It’s not all pain and suffering for Apple, however. “Slow Like Honey,” conveyed in her smoky, wise-beyond-her-years contralto, is as seductive a tune as you’ll ever hear. Fiona Apple is living proof that a student can surpass her teachers—all of them.

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Reference 800 DVD/CD player: Internal ATAPI/IDE DVD drive. Sampling rates: 32–96kHz, up to 24-bit resolution. DSP-based processing for up/down-sampling, error correction, resolution enhancement, gain control (with 72-bit resolution). Configuration as tested: 5 RCA, 2 TosLink, tape monitor digital I/O (ID16); component, composite, and S-video video I/O (VE00); coax and XLR analog outputs with 24/96 D/A conversion (OA20), 2 AES/EBU & 2 RCA digital outputs (OA20), DVD-Video region decoder (DV10), RS-232 controller (DV00), RS-232 & comm links (C000).
Dimensions: 19" W by 6.5" H by 16.3" D.
Serial number of unit reviewed: 100085.
Price: $15,245–$16,195, depending on options.

Reference 861 digital surround controller: Multimedia controller with video. DSP-based decoding for matrixed and discrete multichannel sources. Configuration as tested: 6 unbalanced analog inputs (IA00), 3 AES/EBU & 1 TosLink digital inputs (ID30), 5 RCA & 2 TosLink & tape monitor digital I/O (IE16), Video I/O (VS00), 4 RCA-connected digital outputs (OE12), 4 balanced analog outputs (OA12), tape monitor & headphone & second zone outputs (TP00), digital speaker control output (SL00), RS-232 & comm links (C000).
Dimensions: 19" W by 6.5" H by 16.3" D.
Serial number of unit reviewed: 100484.
Price: $11,615–$19,080, depending on options.

DSP6000 digital active loudspeaker: Drive-units: 1" aluminum-dome, silver-voice-coil tweeter; 6.5" polypropylene cone midrange/woofer; 6×8" plastic-cone woofers. Frequency response: 25Hz–20kHz, ±3dB. Inputs: 2 coaxial digital. Amplifiers: 75W (HF), 100W (LF), each with its own D/A converter with 24-bit/96kHz capability. Maximum output: >112dB SPL at 1m.
Dimensions: 53.5" H by 11" W by 17" D. Weight: 143 lbs.
Serial numbers of units reviewed: D6K300747 A/B/C/D (left & right head units & woofers).
Price: $19,950/pair.

Dimensions: 53.5" H by 11" W by 17" D. Weight: 143 lbs.
Serial numbers of units reviewed: D6K300129 A/B (head unit & woofer).
Price: $10,495.

DSP5000 digital active loudspeaker: Drive-units: 1" metal-dome, silver-voice-coil tweeter; 6.5×8" polypropylene cone midrange/woofer; 6.5×8" polypropylene cone woofer. Frequency response: 25Hz–20kHz, ±3dB. Inputs: 2 coaxial digital. Amplifiers: 75W (HF), 150W (MF), 150W (LF), each with its own D/A converter with 24-bit/96kHz capability. Maximum output: >112dB SPL at 1m.
Dimensions: 36.5" H by 8.5" W by 12" D. Weight: 70 lbs.
Serial numbers of units reviewed: DSK202239 A/B.
Price: $6950/pair.

For all above:
System price as reviewed: $72,670.
Approximate number of dealers: 110.

I am biased: On very little evidence, I remain convinced that, in the near future, high-quality music reproduction will be multichannel. While most multichannel demos are still egregiously and aggressively ping-pong, I have attended a few successful demonstrations.
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of discrete multichannel reproduction that have impressed me so deeply that I hunger to have all the music I love transported to me (and me to it) in this way.

One recent example was at a Sony preview of a prototype multichannel Super Audio CD player. Not only was I convinced of the rightness of the SACD's reproduction of sound and spatial cues, but the skeptical person sitting next to me was convinced as well. At first he complained that the concert hall sounded deep and narrow, like a shoebox. Having seen a documentary film of performances in the very hall in question, I told him that it was, indeed, extraordinarily deep and narrow. The recording had transported us to the hall in Finland.

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quality with the new SACD and DVD-A discs—about which the High End is all atwitter—they will definitely be grabbing multichannel discs to exercise their home-theater-based audio systems. Tell me that there are enough two-channel purists in the High End to fend off this market pressure, and I’ll ask you why Sony and Universal Music aren’t releasing everything on vinyl. Multichannel audio is coming. All our little minority can do is hope for and support responsible producers who will use the new tools with aesthetic rather than cynical considerations.

So, given my bias, and that I’ve never had a multichannel system before, I turned to Meridian, one of the very few manufacturers of source-to-speaker multichannel systems that has also earned great respect among the high-end coterie. What I wanted was a complete, no-holds-barred multichannel system that had been designed to be put in the service of music.  

The Meridian Digital Theatre consists of two DSP6000 front L/R speakers, one DSP6000C center-channel speaker, two DSP5000 speakers used for surround, the Reference 800 DVD/CD player, and—the soul of the system—the Reference 861 System Controller. While the speakers and the disc player are perfectly compatible with conventional two-channel digital systems, it is the Reference 861 controller, with its multichannel decoding, synthesizing, and processing capabilities, that makes this system completely different from anything I have used before. In fact, a full description of the technical capabilities of the system would fill this entire issue of Stereophile. The reader is directed to www.meridian-audio.com for details.

**DSP6000 loudspeaker:**
Good, old-fashioned stereo

The first big boxes to arrive contained a pair of DSP6000 digital speakers and a bonus 508-24 CD player. My intent was to become familiar with Meridian’s flagship speakers in the two-channel paradigm with which I am experienced. The 508-24 was provided so that, while the final touches were made on the production of the Reference 800 DVD/CD player, I could get comfortable with Meridian’s integrated systems approach. Although these three units were installed by Meridian’s Marc Koval, I was easily able to modify the setups and add a few other sources. The DSP6000s were placed about 8‘ apart and about 12‘ from my listening position, toed-in so that their axes converged at the listening seat.

The DSP6000 (the latest version of the speaker that was reviewed by Robert Harley in September and October 1991 and by J. Gordon Holt in June 1995) is asymmetrically tapered, with its midrange and high-frequency drivers in the top of its tall, slim main cabinet, which contains the bass drivers, amplifiers, digital signal processors, and DACs. It is finished in glossy black, and is attached to its partner speaker by a short cable. The main cabinet contains four side-mounted 8“ woofers, driven by a pair of 100W amplifiers. The 6“ midrange and the 1“ aluminum-dome tweeter are driven by separate 75W amps. The DSP6000 accepts only digital inputs to its dual Motorola DSP156001 processors, which handle signal extraction (which channel and I?), and control processing (volume, tone control, etc.) and feed four Bistream DACs. The crossover between the drive-units is implemented in the digital domain; the signals are not converted to analog until

---

**Associated Equipment**

Because, most of the time, I used the Meridian gear as a complete system, only limited comparisons were made to specific reference equipment. However, the resident system at the time of the Meridian auditions was as follows:

**Digital sources:** California Audio Labs CL20 DVD/CD player, Meridian 508-24 CD player, Mark Levinson No.360 D/A converter.

**Preamplifiers:** Klyne 6L3.3P, Sonic Frontiers Line-3.

**Power amplifiers:** McCormack DNA-1 (with Rev. A modifications), Sonic Frontiers Power-2.

**Loudspeakers:** PSB Gold-i.

**Cables:** Interconnects: Cardas Cross, Golden Cross; Straight Wire Virtuoso; JPS Balanced Super-Conductor 2. Speaker cables: Straight Wire Maestro.

In addition, I adapted my weekend system to 5.1 channels so that I could try to learn more about the effects of multichannel sound in isolation from the system under test. This much more modest and quite different system consisted of:

**Digital sources:** California Audio Labs CL-20 DVD/CD player, Pioneer PD-7700 DVD player, MSB LinkDAC, CAL Audio Sigma DAC.

**Preamplification:** Meridian 201, Technics SH-AC500D digital processor.

**Front channels:** Adcom GFA-555 power amplifier (with regulated power supply), Paradigm Esprit Bipolar loudspeakers, Straight Wire Teflon-12 speaker cables.

**Rear Channels:** Parasound Z-Amp power amplifier, Celestion MP-1 loudspeakers, Straight Wire Teflon-12 speaker cables.

**Subwoofer:** Canton SW-22 (active).

— Kalman Rubinson
they reach the amplifier inputs.

Lest one think that its lack of buttons and knobs means that the DSP6000 is inflexible, note that, in addition to volume control, the inbuilt processor offers control of absolute phase, frequency tilt, bass level, and loudness compensation. Moreover, there are two quite unusual adjustments possible: First, interchannel balance is accomplished either by reducing the level or by delaying the signal in one channel, thus correcting for the two parameters affected by off-axis listening. Second, the Axis control operates in a manner similar to the balance control, but only on the MF/HF drivers, acoustically “tilting” the system to adjust for the vertical listening angle. As my usual listening position is decidedly below the tweeter axis of these 53½-inch-tall speakers, I found the Axis control essential.

The DSP6000 was damn good. From initial turn-on, it was obvious that this DAC/amp/speaker combination was as open and transparent as any I’ve had in my home. The DSP6000 never disappointed, offering the kind of perfor-

**Measurements: Meridian 800**

Looking at the Meridian 800’s performance as a CD player from its OA20 digital/analog card, its output impedance was a low 47.5 ohms from the single-ended outputs, and almost twice that figure at 94.8 ohms from the balanced XLR jacks. The player didn’t invert absolute polarity with the absolute phase set to “+,” and the XLRs were wired with pin 2 positive. Although the volume control operates in 1dB steps up to an indicated “99,” the analog output stage clipped with a full-scale digital signal when set to “88.” All subsequent measurements were performed with the volume set to “87.” At this setting, the maximum output level was 70.6V from the balanced outputs, 3.28V from the unbalanced jacks. The well-documented setup program (which runs under Windows 95 and NT) allows the volume control to be disabled. The player then has a fixed maximum output of 4V/2V balanced/unbalanced.

The 800’s frequency response was identical from both sets of outputs, with the bass extending to –0.5dB at 12Hz. However, as shown in fig.1, there is some upper-frequency passband ripple present, which is unusual these days. In addition, the player did not apply the proper deemphasis when playing a pre-emphasized disc. This can be seen in fig.2, which shows the response from the unbalanced outputs for both a normal CD (bottom trace above 1kHz) and for a pre-emphasized disc (top above 1kHz). Fortunately, pre-emphasized discs are rare; still, this indicates either a sample fault (I’ll check this with the Meridian setup software) or a more general problem.

The Meridian played 96kHz-encoded DVDs without a problem, but I did find an idiosyncrasy when checking its performance using the Chesky test DVD (CHDVD171): I mentioned above that I left the volume control set to “87” for all the tests, which is just below the analog stage’s clipping level. However, while the player performed flawlessly with 44.1kHz- and 48kHz-sampled material at this volume setting, it stumbled when I tried to play 96kHz-sampled squares. The bottom trace in fig.3, for example, is the waveform of a 96kHz-sampled, 12kHz squarewave with the volume set to “85,” and has the correct first-third-harmonic shape. (The next harmonic, the fifth, at 60kHz, is above the medium’s passband.)

But the upper trace shows what happened when I increased the level to “87.” The top of the wave in each cycle hard-clips, I assume in the digital filter (a sinewave at the same peak level is reproduced without problem), followed by some full-level RF oscillation. It is extremely unlikely that the Meridian will ever display this tweeter-destroying behavior on 96kHz-sampled music, but perhaps it would be a good idea to keep the volume control below “87.”

Channel separation revealed the usual 60dB/octave decrease with frequency, due to capacitive coupling between the channels, but was still better than 100dB below 3.5kHz with respect to left-to-right leakage. However, crosstalk was 20dB worse in the other direction from both balanced and unbalanced outputs.

Fig.4 shows a ½-octave spectral analysis of the 800’s balanced output as it decoded CD data representing a dithered 1kHz tone at –90dBFS. The noise floor is free from power-supply or harmonic spuriae, and there is a very slight negative error visible. Extending the measurement bandwidth to 200kHz and playing data representing a 1LSB DC offset gave the spectrum shown in fig.5. The rise in ultrasonic noise due to the Bitstream D/A converter’s noise-shaping is only moderate, and the overall noise floor is low in level.

The linearity (fig.6) is basically excel-

![Fig 1 Meridian 800, balanced frequency response at 0dBFS. (Right channel dashed, 0.5dB/vertical div.)](image1)

![Fig 2 Meridian 800, unbalanced frequency response at –12dBFS (top below 1kHz) and with preemphasis signal (bottom below 1kHz). (Right channel dashed, 1dB/vertical div.)](image2)

![Fig 4 Meridian 800, ½-octave spectrum of dithered 1kHz tone at –90dBFS, with noise and spuriae (16-bit data). (Right channel dashed.)](image3)
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mance that sent me scurrying to the CD racks to haul out all my favorites, as well as my torture discs. Using George Cardas’ CD-R sampler, Oregon Music, a disc of disarmingly natural depictions, I felt that the ladies of Bella Acapella were standing shoulder-to-shoulder between the DSP6000s as they performed “Mr. Sandman.” The clarity of their individual voices was nearly perfect, and there was a complete lack of any artificial aura around them.

The bass, too, was exemplary. Remember, with 400W dedicated to a total of eight 8” drivers, this is a potent system. Plucked and bowed bass, as presented on King and Moore’s “Man in the Oven” on Oregon Music, was incredible, especially when played at levels appropriate to an acoustic performance.

With bigger stuff—from Mahler to Wagner and from Pink Floyd to Yello—the DSP6000s handled everything I threw at them, and always seemed to have lots in reserve. In fact, I rarely set the volume above “80”—and the scale goes up another 19dB! Despite pushing

**Measurements**

lent, but with a slight negative error apparent in the ~90dB region. The player’s reproduction of an undithered 16-bit/1kHz sinewave at ~90.31dBFS (fig.7) is correspondingly superb, the three discrete voltage levels clearly visible. Harmonic and intermodulation distortions (figs.8 and 9, respectively) were also very low in level—at the resolving limit of the Audio Precision System One, in fact.

As with the other Meridian digital gear I have examined, word-clock jitter was also superbly low. The Miller Audio Research Jitter Analyzer gave a figure of 144.7 picoseconds peak-peak, which is very low. And as can be seen in fig.10, all the data-related jitter sidebands (red numeric markers) lie below ~121dBFS, with the noise floor at or below ~130dBFS—the lowest I have ever measured on this test.

Finally, although it uses a DVD transport, the Meridian 800 will play CD-Rs. Its error correction was excellent, the 800 playing without dropouts through track 35 of the Pierre Verany test CD, which has 2.4mm-long gaps in its pit spiral.

I understand that all the current Meridian 800-series digital components and DSP-series loudspeakers use D/A stages similar to that in the 800, so this set of measurements should be representative of all these components. Other than the volume-control idiosyncrasy with 96kHz-sampled material, the 800’s measured performance represents the current state of the art. —John Atkinson

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**Fig.5** Meridian 800, 1/5-octave spectrum of -1LSB, with noise and spurs, 16-bit data. (Right channel dashed.)

**Fig.6** Meridian 800, left-channel departure from linearity, 16-bit data. (2dB/vertical div.)

**Fig.7** Meridian 800, waveform of undithered 1kHz sinewave at ~90.31dBFS, 16-bit data.

**Fig.8** Meridian 800, balanced spectrum of 50Hz sinewave, DC–1kHz, at 0dBFS into 100k ohms (linear frequency scale).

**Fig.9** Meridian 800, balanced HF intermodulation spectrum, DC–22kHz, 19+20kHz at 0dBFS into 100k ohms (linear frequency scale).

**Fig.10** Meridian 800, high-resolution jitter spectrum of analog output signal (11.025kHz at –6dBFS with LSB toggled at 229Hz), Center frequency of trace, 11.025kHz; frequency range, ±3.5kHz.

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the system to levels my neighbors surely had to appreciate, the DSP6000s never blocked up the room, as has happened with lesser systems pushed to these levels; they just got louder and louder until I, not the system, cried "Uncle!" Béla Fleck’s *Flight of the Cosmic Hippo* (Warner Bros. 26562-2) was as well defined as it had been on the potent Genesis 500 that I reviewed in May ’99, with its self-powered woofers — but the Meridians displaced even more air, and displaced the G500s as the best low-bass producers I’ve used. The DSP6000s needed no help from a subwoofer and got none, even in the multichannel tryouts.

Although not lacking in depth, the sonic images the DSP6000s presented seemed always behind the speaker plane. The effect was not unlike having a wide, open window into the recording venue. Almost nothing separated me from the orchestra and/or singer — the aural view was defined by the picture-window aperture at the speaker plane. This window was wider than those created by most of the other speakers that have occupied my listening room, but not so wide as those offered by the Artemis EOS or Apogee Duettas.

I also used the second digital input and the volume control of the DSP6000s to audition a few 24-bit/96kHz audio DVDs from Chesky and Classic, played directly into the speakers by my trusty California Audio Labs CL20 CD/DVD player. With the digital circuitry of the Meridians, I was going full 24/96 all the way to their power amps, and boy, it was nice. The step up from 16-bit/44.1kHz to 24/96 didn’t so much change the dimensions of the window through which I listened as seem to bring the performance closer.

Compared to the EOS and the Duettas, the tonal balance of the DSP6000 was a bit cool. The main cause seemed to be a slight dullness in the 150–180Hz range that I could not correct with the Bass or Tilt controls. Fortunately, this fault was quite minor. I suspect it may have to do with my listening room’s historic inhospitality toward speakers with side-mounted woofers.

Finally, despite the quite effective Axis adjustment, the visual effect of the tall cabinets probably contributed to my continued perception of an elevated sonic image: All sounds seemed to originate above eye level. The effect was not usually bothersome, and then only when I sat down and focused my attention.

But all of these points are directly related to my specific listening environment. Contrasted with the DSP6000’s otherwisepellucid reproduction, they’re relatively unimportant. Your mileage may vary? Definitely.

**Reference 800 DVD/CD player**

This is quite the biggest player I know of, but its size is required to contain all of its capabilities. The actual transport is a computer DVD-ROM drive that, with its own tray and cover, lies behind Meridian’s larger front panel. Opening the drive reminded me of the jaws-within-jaws monster in *Alien*. The drive’s output is treated to three memory buffers and three layers of error correction to minimize jitter and maximize data integrity. Although the drive is supposed to be compatible with CD, CD-R, Video CD, CDI, and DVD-Video media, it had trouble with some tracks of *Ogden Music*, which was playable on the 508-24 and totally unplayable on the CL20.

Meridian says that the DVD-ROM drive was chosen for its high-speed reliability, and because the 800’s standard bay can accommodate future drive requirements. There also is room for another drive, and for multiple plug-in cards for audio and video. This makes the Reference 800 more than a transport: there is the potential for analog inputs (A/D conversion) and outputs (D/A conversion), gain/system control, and upsampling, as well as for future developments in multichannel audio and DSP-based room correction — and that’s without mentioning anything about video! For the most part, I used the Reference 800 as a digital source for the Reference 861 Digital Surround Controller, but I did try the former as a direct-digital source for two and three DSP6000s — the supplied digital output card optionally encrypt 96kHz-sampled data — and, via its D/A converters, as the source in a more conventional system.

Via the analog output from the D/A plug-in, the Reference 800 was as good as digital gets today. Its clarity and impact were beyond reproach, and it surpassed the CAL CL20 in bass definition and treble purity. I noted its superiority with 24/96 discs as well as with 16/44.1 CDs, but in the latter case, the fact that the 800 can upsample to 88kHz placed the otherwise admirable CAL CL20 at a further disadvantage. For the same reason, I also preferred the Reference 800 over Meridian’s own 508-24, although without upsampling there was little to choose between them. Sure, one could defeat the upsampling — but if you’ve got it, why not use it? (It would be only logical, by the way, for the coming generation of high-bit-rate players, regardless of format, to make use of their DSP engines to upsample regular CDs.)

The 800 replaced pairs of tiptop transports and DACs, from mbl and Burmester, but I didn’t mourn their absence. Compared to the German duos, the 800 Reference seemed to differ less in sound quality than in operation and ergonomics. The 800 requires no pucks or mysterious trap doors; just hit Open on the remote, insert the disc, hit Play, and enjoy. Going back through all the discs I used to differentiate the Burmester, mbl, and Levinson DACs that I reviewed in December ’99, I could not find one that was not completely satisfying on the 800. In consideration of its performance as a player and its configurability as a system controller, the 800 can be considered a really attractive value.

It’s not surprising that the sound fed directly from the 800 Reference’s transport to the DSP6000s was the same as that via the 861 in its Direct or Music.
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mode; Direct mode uses the 861 merely for a volume control, and the Music simply provides a summed center channel. Consequently, I refer the reader to the more detailed discussion that follows.

The 861 Reference surround controller: into the labyrinth

Now I was ready for the big step into uncharted regions: The left and right DSP6000s were augmented with a center-channel DSP6000C, this placed about 1’ back so that all three were the same distance from my listening seat, and supplemented by a pair of DSP5000s placed directly lateral to the listening position. All were driven by the 861 Reference Digital Surround Controller, which, in turn, got its bits’n’bytes from the 800 Reference DVD/CD player/transport. Though the 861 was clearly intended to be the brains of this bunch, the 800 can be fitted with many of its attributes to function as a controller as well. What's unique to the 861, however, is its inbuilt, reprogrammable modes for decoding multichannel sources (Dolby Pro Logic, Dolby Digital, DTS, Ambisonic, etc.) and for synthesizing multichannel performance from two-channel sources.

Setup for this ambitious system was handled by Meridian vice-president Andy Regan and an assistant, but Regan assured me that anyone purchasing this system from a Meridian dealer can expect comparable physical and logical assistance. The process began with the connection of each speaker to the 861 with a Meridian coaxial digital data line similar to a plain-vanilla S/PDIF cable, and with a five-conductor Meridian Comms cable to provide “intelligent control” by the 861. Each pair of speakers—the front L/R DSP6000s and the surround L/R DSP5000s—was daisy-chained to a single digital output, while the DSP6000C was linked to a third 861 output. The 800 Reference was connected by similar but shorter cables. Finally, my analog tuner (and, later, a phono preamp) was connected to one set of the 861’s analog inputs.

But if you think that’s all there was to it, you have no idea of the depths of sophistication and complexity disguised by the 861’s clean, smooth, black front panels. Andy hooked up his laptop to the KS-232 port and proceeded to load into the 861 and the 800 a series of setups, presets, and defaults to suit the system, the room, and, most important, my preferences.

First, he told the system about the speakers (how many, what type, their positions) and the sources (how many, analog or digital, etc.). Second, with me seated immobile in my preferred listening spot, Andy’s assistant carefully measured the distance from each speaker to my nose, and programmed the 861 so that each speaker’s level was spot-on in relation to the others. In addition, the phase of the center and rear channels was adjusted to match that of the front speakers when monitored from my couch. Third, each input was assigned a default mode of signal processing. In the case of the “Analog” source, the default was, appropriately, “Music,” but the input from the 800 DVD/CD player was assigned multiple names, each with a different default so that I could go from one processing mode to another. Regan then downloaded a copy of all my setups into his laptop, and stowed away into the Manhattan night.

All of this took less than an hour, but remember—I had a couple of ringers doing the job. I later connected my laptop to the 861 and found the setup procedures extremely lucid, despite their seemingly infinite flexibility. The 861 informs the program about the hardware and current setup; thus, one deals only with relevant variables. The procedures outlined above lost their mystery as I stepped from one logical menu to another. For example, the user is prompted for simple descriptive information about the loudspeakers so that the 861 can implement progressive levels of protection from dynamic overload. In certain modes, the user can adjust the width, depth, and even the perspective (subjective distance) of the source.

Of course, the expected parameters for levels, balance, phase, DSP mode, etc., are accessible, and one can customize them for one’s situation and taste. A caution, however: The range of options is so wide that it’s best to live with and become familiar with the setup provided by the installer before wading in to further customize it. Along the way, as one gets comfortable with the 861, one learns to access all the functions from the front panel or the Meridian system remote without the need to plug in a PC.

So, what can the 861 do? As configured in this sample, it can accept both digital and analog audio inputs, and has multiple analog and digital outputs. Thus, it can be used as an analog preamp/controller, a digital controller, and
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The 861 can process two-channel PCM input, Pro Logic, DTS, and MLP. (I had no suitable source material for the latter two processes.) Pro Logic, DTS, and MPEG were also available in THX modes, supposedly optimal for domestic listening. Both DTS and MPEG come in “Music” variants. Compared to the original DTS, designed for theater use, DTS-Music has a lower output from the low-frequency effects (LFE) channel, but MPEG-Music is quite vaguely described. From a PCM input (such as S/PDIF from a CD or DVD player’s digital output), the 861 can process the following formats:

Direct: Plain vanilla two channel
Stereo: As above plus subwoofers
Music: Two channel plus an extracted center channel
Trifield: As above except that the L/R channels are reprocessed as well
Ambisonic: Transforms UHJ format matrixed signals into 4-7 channels
Super: Similar to Ambisonic, for recordings made with coincident microphones

MusicLogic: Multichannel synthesis with L/R and F/R steering
ProLogic: Phase-amplitude matrix decoding for Dolby Surround
THX Cinema: ProLogic plus frequency correction/EQ and rear channel decorrelation
Mono: Either mono from center channel only or via all speakers (Party Mode!)
Academy: As above with additional EQ for older mono soundtracks
TV Logic: A variant of ProLogic affording

**Measurements: Meridian DSP5000**

Although Kal used the DSP5000s as rear-channel speakers, they are respectable full-range speakers in their own right. I thus performed a complete set of measurements using the DRA Labs MLSSA system, a calibrated B&K microphone, and a dCS 904 A/D converter running at 96kHz to convert the analog test signal to digital.

As a digital-input active speaker, the DSP5000 doesn’t have a meaningful voltage-sensitivity rating. However, driving it with a noise signal at -12dBFS and with its volume control set to “70” (out of a possible “99”) gave a B-weighted level at 1m of 84dB(dB), which implies that a pair

![Plot](image1.png)

**Fig.11 Meridian DSP5000, anechoic response on tweeter axis at 50°, averaged across 30° horizontal window and corrected for microphone response, with the nearfield woofer and port responses and their complex sum plotted below 300Hz, 900Hz, and 300Hz, respectively.**

![Plot](image2.png)

**Fig.12 Meridian DSP5000, effect of tilt control set to ±10°, normalized to response on tweeter axis at 50°.**

will give SPLs well above 100dB.

The speaker’s balance, with its tilt control set to “0” and averaged across a 30° horizontal window on the tweeter axis (fig.11), is basically flat, with small peaks balanced by equally small dips. The usual ultrasonic tweeter resonance at 25kHz rises some 20dB above the reference level. While this will never be excited by playing back CDs, it will be by 96kHz-sampled material, which might have an unpredictable effect on sound quality. To the left of this graph are shown the nearfield responses of the woofers and the port, as well as their complex sum. The port appears to be tuned to 40Hz, but the overall bass alignment is higher than the normal fourth-
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order reflex, with a steeper rollout. A peak at 800Hz can be seen in the port's output, but as this is low in level and the port faces away from the listener, it should have no subjective consequences.

The unusual tilt control can be set in numeric "0.5" steps between "+10" and "-10": fig.12 shows its effect on the on-axis response when set to its extremes, with the latter subtracted out to reveal just the action of the control. It can be seen to hinge the speaker's output around 2kHz, with a maximum boost/cut of ±5dB. A useful tone control.

The DSP5000 has excellent lateral dispersion, fig.13 revealing a wide, well-controlled radiation pattern with just a trace of beaming above 20kHz and at the top of the woofers' passband, where it will tend to compensate for the on-axis suck-out in the same region. In the vertical plane (fig.14), the speaker's balance doesn't change much over a wide (+10°) window centered on the tweeter axis, which is a bowish 33° from the floor.

In the time domain, the use of DSP-implemented crossover filters results in an excellent, time-coherent step response (fig.15). Note in this graph that, even though the microphone was my standard 50° away, the step doesn't start until the 8.5ms mark—equivalent to an extra time of flight of 4ms. The extra 4.5ms delay is due to the digital filters both in the A/D converter I used and in the DSP5000, but it will be subjectively inconsequential.

Other than the tweeter resonance, the Meridian's waterfall plot on the tweeter axis (fig.16) is very clean, as is a similar plot calculated from the output of a simple accelerometer fastened to the center of the cabinet sidewall (fig.17). A resonant mode is apparent at 383Hz, but this is both low enough in level and high enough in frequency to have little subjective effect on the sound. However, the sidewall does appear to flex a little at the reflex port's tuning region of 40Hz, which might make the bass sound very slightly soft.

—John Atkinson
hotter and closer. Both were more immediate than the original at 16/44.1.

The issue of upsampling, however, proved to be only the tip of the 861 iceberg. Sticking with traditional two-channel sources, I spent weeks sampling all the suitable (and some of the unsuitable) DSP modes. The Music and Trifield modes use only the front three speakers and were always preferred in their HS (upsampled) variants, for the reasons described above and in J-10's test issue in the dCS 972 upsampler (Stereophile, February 1999). These three-channel modes seemed to vary in degrees, narrower, less airy, and less capable of pinpoint localization than was Direct. Trifield, however, offered seductive tradeoffs that ultimately made it my default listening mode for normal two-channel sources — including CDs, LPs, and radio.

George Faber's "Count the Tears," from Sure Beats Workin' (PopeMusic PMG2023-2), features a strong central solo voice fronting a small ensemble; Trifield gave the voice a presence and a solidity I had not heard before, but did so without making the voice any louder, or upsetting the subtle balance between the voice and the rest of the ensemble. I tried the switchover from Direct to Trifield with many solo voice/instrument and combo discs, and the results were consistently successful. I guess Paul Klipsch was right all along. I'm old enough to remember his HI-FI Show demos, with a Klipschorn in each corner and a Heresy at mid-wall: If you want solid center-fill, put a speaker there to do the job.

I came to regard the loss of air and the narrower soundstage as acceptable concomitants of the richer, tighter, better-defined central images. "Audiophile air" began to seem an artifact rather than an enhancement. With Trifield, there also seemed to be more going on within the ensembles on orchestral and opera recordings. The listening window was cleaner, the instruments just a bit closer, although the width of the window was a bit narrower compared with Direct. The soundstage was also quite stable, with none of the contraction and expansion that often accompanies dynamic changes in volume.

My old favorite, Bernstein's DG recording of Mahler's Symphony 6 (DG 427 697-2), is bit steely but extremely spacious and wide-ranging. There was slightly less space in Trifield than in Direct, but that space was better defined. Instrument localization was definitely not enhanced by Trifield, although I suspect it was no worse than it would be in a real concert hall with the visual cues eliminated. The Music mode was similar to it, but a bit too narrowed and phased to my ears. In other words, there were too many tradeoffs, even though I occasionally preferred Trifield with live FM broadcasts.

The only orchestral disc with which I preferred Direct was the recent Nature's Realm disc from Wolfgang Sawallisch and the Philadelphia Orchestra (Water Lily WLA-WS-66-CID). This spectacular recording was made with a single crossed pair of mikes, and sounded right only with a Blumlein arrangement of the two DSP6000s, each toed-in 45°. In either Music or Trifield mode, the precision of instrument placement was obscured.

Synthesizing surround
Meridian's 861/DSP6000 proved a superb two-channel system, and the addition of a center channel (Trifield) was almost always an improvement. But what happened when, using normal (nonencoded) two-channel sources, I added the two remaining channels?

First, I synthesized a surround channel and added it to an L/R or Trifield front, but all that accomplished was to make the sound blowy and indistinct. Sure, I was more immersed in the soundfield, but that soundfield was far from realistic, and the effect was unpleasant and unmusical. Adding the rear channels to Trifield meant going from palpability to vagueness. I fiddled a bit with the relative level of the rear speakers, but always found the optimum level to be the minimum level.

It was a much different, if more complex, story with discs that were recorded with surround or rear-channel information intended for extraction from the two-channel mix. With Dolby Surround discs, such as Strauss' Also sprach Zarathustra with Lorin Maazel and the Bavarian Radio Symphony (RCA 68225-1), there was a welcome sense of "place"; I felt closer to and more intimately involved in the music. This effect was so enjoyable that I even sat through all of Andrew Litton and the Dallas Symphony's new recording of Mahler's Symphony 2 (Delos DE 3237), even though I find the performance torpid and uninspired. Mahler's massive forces were so much less constrained with Pro Logic decoding.

I used Delos' DVD Music Breakthrough (Delos DV 7002) for many auditions because it offers both Dolby Surround and Dolby Digital tracks. When I listened to the Dolby Surround program in two channels, the listening window was as wide as the room but far away. Orchestra and soloists were arrayed widely, but extended back from the plane of the speakers. Violins had a distinct edge, but reverberation and decay endowed each instrument with an aura of ambience.

I then switched the 861 into Pro Logic and the change was amazing. First, the instruments seemed less widely spread out. However, they were more "naked," less cloaked by hall ambience, and the violins were less edgy. The best part was that the listening window was now much closer to me; in other words, I was "seeing" into more of the concert hall. At no time was I distracted by inappropriate signals from sides or rear. Still, I was not so much "inside" the hall as standing on its threshold.

An older technology for achieving a similar end is Ambisonics. These recordings are made with a single, "Soundfield" microphone and are usually labeled "UHJ encoded." So far as I know, only Nimbus Records continues to regularly offer such recordings. Since I am a devotee of the Hanover Band's recordings on Nimbus, I was anxious to hear them, for the first time, properly decoded. I popped in the Band's CD of Weber overtures (Nimbus NI 5154), which has afforded me great pleasure over the years, expecting to be overwhelmed.

I wasn't. Certainly, as decoded by the
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861's Ambisonics mode, Nimbus' characteristically ripe reverberation was now more enveloping and natural, but there was a loss of immediacy with the instruments, which now were almost dwarfed by an apparently immense recording venue. One can adjust the 861 to simulate different seating positions with Ambisonic decoding, but although these adjustments changed my proximity to the instruments, none eliminated the dominance of the reverberation.

But all was not lost. The Test Discs from Hi-Fi News & Record Review include several UHJ-encoded tracks, both of music and of sound effects, which were greatly improved with proper decoding.

Mike Skeet's infamous garage-door slam-and-kick routine (HFN 003) was spine-tingling — I felt as if I'd been trapped in that garage. The small "Feeny Poppers" cannons (HFN 015) could be heard to have been placed in an obliquely receding line as they were fired in series.

Finally, I recalled that the Cowboy Junkies' The Trinity Session (BMG 8568-2-R) had been recorded with a Soundfield mike. What a coup! This recording needs no introduction, but if you haven't heard it decoded, you don't know how eerily realistic it is. With the 861 on Ambisonic and five DSP speakers, I was inside that Toronto church on that November night in 1987. All the subtle little sounds (air conditioning, footsteps, incidental instrument noises, etc.) that audiophiles detect with relish were not only revealed, but were part and parcel of the band's enhanced presence. Add to that the greater immediacy of the voices and instruments, and although I've heard this disc perhaps too often, I was hooked into listening to all of it again. Although there may be controversy about whether the Soundfield mike was actually in Ambisonic mode at this session, it was the most heartening indication I've heard so far that multichannel could be more than a gimmick for audio.

**Measurements: Meridian DSP6000**

For logistic reasons, I measured only the Center version of the DSP6000. However, as this model differs from the side version only in the angle of the head-unit's sidewalls, this set of measured data should be representative of all three speakers.

The DSP6000 appeared to be around 0.5dB more sensitive than the DSP5000 with the same noise signal at -12dBFS and a volume setting of "70." The difference is inconsequential. The balance averaged across a 30° horizontal window on the tweeter axis (fig.18) was almost flat as the DSP5000's, but with slightly less energy in the mid-treble. An alternative way of looking at this balance would be to regard it as being slightly forward in the upper midrange. All things being equal, whether this or the presence depression is perceived by the listener will depend on personal taste and the recordings played.

Again, the tweeter features a large rise at its ultrasonic resonance. In the bass, the '6000 offers extension at full level down to 30Hz, with then a steeper rolloff than is usual from a sealed-box alignment. The effect of the tilt control appeared identical to that of the smaller speaker, so is not shown.

The DSP6000's horizontal dispersion (fig.19) was also similar to that of the "5000, which implies excellent matching of the two speakers in a surround-sound system. And again, in all but very large or acoustically dead rooms, the flare in the speaker's radiation pattern at the bottom of the tweeter passband will tend to

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**Fig.19 Meridian DSP6000C, lateral response family at 50°, normalized to response on tweeter axis, from back to front: differences in response 90°—5° off-axis, reference response, differences in response 5°—90° off-axis.**

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**Fig.20 Meridian DSP6000C, vertical response family at 50°, from back to front: differences in response 10°—5° above tweeter axis, reference response, differences in response 5°—20° below tweeter axis.**
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The real thing?
In order to hear what the Meridian 861 could do with discrete, albeit compressed, multichannel recordings, I quickly compiled a collection of Dolby Digital and DTS discs. Whenever possible, I also picked up the standard two-channel version. Insertion of a Dolby Digital or DTS disc automatically switches the 861 into the appropriate mode. Unfortunately, the switch into DTS from any other mode was usually accompanied by a few seconds of harsh transients, which should have been muted; each time, I had to hit the Repeat button to hear the beginning of the music. Playing a second DTS disc, or switching from DTS to any other format, was appropriately uneventful.

In every comparison of stereo and multichannel releases, it became apparent that the masterings for the two formats had resulted in different balances, thus rendering comparisons of limited value. Consistently, multichannel discs have an excess of bass, as if to appeal to an audience in need of cheap thrills. This can be cured, to a good degree, by opting for the DTS-Music or Pro Logic-THX alternative modes. The majority of DTS discs also wreaked havoc on instrument placements, as players and singers were scattered about the room, shattering any sense of ensemble and loudly shouting “This is multichannel!” This wasn’t a total surprise, but I was disappointed that so many respected producers had fallen into that trap.

Most of the DTS recordings I obtained, including many of my favorite performances, were unlistenable. For example, I very much like Lyle Lovett’s Joshua Judges Ruth, but aside from a few neat effects on “Church,” the DTS version has singers and instruments popping up all over the room instead of playing together as an ensemble. The DTS release of Junior Wells’ Come On In This House (Telarc CD-83395-DTS) has phenomenal impact and presence, but it, too, puts the listener in the center, with the players pulling at you from all direc-

compensate for the lack of on-axis energy in the same region, resulting in a neutral perceived balance overall. Vertically (fig.20), the DSP6000’s balance doesn’t change significantly as long as the listener’s ears are between 51” (the tweeter’s axis) and 39” from the floor. For a standing listener, a suckout appears at the upper crossover frequency (2.5kHz), while the treble tilts up. But in any case, the speaker’s optimal axis can be tilted down by adjusting the relative time delay between the drive-units.

The ‘6000’s step response (fig.21) is hard to interpret, and I admit I was a little surprised not to see the same time-coherent shape as in the ‘5000. But after I’d inspected the step responses of the individual drive-units, I realized that what fig.21 shows is first the beginning of the midrange unit’s positive-going step just after the 8ms mark, over which is then laid the tweeter’s negative-going step. The midrange step overshoots after returning to the time axis, its subsequent positive-going recovery coinciding with the positive-going woofer step. This is not a time-coherent design—if that matters. (The jury is still out.)

Other than a ridge of delayed energy due to the ultrasonic tweeter resonance, the DSP6000’s waterfall plot on the tweeter axis (fig.22) is very clean, though with a slight discontinuity at the top of the midrange unit’s passband. Despite its large size, the speaker’s bass bin is rigidly constructed; on a waterfall plot calculated from the output of an accelerometer fastened to the main panel, only one resonant mode is visible that could have an effect on sound quality: the front. The mode is both sufficiently high in frequency and low enough in level that it should have no effect on the speaker’s perceived sound quality. —John Atkinson

Measurements

![Fig.22 Meridian DSP6000C, cumulative spectral-decay plot at 50° (0.15ms risetime).](image)

![Fig.23 Meridian DSP6000C, cumulative spectral-decay plot of accelerometer output fastened to front panel. (MLS level, -3dBFS; volume control = 70°; measurement bandwidth, 2kHz.)](image)
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Stereophile, February 2000
tions. Very disconcerting! To this list could be added more than a dozen others, all of which suffer from this blatant abuse of multichannel's potential. What makes this especially disconcerting is that I rarely found a movie soundtrack, auditioned on my weekend home-theater setup, with these faults. The reason must be that the soundtrack has to make dramatic sense in terms of the action on the screen. Why can't music producers display the same sense?

Mercifully, there were exceptions, and playing those, the Meridian system gave me the chance to see the true potential of multichannel. With these discs, the performers stay together and put away where they belong, whether on a concert stage, in a small clubroom, or even in a church. Going back to Delos's DVD Music Breakthrough, selecting the Dolby Digital program, and switching the 861 into Pro Logic, I finally achieved something close to what I'd hoped for. Litton/Dallas performing Gershwin's Rhapsody in Blue was a marvelous experience. The somewhat distant aural space they occupy no longer had hard limits, and my listening room was no longer merely "looking into" the far end of the performing venue—it was that venue's far end. Even though the physical distance between us seemed no less, I felt more intimately related to the performers.

Another disc with multiple formats is Mickey Hart's Indoorsub DVD single. Both the Dolby Digital and DTS programs were more exciting and involving than the straight 24/96 stereo mix. This is probably a consequence of my not caring at all for the music, so clearly limned in the 24/96 mode, but I succumbed to the spatial, multidirectional manipulation of the other mixes. Can I choose between DD and DTS? Easily, given the tools of the 861 to tame the bass of the DTS mix so that its more explicit directionality could be enjoyed. The DD tracks were great too, but seemed less precise in all channels than the DTS.

I badmouthed one of Telarc's DTS efforts above, but the Ray Brown Trio's Summertime (Telarc CD-83430-DTS) is an example of DTS done right. The ensemble is up-front, as they are on the two-channel release, but now the window frame that limited the aural view is completely gone, and the listener is in the room with this trio-plus-one. I don't mean to suggest that the listener and performer are any closer, but that they now occupy the same ambient space. In a similar way, on the Yool Levi/Atlanta performance of Holst's The Planets (Telarc CD-80466-DTS), there is no longer a lateral limit to the soundstage, even though the orchestra spans little more of it than on the conventional CD. Setting aside the sound-effects tracks and overly aggressive bass, Erich Kunzel and the Cincinnati Pops' The Big Picture (Telarc CD-80437-DTS) is a smashing example of how five-channel reproduction can bring the listener into the concert hall.

The Meridian system gave me the chance to see the true potential of multichannel.

My three favorite multichannel experiences were with widely different music: the DMP Big Band's Big Band Potpourri (DMP/MAS CD-804), Sacred Feast from Gaudeamus (DMP/MAS CD-805), and Sir Adrian Boult and the London Philharmonic performing Tchaikovsky's Suite No.3 for Orchestra (DTS 51031-2). In each case, the depiction was of a group of performers in a characteristic and defined space that acoustically subsumed the listening room. In the DMP Big Band disc, the performers' chairs were arranged in a U with the mikes and the listener at the open end. Thus, the performers were arrayed from my immediate left, forward and around to my immediate right; I sat in the conductor's podium and reveled in the flavors of the instruments. On Gaudeamus, from Sacred Feast, the a cappella chorus is much more distant, but it is the reverberation of the chapel that engulfs me. How real and clear the chorus remained, as the echoes from sides and rear did not confuse their sound! The Tchaikovsky, drawn from recordings made in the Quadraphonic era of the 1970s, gives us Boult/LPO in a large hall. I seemed to be seated in about Row M, with the orchestra spread widely in front. I heard the hall around me, and felt that there was space to the sides and behind than in front.

The Meridian system and these three discs showed that multichannel could significantly enhance the musical experience in the home. Was there a price for this? Sadly, yes. None of the Dolby Digital or DTS recordings seemed nearly as detailed and precise as their two-channel siblings. This is not surprising; both surround processes involve a loss of data compared to 16/44.1 stereo upsampled by the 861 to 16/88.2. The loss of resolution might account for the raucous effect of the improperly placed voices in the rear channels on many discs. It might also account for the fatigue I experienced even with the best of the surround/multichannel recordings.

Because I set up a parallel but much less ambitious multichannel system in my weekend home and heard the same disappointments, I can ascribe none of these faults to the 861. In fact, the Meridian system made the more convincing argument for the potential of multichannel by offering alternative modes of decoding and synthesis, and by permitting optimum setup configurations. Nonetheless, I usually listened to multichannel discs, of any format, only when I needed to critically audition multichannel. When listening to music, I chose the two-channel version. This disturbs me.

Conclusions

There is no question that the Meridian Digital Theatre system auditioned here performed admirably, and that its individual components were equal to the best obtainable conventional devices. The system was beyond significant reproof in its reproduction of two-channel discs, and the realization of multichannel material was limited only by the source. As an obsessive audiophile, I'd be very happy with the Meridian system, but wonder if another amplifier might have made the speakers sound warmer, or if I could somehow pipe my LPs to the speakers' amps without intervening A/D and D/A conversions. As a music-lover, I could live blissfully with this Meridian system for the foreseeable future.

One could reasonably compare the DSP6000 with any combination of Class A-rated DACs, amps, and speakers. What one sacrifices in being able to mix and match, one gains in synergy, and simplicity and flexibility of control. One also saves big bucks on speaker cables and interconnects! The DSP6000's sound was transparent and tight, with great bass power. It can be optimally tailored with its DSP-based tone controls, but I think the DSP6000 will appeal to devotees of precision more than to those who prefer warmth. Extended listening is required if you are considering it: you're auditioning not just a new speaker system, but new amps and DACs as well. Considering that it includes an entire system, less only the digital source, the decidedly serious asking price of $19,950/pair is far from unreasonable.

The 800 Reference is as perfect a transport/player as I've experienced with present-day sources, and its architecture, including programmable DSP and plug-in cards, seems as future-proof.
From start to finish

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as can be. Whether used as a transport in the context of a Meridian system or as a player with other components, I usually preferred the 800 when comparing it to other digital sources—it was sometimes an equal but never an inferior. As with the DSP6000, the $16k price of the 800 Reference buys a lot of functionality, as it includes an excellent upsampler and system control facilities. Oh, I almost forgot: it does video, too.

The 861 Reference is, to my knowledge, the most flexible and capable device in audio. It can accept any analog or digital input, provide any analog or digital output, configure and control two-channel to 7.1-channel audio systems, and its DSP brain can recognize and process all known audio-signal formats except HDCD. The DSP engine seemed to neither add nor subtract anything from the music, and its digital volume control was as transparent at all levels as those of the dCS Elgar and the Z-systems rdP-1.

In its two-channel modes, the 861 gave me as good an experience as I have obtained from each source, and the enhancements of Trifield were even a step beyond. With Ambisonic and Dolby Surround sources, the 861 provided the tools for maximizing performance and minimizing distractions. Performance with Dolby Digital and DTS sources seemed limited only by the compromises of the media themselves. Add to that the potential to encompass as-yet-unknown processes via DSP programming and plug-ins, and it offers as much insurance against the winds of technological change as is possible. It is a formidable machine.

**The big picture**

Even with the best recordings and equipment, two-channel stereo means that the direct sound of the performers is mixed with the ambient cues from the side walls, the rear walls, and even the ceiling, and is directed at you from a pair of speakers. The result is that music and ambience are heard through an aperture, or soundstage. Thus, the entire musical event takes place just beyond the speakers, and one listens from a room whose own relatively short reverberation times make little contribution. As two-channel stereo has advanced, we have enjoyed progressively wider and clearer windows into that soundstage, and this has permitted us to resolve more of the direct sound and environmental cues. But despite the inspired work of recordists and mixers, we remain hopelessly separated from the event by the conflation of direct and reverberant sounds to two front channels. How can all of the collapsing echoes of an acoustic sound come from the same direction as the original sound?

I've begun to think of two-channel audio as similar to watching a football game from a private "sky box." It's comfortable, and the ability to hear and see detail is superb, but the event is going on "out there," not "in here." The players, the crowd, and the stadium announcer are all in front, their sounds coming to you through the front window. If you move to the front of the box, the aperture (soundstage) subjectively widens but still circumscribes the event.

But move out of the box and into the stands—or, better yet, down to a midfield seat—and the entire experience is transformed. Sure, the sounds (and sights) of the players are still in front of you, but much more widely spread, giving you a greater resolving power. The crowd is now all around you; using directional cues, you can more easily distinguish them from the sounds of play. Finally, the stadium announcer booms overhead, and you hear the echo bounce off the stadium's opposing walls. Where's my beer and hot dogs?

Having multiple channels can do away with this separation between listener and musical event. Telarc's DTS discs and Delos' Dolby Digital 5.1 music recordings are perfect examples because I can compare them with same producers' two-channel versions. By removing the constraining soundstage window and encompassing my listening room within the reverberant soundfield, these recordings provide a greater sense of presence, place, and reality in multichannel than they do in conventional stereo. I am less aware of the acoustic properties of my room because these are superseded by the injected ambience. In spite of this, the performers are not bloated, nor do they surround me. Despite the resolution limits of DD and DTS, I can hear great intricacy and richness in the music.

Multichannel reproduction gives the same immersive experience in the musical event. I don't want to sit in the middle of a string quartet, symphony orchestra, or big band. I want to hear, in my listening room, what it sounds like in the concert hall or club room. More than ever, I am convinced that the future of high-quality music reproduction is multichannel. The Meridian Digital Multichannel/Surround System is ready now. How long must we wait for the software to catch up?
Bill Evans has been called "the poet of jazz piano." Evans' unique combination of strength and sensitivity influenced a whole generation of jazz pianists, from Herbie Hancock to Keith Jarrett. Using a subtle dynamic range, his playing was full of constantly shifting color and beauty.

These seven recordings capture the intricate phrasing and emotional depth of Bill Evans at the peak of his career in the late 50s and early 60s.

MORE BILL EVANS ON XRCD:

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  featuring Chuck Israels and Larry Bunker
- Everybody Digs Bill Evans
  JVCX-0020
  featuring Philly Joe Jones and Sam Jones

BILLEVANS

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Moonbeams
VICJ 60214
featuring Chuck Israels and Paul Motian
In Moonbeams Evans did some of his most introspective playing, his loss of bassist LaFaro (killed in an auto accident the previous year) apparent, but relieved by Israels' power and empathy.

Interplay
VICJ 60172
featuring Jim Hall, Freddie Hubbard, Percy Heath and Philly Joe Jones
Interplay adds trumpet and guitar to Evans' usual trio format, creating an unusual quintet alignment concentrating on standard tunes and brighter tempos than generally associated with Evans' playing.

Explorations
VICJ 60140
featuring Scott LaFaro and Paul Motian
This recording, made when Evans' classic trio with LaFaro and Motian had been together for a full year, brilliantly captures his innovative concept of "simultaneous improvisation" with bassist La Faro.

How My Heart Sings
VICJ 60373
featuring Chuck Israels and Paul Motian
This session (recorded at the same time as Moonbeams), is by Evans classic "second trio."
While Moonbeams is more balled orientated, How My Heart Sings bubbles with energy on a program including "I Should Care," "In Your Own Sweet Way" and "Summertime."

Portait In Jazz
VICJ 60139
featuring Scott LaFaro and Paul Motian
"Evans is one of the freshest things to happen to the piano in years. Here is an album with meaning. Here is the truth." - Don Be Michael-Down Beat

Green Dolphin Street
VICJ 60372
featuring Paul Chambers and Philly Joe Jones
This rare session, taped in 1958, while Evans was still with the Miles Davis group, includes stunning performances of the standards "Green Dolphin Street," "You, The Night and the Music" and "My Heart Stood Still."

Waaltz For Debby
VICJ 60141
featuring Scott LaFaro and Paul Motian
This, one of Evans' most celebrated recordings, is the second of two albums recorded on June 25, 1961 at the Village Vanguard. "The trio is a deftly integrated unit."-Leonard Feather-Down Beat

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When I describe the Thiel CS7.2 to friends, the word that gets the biggest reaction is "simple." Veteran audiophiles protest, noting the big Thiel’s multiple drivers, complex cabinet, and elaborate, zillion-element crossover. Nonaudiophiles just glance at the 5'-tall speaker, smile sympathetically at Bonnie, and roll their eyes.

But in the world of ultra-high-end loudspeakers, the CS72 is actually quite simple. The other super systems I’ve used—big Infinitys, Genesis 200s, Audio Artistry Dworaks, and the like—have been bi- or even tri-amped. There are four towers, external crossovers, and a brigade of amplifiers to deal with, and cables everywhere. With the CS72 there are only two speakers, one stereo amplifier, and one set each of interconnects and speaker cables.

But when I say “simple,” what I really mean is the engineering. Though its execution may have ended up being complex, the CS72’s design principles are elegantly simple. Jim Thiel begins with the premise that, to communicate musically, it’s necessary to achieve fidelity in four areas: tone, spatial resolution, transient reproduction, and dynamics. This gives rise to a number of technical requirements, which in turn lead to a set of design goals. It is against these goals—uniform frequency response, accurate time and phase response, low energy storage, and low distortion—that all decisions and tradeoffs are judged.

**Description:** Four-way, floorstanding, reflex-loaded loudspeaker. Drive-units (all anodized aluminum, midrange three-layer sandwich construction): 1" (25mm) dome tweeter coaxially mounted in 3" (76mm) cone midrange; 6.5" (165mm) lower-midrange cone; 12" (305mm) cone woofer; 12" (305mm) passive radiator. Crossover frequencies: 200Hz, 1kHz, 3kHz. Crossover slopes: all acoustic first-order. Frequency range: 23Hz-20kHz.

**Frequency response:** 25Hz–17kHz, ±1.5dB. Phase response: ±10°, minimum. Sensitivity: 86dB/12.83V/1m. Impedance: 4 ohms nominal, 3 ohms minimum. Recommended power: 100–500W.

**Dimensions:** 55" (1400mm) H by 14" (360mm) W by 19" (480mm) D. Weight: 168 lbs each.

**Serial numbers of units reviewed:** 153, 154.

**Finishes:** Standard: walnut, black ash, white oak, natural cherry, black laminate; other finishes available at extra cost.

**Price:** $13,500/pair. Approximate number of dealers: 27 (not all 70 Thiel dealers stock the CS72). Warranty: 10 years.

**Manufacturer:** Thiel Audio Products, 1026 Nandino Boulevard, Lexington, KY 40511. Tel: (606) 254-9427. Fax: (606) 254-0075. E-mail: mail@thielaudio.com. Web: www.thielaudio.com.
The idea of a rigid cabinet is simple, but Thiel's bracing scheme and baffle are not. The same is true for low-distortion drivers: simple concept, difficult execution. Because of the considerable overlap between drivers, first-order crossovers must be complex to incorporate all of the factors necessary to achieve a seamless blend. The coaxial midrange/tweeter poses its own challenges, overcome here by a complex, three-layer sandwich construction and a carefully engineered cone shape.

Sure, if you just look at the details, the CS72 is complex. However, if you follow the process — start with the desired performance attributes and move forward into the CS72's design and implementation — it becomes obvious that each element is only as complex as it needs to be to do the job.

**Measurements**

Like most Jim Thiel designs, the CS72 features quite a low impedance over most of the audio band (fig.1), with a magnitude dropping to below 2.7 ohms above 8kHz and ranging between 2.9 ohms and 4.2 ohms between 60Hz and 8kHz. The electrical phase angle is generally low, however, meaning that a good amplifier rated into 4 ohms will be able to drive the speaker. The minimum value at 24Hz in the magnitude trace in fig.1 reveals the tuning of the passive radiator, implying excellent low-frequency extension. My estimate of the Thiel's B-weighted voltage sensitivity was 85dB/2.83V/1m — slightly lower than specified, and ruling out the use of amplifiers of less than 100W, in my opinion.

The impedance traces were free from resonance-caused wrinkles, and an investigation of the cabinet walls' vibrational behavior revealed just two resonant modes of any consequence (not shown). These should have only minimal subjective consequences; their relatively high frequencies, 350Hz and 535Hz, indicate a very well-braced cabinet, considering its size.

Assessing the amplitude response of a physically large loudspeaker featuring first-order crossover slopes is an enterprise fraught with difficulty due to the significant overlap between the drive-units, which gives rise to interference effects. Please bear this in mind when you examine fig.2, which shows the CS72's quasi-anechoic response averaged across a 30° horizontal window on the tweeter axis, spliced to the complex sum of the nearfield radiator, woofer, and midrange responses below 500Hz. The speaker's bass extends down to 25Hz, below which it rolls off quite steeply. There appears to be a lack of energy in the upper midrange, but this might be due to interference in the crossover region between the two midrange units at the relatively close (50") microphone distance I have to use.

However, what are undoubtedly real aspects of this response are the narrow but quite intense peak just below 6kHz and the large peak at 21kHz. The latter

**Updating a classic**

The CS72 is visually indistinguishable from its predecessor, the Class A-rated CS7, reviewed by Tom Norton in October 1995, with a Follow-Up by Wes Phillips in January 1996. It is 55" tall, with a 14" by 17" footprint, sloping front baffle, and full-length grillecloth. Other than in front, the speaker is entirely encased in luscious veneer — in the case of the review samples, a gorgeous dark cherry — and connections are via a single pair of heavy, gold-plated, 5-way binding posts on the unit's underside. All aspects of the 72's construction, fit, and finish are outstanding.

The CS72's basic configuration, too, is identical to the CS7's. They're both large, floorstanding, four-way designs, with the drivers arrayed vertically in a massive, curved, cast-mineral front baf-

---

**Figure 1**

Thiel CS72, electrical impedance (solid) and phase (dashed). (2 ohms/vertical div.)

**Figure 2**

Thiel CS72, anechoic response on tweeter axis at 50°, averaged across 30° horizontal window and corrected for microphone response, with the complex sum of the nearfield midrange, woofer, and passive radiator responses plotted below 500Hz.

**Figure 3**

fle. On top is a coaxial midrange-tweeter, with the 1" dome tweeter mounted deep in the throat of the 3" midrange. Below the tweeter-midrange are a 6.5" lower midrange and a 12" woofer. As in other Thiel models, the woofer is loaded with a passive radiator rather than a port.

All of the drivers and crossovers, however, are different from those in the CS7. Thiel Audio now builds all of its drivers in-house; according to Jim Thiel, this has allowed the company to achieve both increased output and reduced distortion. "The biggest differences are in the midrange and tweeter. We learned a lot from designing the tweeter for the CS6, and its high end was much better than the CS7's... We also got a lot of new ideas for the midrange, the engineered shape, and the three-layer sandwich construction. In the meantime, we went to manufacturing our own drivers, so they're built exactly to spec. The 72 takes full advantage of this fact."

Although the CS72's midrange/tweeter is a coaxial design, it's not a single-motor/mechanical-crossover design like the one used in the CS2.3 that I reviewed last January. "We're still considering it for a CS73," Thiel said, "but right now, the mechanical crossover is a way to get 98% of the performance for a drastically reduced cost. It's still not quite as good on a cost-no-object basis, so it's not appropriate for the CS72."

Maybe not so simple:
Systems and setup
Being a Thiel veteran, I confidently set up the 72s firing down the long axis of my 18' by 27' listening room, and moved the speaker's placement only slightly to afford an even field in a room which, with the Thiel CS71s, used to be quite trebley due to the tweeter dome's "oil-can" resonance and, despite its closeness to the audio band, should have no audible consequences. With program material possessing energy in the 6kHz region, however, the lower-frequency peak will be audible as a steeliness or a lack of mid-treble clarity. When I auditioned the speaker for myself, I was surprised at how unobtrusive this resonant problem was for much of the time — it is very narrow, meaning that it will be excited only if significant program energy exists between 5 and 6kHz. But Brian does talk about a touch of treble "hardness" that occasionally intrudes; I imagine that this peak was the cause of this comment.

In the vertical plane (fig.3), the midrange rapidly recedes as the listener's ear rises above the tweeter axis. As this axis is quite high (40° above the floor), this should not be an issue except for standing listeners. Moving below the tweeter axis, the high treble starts to shelf down, but the balance otherwise remains unchanged to any significant extent.

Fig.4 shows how the CS72's response changes (in 5° steps) as the microphone moves 90° to either side of the tweeter axis. The dispersion is superb even up to about 2.5kHz, with then some very slight beaming before the speaker's radiation pattern widens again as the upper-midrange unit takes over. An off-axis notch develops in the exact region of the on-axis peak, which might work against its audibility. Probably most important, the tweeter becomes quite directional between 11kHz and 16kHz, presumably because of the modifying effect of the very slight flare of the upper-midrange cone. Brian did comment on the CS72's lack of high-frequency air; as the speaker actually has a slightly rising treble response on the tweeter axis, I imagine he is responding to the lack of top-octave energy in his room's reverberant field, this due to the tweeter's directivity in this region.

This can be seen in fig.5, a spatially averaged response centered on the listening position, the measurement taken in Brian's room. If you compare this with the quasi-anechoic response (fig.2), you can see that the measured lack of on-axis energy in the upper midrange has disappeared, and that the in-room balance from the middle of the midrange to the mid-treble is impressively flat. The on-axis peaks at 5.6kHz and 21kHz continue to make their presence known. However, note how well this graph correlates with Brian's subjective comments about the CS72's overall balance: somewhat elevated low bass, recessed lower mids, neutral midrange and low treble, and a lack of top-octave energy.
MIT has really set a new mark in advancing cable technology with the introduction of the Oracle series of speaker cables. The new “one box” design with docking connector makes the Oracle easier to integrate into real-life rooms. Redefining performance and usability, the Oracle series has the flexibility to be easily upgraded as your system changes. Available in several price levels starting under $3000.”

-Robert Roeger / Store Manager
ing it to pick up the pace. But no matter how I tweaked and twisted, the music just wouldn't break free from the lan-
guid aquascape. Seventy watts, no mat-
ter how good, weren't going to cut it.

The results with Linn's 100W ML-
1 monoblocks were similar to those with
the VAC setup, so I decided to bring up
the heavy artillery. In addition to my
VTI Ichibanis, I lined up a Krell KSA-
250 and pairs of Mark Levinson No.20.6
and Sonic Frontiers Power Three mono-
blocks. All worked well, but none was
excessive, and the CS72s clearly revealed
each amp's characteristics. I ended up
preferring— and doing most of my lis-
tening with—the Levinsons.

Other changes followed. I switched to
MIT cables and power delivery and in-
stalled the Wadia 830 CD player. In
went the Adcom GFP-750 preamp—

but for digital, I ran the Wadia directly
into the Levinsons. Finally, I tore every-
thing down and flipped the entire setup
90°. The new setup, with the CS72s
backed up to a solid brick wall and fir-
ing down the short side of my listening
room, was noticeably better. In their final
placements, the Thiel sat approximately
3' from the front wall, 8' from each other
and the side walls, and were slightly toed-
in. My listening chair was set about 1' off
the back wall, putting it approximately
12' from the speakers.

I experimented with room treatment
and ended up using five floor-to-ceiling
ASC Tube Traps: two in the corners,
two more at the side walls' first-reflec-
tion points, and the fifth centered be-
tween and slightly behind the speakers
(see the sidebar). I then added Echo Bus-
ters: Double Buster diffusers on the back

wall, behind my listening chair, and a
pair of Echo Busters reflectors as wings
on either side of the central column.

Use and listening
In my review of the Wadia 830 CD
player (Stereophile, October 1999), I
mentioned that the system—Wadia
830, Mark Levinson 20.6es, Thiel
CS72s—was the best I'd ever had,
and that I was staying up nights listening to
music for the first time in quite a while.

Back then, I concentrated on the
Wadia's resolution and accuracy, which
both improved the system directly and
allowed everything else in the chain to
be optimized. The Thiel's contribution,
on the opposite end of the chain, was
similar and equally profound. By repro-
ducing everything—every tone, every
harmonic, every nuance, every detail—

M e a s u r e m e n t s

Jim Thiel's Coherent Sound speakers
all have excellent time coherence, and
the CS72 is no exception. The impulse
response (fig.6) has a coherent shape,
though the tail is overlaid with ringing
from the two HF resonances discussed
earlier. The step response (fig.7) has an
almost perfect right-triangle shape,
though the 6kHz ringing can be seen
and there is a little too much overshoot,
this partly due to the measuring micro-
phone but mainly due to the slightly ris-
ing tweeter response on-axis. As a re-

tult, the acoustic phase response (fig.8)
is flat, with a minimum-phase charac-
teristic, over almost all the audio band.
(The phase error due to the CS72's de-
partment from a flat response has been
subtracted from this graph.) But note
the wrinkles in this so-called "excess-
phase" response around 6kHz, which I
assume are associated with the resonant
peak in this region.

Finally, the Thiel's waterfall plot (fig.9)
reveals a generally clean decay, marred
only by ripples of delayed energy not only

at 5.6kHz and 21kHz, as expected, but
also one at 4.1kHz—exactly the frequen-
cy of a response notch. Again, I am
puzzled why this resonant behavior made its
presence known only sometimes.

The Thiel CS72 combines some fine
measured performance attributes—
time coherence, excellent bass exten-
sion, and wide, even dispersion—with

some that leave me perplexed, such as
its mid-treble resonant behavior. Its use
of first-order crossover slopes with the
attendant overlap between drive-unit
passbands and its limited top-octave dis-

currence will make room setup more
arduous than usual. But with care, the
speaker can—as Brian found—be
made to sing.

—John Atkinson
with precision and purity, the CS72 similarly allowed every aspect of the system to be improved and optimized, as well as making its own, direct contribution to the performance.

Thiel speakers are known for excellent bass, but the CS72 was even better than I'd expected. From the mid-20Hz range on up, it was fast, clean, powerful, and very natural — in other words, dead on. Detail was excellent, as was the recovery of ambience and spatial cues. On “Saturn,” from the Zubin Mehta/LSO reading of Holst's The Planets (London/Classic CSCD 6734), I could clearly hear the individual double basses lined up at an angle. The walls beside and behind them were solidly located, and there was a great sense of the space between the instruments and the walls.

Fast, melodic bass lines — Ray Brown’s Soilar Energy (Concord Jazz CCD-4268), for example — were sweet, clean, and bouncy. But what really struck me was the 72's reproduction of bass drums, and the breathtaking drive and impact that it added to orchestral pieces. My notes on the second movement of the Reiner/Chicago performance of Prokofiev's Lt. Kijé (Chesky RC10) say it all: “Wow — incredibly realistic, with a fast initial transient followed by a seismic, blooming weight… all the while maintaining a clear pitch, harmonic structure, and distinct skin tone. Fantastic! I've never heard bass drums like this outside of a concert hall.”

The only nit I'll pick is that the 72 slightly emphasized the very lowest bass relative to the upper bass and lower midrange. This didn't come across as an imbalance or discontinuity, however, but as if Ray Brown just wasn't playing quite as loudly at the top of his range as at the bottom.

The CS72's top end was clear, sweet, and detailed, without any of the brightness and overetching that some Thiels have been accused of in the past. Inner details, like the pattern of brushes moving against a cymbal, were beautifully

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**Room Tuning: ASC Tube Traps & the MATT Test**

One of the challenges I faced in optimizing the Thiel CS72's performance was controlling and tuning their interaction with my listening room. Intuition, experience, trial and error — all came into play, as did several of the procedures and calculations covered by Jonathan Scull in his “Fine Tunes” column.

I even had expert guidance — in the form of visits from Bruce Brisson and Joe Abrams of MIT, and Art Noxon of Acoustic Sciences Corporation (ASC), who led me through a two-step process. First, we concentrated on getting smooth overall response and good, even articulation. Then we dialed-in depth, dimensionality, and ambience.

One of the most powerful tools we used in the first process was the Music Articulation Test Tone (MATT) test, Track 19 on Stereophile’s Test CD 2 (STPH004-2). The test was created by Art Noxon as a way of characterizing an audio system's response and articulation. “It's basically a music intelligibility test,” he explained. “Home theater installers have standards for intelligibility, and pro sound people have a standard. But, oddly enough, high-end audio, where we pride ourselves on superb sound, has no such standard.”

The test consists of a tone that ramps at 16Hz per second from 28Hz to 780Hz and back again. Instead of being constant, however, it turns on and off rapidly, creating 1/5th-second tone bursts, each 2Hz higher (or, on the way down, lower) than the previous burst, interspersed with 1/5th-second periods of silence. The test not only characterizes a system's frequency response by the average level at any frequency, but also its articulation — *ie*, how cleanly it turns on and off.

The test can be conducted by listening or by watching the needle on a sound-level meter, and noting the times when the level varies or the pulses aren't cleanly reproduced. Because the tones ramp up linearly, time can easily be converted to frequency to isolate the problems. The most graphic method, however, is to use the level meter's output to drive a chart recorder or computer data-acquisition board. The trace's average levels indicate the system's frequency response, and the width of the trace shows how effectively and cleanly the system turns on and off.

It's significant to note that the test characterizes the *entire* system, including the listening room. In fact, the room interactions typically dominate the test. If the room is removed, either by listening to the test through headphones or by holding the level meter close to a speaker, the results are nearly perfect — crystal-clear reproduction, or a flat, fat trace indicative of flat overall response and consistently good articulation.

Fig.1 shows a results of a MATT test performed in BD's listening room, without room treatment. Note the reduced level and articulation at approximately 360Hz (a), and the greater articulation (thicker trace) at 550–600Hz (b).

Fig.2 shows the results of a MATT test performed in BD's listening room, treated with Tube Traps and Echo Busters panel absorbers. Note overall improvement in articulation compared to the setup in fig.1. Articulation is still minimal at approximately 360Hz (a), but significantly improved over the untreated room.
reproduced. On the minus side, dynamic contrasts weren’t quite as large in the treble as in the midrange or bass, so high-pitched, massed violin crescendos never quite balanced the power of the rest of the orchestra. There was also a bit less detail up top; individual violins weren’t as distinct as cellos or woodwinds.

There also seemed to be a slight lack of air and extension. For example, the 7.2 seemed to properly balance the celesta’s dense, bell-like ring and the surrounding halo of overtones. Triangles, on the other hand, were sweet but a tiny bit muted. Lastly, a trace of hardness crept in on a few occasions when the tweeter was driven hard, as at the end of an explosive, flying piccolo run. But these were minor deficiencies. The CS72’s top end was easily the best of any Thiel speaker I’ve heard, and very good on any scale.

But when I got to the midrange, I threw away my caveats. The 7.2’s mids were outstanding.

When I got to the midrange, I threw away my caveats. The 7.2’s mids were outstanding.

We then experimented with ASC Tube Traps, beginning with them oriented as absorbers. Using the MATT test to check each configuration, we added columns of Tube Traps in the corners for bass control, at the side wall’s first reflection points, and between the speakers, to make the soundstage coalesce/cohere better. Fig.2 shows the MATT results for our final configuration, which added Echo Busters absorbers behind the listening position. While there’s still a minimum in both level and articulation at about 360Hz, fig.2 shows that the dip isn’t as severe with this setup, and that the articulation is much better throughout the frequency range covered by the test.

The sonic effects were more subtle than the measurements would suggest, but still noticeable. The Thiel’s had excellent focus and precision before; with the room treatment, they became truly extraordinary. The same was true of their pure, uncolored sound: outstanding before, truly exceptional in the treated room.

The second part of the process—expanding the soundstage’s width and depth, and adding ambience by incorporating reflected information—was accomplished by a systematic process of rotating the Tube Traps to expose their reflective sides. This was done in stages—first the corners, then the side walls, then the area between the speakers—checking the effect at each step. We’d play Dire Straits’ “Private Investigations” (from Money for Nothing, Warner Bros. 25794-2, CD) and listen for how far out and back the marimbas were. Other tests were the muted, distant trumpet at the opening of Prokofiev’s Lt. Kijé (Chesky RC10, LP) and the walls beside and behind it, and how clearly delineated were the Turtle Creek Chorale’s three tiers of voices on John Rutter’s Requiem (Reference Recordings RR-57, LP).

Without the benefit of a straightforward graphical analysis like the MATT test, the process of adding ambiance was much more qualitative. It wasn’t a matter of simply more—more depth, more width, more ambience. If too much was added, or too much was reflected directly toward the listener, the coherence of the soundstage was lost. The instruments no longer seemed to be playing in a single acoustic space, or even in similar spaces. Even individual instruments were discontinuous—upper registers or overtones would spread across a much wider space than their bottom ends or fundamentals. The result was a two-layered effect, with dramatically different image sizes above and below the break.

We ended up with very little energy reflected directly outward or at the listening position. Instead, the energy on each side was directed toward the center of a triangle formed by the front corner, the side wall’s first reflection point, and a Tube Trap centered between and behind the speakers. We ran another MATT test to ensure that we hadn’t changed the system’s response (we hadn’t), but we didn’t really need to—our ears told the story. The sound was fantastic.

Where there was depth before, there was now a crystal-clear, tangible portrayal of the instruments at the rear of the stage, and of the surrounding walls of the recording venue. Image dimensionality had become holography, detail bordered on reality, and notions like “speed,” “precision,” and “articulation” faded away, leaving only the performers. The system wasn’t changed per se; it was simply optimized. All of the CS72’s strengths were apparent and consistent throughout, but the room tuning honed them, cuddled them, merged them into a more cohesive whole. Before the tuning, the system sounded very, very good; after, it was phenomenal.

I unconditionally recommend ASC’s Tube Traps, and the Echo Busters products that we used. What I really recommend, however, is the entire package: system, room treatment, tuning process, MATT test, and expert support from Bruce Brisson, Joe Abrams, and Art Noxon. Even before a single Tube Trap had arrived, Art Noxon had looked over drawings of my listening rooms and made recommendations for placements.

“This isn’t just special treatment for you because you’re a reviewer,” he explained. “I’ll do this for any ASC customer.” And while he probably won’t personally visit and supervise the process, part of ASC’s service is to review MATT test results and support a customer through just the process we used in my room. All it takes to start is a copy of Test CD 2 and a RadioShack SPL meter. Give it a try—you’ll be glad you did.

—Brian Damkroger
obviously clarinets, and violas unques-
tionably violas. In fact, I noticed how obvi-
ous overdubs and edits became with the 
Thiels: the speakers revealed subtle differences in an instrument's tuning, or its position with respect to the microphones and surroundings.

The CS72s' imaging — or "spatial fidelity," in Thiel'speak — was similarly outstanding. I find myself judging most speakers' imaging in terms of tradeoffs: coherence vs detail, for example, or con-
tinuity with the surrounding space vs image dimensionality and boundary definition. With the CS72s, there were no tradeoffs. Images were richly and naturally detailed, and almost holo-
graphic in their dimensionality, but 
were never overetched or discontinuous with their surroundings.

In addition, the instruments' po-
positioning, hall boundaries, and sur-
rounding ambience were always consist-
ent, both internally and with respect to the 
listening perspective. The bound-
aries between images and the sur-
rounding space were continuous, and 
there was no hint of vagueness or blurring 
around the edges of instruments or sections. My Audio Artistry Dvoraks, for example, are wonderfully continuous but have nowhere near the Thiels' specifici-
ty and precision.

The most striking thing about the 
Thiels' imaging — and it was striking — 
was the uncanny density of those images. It was as if the Thiels took all of the 
energy that other speakers spread into a 
diffuse orb around an instrument's posi-
tion, and coalesced and condensed it into 
the image itself. Focus, precision, speci-
ficity ... all these words are accurate, but 
don't do justice to the effect, or its

impact on the listening experience. 
Switching from my Dvoraks to the 
CS72s wasn't like adjusting the focus; it 
was more like getting glasses for the first 
time — and simultaneously acquiring 
depth perception.

I'm certain that part of this focus, 
dimensionality, and density stems from 
the CS72's superb performance on transients. The temptation is to say that 

the CS72 is fast, but that's not quite right. It certainly sounded fast when the music demanded it, but actually the 
CS72 was incredibly precise and accu-
rate. If I listened carefully, it was obvious 
that notes were starting and stopping 
very sharply, with a noticeable lack of dulling or softening, and never 
a hint of ringing or overshoot. John 
Atkinson commented that "the notes start and stop so quickly ... it's really quite striking."

If I just listened to the music, how-
ever, the CS72's transient fidelity came 
across as an energy or immediacy that 
made everything seem more realistic 
and alive. I often found myself digging 
out live recordings and listening late 
into the night, just because the Thiel's 
immediacy made the performances so 
riveting. Rickie Lee Jones was a frequent 
late-night companion, via Girl at Her 
Volcano (Warner Bros. 23805-1B) and 
Naked Songs (Reprise 45950-2). But 
Jones's Friday Night in San Francisco 
(Columbia KC 47152) was the stunner. I 
could stack up the adjectives — tangible, 
dimensional, intimate, immediate — 
and still not really describe what the 
Thiels did for live recordings.

Perhaps a Gen-X friend from work 
said it best. Christian stopped by one 
evening "to hear Miles Davis' Kind of 
Blue on a good system." I put on the 
Classic reissue (Columbia/Classic CS 
8163), and within seconds he was mes-
erized. At the end of "So What" he 
turned to me and said, "I've never heard 
anything like this. It's like being at a 
concert — it's like it's happening right 
here, right now." I think that, more than 
anything else, it's the CS72's precision 
— its dynamic fidelity — that gives rise to 
this feeling of immediacy.

As a side note, I can thank the 
Thiels — and the rest of the system — for creating another audiophile music-lover 
that night. Christian and I listened to jazz for 
hours, chatting and alternating between 
my favorites and discs that he'd brought. 
He'd always loved music, and had been 
aware of the High End's existence, but 
only recently had he made the 
"Listening to recorded music," he said, "just never worked for me. It's just never been 
compelling, something I would just do. 
But this ... this is different." Christian's 
a grad student, so buying a pair of CS72s 
is simply out of the question; but he did 
end up buying a nice system (Rega 
Planet CD, Luna amplifier, Meadowlark 
Kestrels), and now spends his evenings listening to music.

Jim Thiel's final design goal, dynamic 
fidelity, goes hand in hand with the 
CS72s' excellent reproduction of trans-
ients. I noted earlier that dynamic gra-
dients might be slightly larger in the 
bas and midrange than in the treble. I 
also noticed that while the 72 can ef-
fortlessly reproduce huge, explosive dy-
namic gradients and can differentiate 
very fine dynamic shadings at low to 
moderately loud levels, it lacks the last 
bit of dynamic resolution at its very 
lowest levels. Full orchestral climaxes, 
for example, didn't have quite the im-
 pact of the explosive guitars on Friday 
Night in San Francisco, or the immediacy of Rickie Lee Jones' soft, breathy voice 
on "Chuck E.'s In Love." But I don't 
want to make too much of this; it's a 
minor point that has as much to do with 
my room and the partnering amplifiers 
as it does with the CS72 itself.

Associated Equipment

**Analog source:** VPI TNT Mk.IV turntable, JMW 12" Memorial tone-
arm, Grado Reference cartridge.

**Digital source:** Wadia 830 CD player.

**Preamplification:** Sonic Frontiers Line 3 and Adcom GFP-750 line 
stages, Sonic Frontiers Phono-I phone 
preamp.

**Power amplifiers:** Mark Levinson 
No.20.6, VTL Ichiban, VAC Renais-
sance 70/70, Lammi ML-1, Sonic 
Frontiers Power Three, Krell KSA-250.

**Cables:** MIT 330 Shotgun and 
MH-750 Shotgun, Nirvana S-L and S-X, 
JPS Lab Superconductor 2, Synergis-
tic Research Designer's Reference.

**Accessories:** MIT Z-System, PAC Super 
IDOS, Nirvana AC isolation 
and AC delivery systems; Nordost 
ECO3 and Music Fidelity DiskSolu-
tion CD treatments; ASC and Echo 
Busters room-treatment products; 
Sheffield/XLO Test and Burn-in CD, 
Stereophile Test CD 2 & Test CD 3: 
Bright Star isolation systems, Tip toes; 
VPI 16.5 record-cleaning machine, 
Immedia Needle Nektar stylus-
cleaning fluid, StyLAST stylus fluid; 
Bright Star, VPI, Merrill equipment 
stands.

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Brian Damkroger
Summing up
As Thiel Audio’s current flagship, the CS72 is the fullest realization to date of Jim Thiel’s process and goals. To understand those goals — achieving tonal, spatial, transient, and dynamic fidelity — is to understand this speaker and its characteristics. The CS72 is absolutely superb in these areas. It combines and exceeds all the positive attributes of other Thiels I’ve audited, while ameliorating most of their shortcomings.

The CS72 is also an absolutely top-flight speaker by any standard. It is the finest loudspeaker I’ve had in my system, which, over the years, has housed large designs from the likes of Infinity, Audio Artistry, Magnepan, and Genesis. Even if I expand the circle to include speakers I’ve heard extensively but have not owned — Aerials, Hales, Dunetics, Quads, Wilsons — the CS72 would remain my choice because with the CS72s, I’ve spent less time thinking about tradeoffs and compromises and more time listening to music.

The CS72 requires a substantial commitment to realize its full potential. Although it works reasonably well with minimal effort, “reasonably well” isn’t what such speakers are about. For optimal integration, it needs careful positioning in a medium-to-large room, and possibly some room treatment. It must also be mated with the best possible components, and really needs to be driven by a superb, very powerful amplifier. Even then, the CS72’s transparency and resolution will clearly reveal the characteristics — good and bad — of the setup and upstream components. Get it right, however, and the CS72 is as good as anything available.

The bottom line: If I could afford to buy the CS72s, I would. I’m going to miss the level of performance my system has reached during their tenure here. As it is, I enthusiastically recommend them to anyone who’s seeking, and willing to commit to, a viable candidate for the best speaker available. $13,500/pair may seem expensive; but in the world of cost-no-object super systems the CS72s’s performance places them in, it isn’t. Add the construction quality, the simplicity and ease of use, and the associated savings in amps and cables, and the Thiel CS72 is actually good value.

THE ULTIMATE HOME THEATER

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“I’ve entered Nirvana. Only, I don’t know the price of admission. Elliot Fishkin, president of New York’s Innovative Audio Video Showrooms, a high-end AV mecca, has ushered me into the Room. The walls of the Room are hung in peach velvet. The carpet glows a soothing golden hue. The Room has no ambient quality. It’s dead quiet. I see other salespeople through the glass door. Their lips move, but I cannot hear a word.

Elliot seats me in the Chair in the center of the Room. I’m 15 feet from a small screen you might find in the smallest theater in the biggest multiplex of the nearest mall. Speakers the size of refrigerators tower over cables as thick as anacondas. I nod at Elliot with the exaggerated gravity of a duelist. He raises a tiny remote and presses Play.

The Fifth Element appears on screen, Madhouse cartoon images flash by. My jaw drops. This is the very incarnation of the much promised home-video revolution. The picture has no grain. No lines. It looks like film — warm and smooth, with none of the coldness of video. The colors are as sharp and luminous as those on the screen at the Ziegfeld Theater in New York or Le Grand Theater Lumiere in Cannes. The sound is clearer than that at Carnegie Hall. What’s more, this has nothing to do with HDTV. This is just a video signal blown through cutting-edge technology made bigger and cleaner by the application of money. I turn to Elliot, amazed. He smiles complacently.

“The sound,” Elliot says, “runs around $75,000. The picture, $85,000. And that doesn’t include designing the room.” Against my better judgement, I must honor the truth: It’s worth every stinking penny.”

—Wired Magazine, June 1999, Article by David N. Meyer II

To read the full content of this article on the web, link to http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/7.06/home_theater.html

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Audio Research's long-promised "final statement" phono preamplifier has finally arrived, and its price is $3500 less than the originally rumored $10,000. That's a pleasant deviation from the audiophile norm, but at $6495, the Reference phono still boasts a steep ticket. That's more than twice the price of the $2495 PH3 SE, AR's previous best — a class sonic act itself.

The cost-no-object company kept the Reference's sticker price down not by skimping on the parts or build quality of its original vision, but by leaving out the variable equalization feature it intended to include.

For those of you new to analog playback (yes, even at this late date, there are happily many new converts): In order to increase the amount of music on an LP side and to make tracking easier, bass is rolled off in the disc-cutting process, while high frequencies are boosted. In playback, an inverse curve is applied to the signal that restores overall flat response and lifts the music well above the LP's noise floor.

During the LP's early days, many labels devised their own compensation curves. In fact, many early phono pre-amps included various user-selectable curves. Eventually, the RIAA (Recording Industry Association of America) standardized a curve that the American and many foreign recording industries adopted.

Audio Research concluded that including the costly variable equalization feature was not a wise move, given that the vast majority of LPs played by most potential Reference buyers are encoded with the RIAA curve. Why ask them to pay more than $3000 for a feature they wouldn't be using and that the company claims potentially degrades the sound? (Ironically, as I was preparing this review, I received a call from an importer of a very expensive Japanese phono preamp that includes the variable EQ feature. The designer's research told him that, even among labels adopting the RIAA curve, there are variables that affect the sound.)

Nonetheless, Audio Research — and most other electronics manufacturers offering premium-priced phono sections — have focused their attention on the difficult task of getting the RIAA curve right and leaving it at that. FM Acoustics is one of the few companies to offer variable EQ in its phono sections; owners of large collections of pre-RIAA LPs and 78s should consider a variable-EQ unit.

For the rest of us, though, there's this end-of-millennium gift to chew on: a 14-tube, no-compromise phono section from one of America's premier high-end electronics manufacturers. Review time well spent!

**Description:** Vacuum-tube phono preamplifier. Tube complement: eleven 6922/E88CC, one 5AR4, one 6L6GC, one 6992 in power supply. Frequency response/RIAA accuracy: ±0.15dB of RIAA, 10Hz–60kHz; 3dB points below 1Hz and above 250kHz. Voltage gain: 48dB (low), 69dB (high) at 1kHz. Input impedance: 280 ohms (High Gain); 47k ohms (Low Gain). Hum and noise: 0.56μV equivalent input noise, IHF weighted, shorted (low gain) input (65dB ref. 1mV 1kHz input); 0.05μV equivalent input noise (high gain) (65dB ref. 0.1mV 1kHz input). Distortion: 0.005% at 500mV RMS output at 1kHz. Output impedance: 200 ohms unbalanced. Recommended load: 50k–100k ohms in parallel with 100pF (10k ohms minimum and 2nF maximum). Rated output capability: 500mV RMS (10Hz–60kHz) into 100k ohms (maximum output capability is 5V RMS output at 0.5% THD at 1kHz).

**Dimensions:** 19" W by 7" H by 15.5" D. Weight: 28 lbs.

**Serial number of unit reviewed:** 99001620.

**Price:** $6495. Approximate number of dealers: 60.

**Manufacturer:** Audio Research, 5740 Green Circle Drive, Minnetonka, MN 55343-4424. Tel: (612) 939-0600. Fax: (612) 939-0604. Web: www.audioresearch.com.
ultra-low voltages produced by some moving-coil phono cartridges, the Reference uses a pair of premium Jensen transformers to give the High Gain input an impressive 69dB of gain (63dB is available as a factory-installed option) with ultra-low noise specs—and no transistors in the signal path. The Low Gain input, which bypasses the transformers, gives 48dB of gain (43dB is available as a factory-installed option). Both inputs are compatible with moving-coils, and while AR gives you a guide as to which input to use with an MC cartridge of given output, some models will fall in between, in which case use the input that sounds best.

Eleven dual-triode 6922 (6DJ8) tubes handle the amplification. Passive HF equalization is applied to the first group of tubes, while the LF boost is achieved through an active feedback circuit. According to Larson, this design achieves the “best balance overall, but it requires more tubes.” The tube count improves the sound, according to Larson, because each tube is not working as hard, and the number allows for more cathode followers, which give better isolation and improved high-frequency response.

I asked Larson why 6922s and not the other obvious choice, 12AX7s. In his opinion the 6922 sounds better, has lower noise and microphonic, and is a more consistent performer [and, of course, Audio Research has a long history with the 6DJ8 tube and its derivatives, such as the 6922, since its SP18 and SP10 preamplifiers of 1984 — Ed.]. Designers using 12AX7s will, of course, beg to differ.

Setup and use

The AR Reference is shipped with the tubes out, packed in foam inside the chassis. The user has to remove 20 Phillips-head sheet-metal screws (AR includes a high-quality screwdriver) to access the inside. There are two vertically mounted circuit boards, one at the front for the power supply and one at the rear, adjacent to the input and output jacks for the EQ and amplification circuitry. Each tube (including all eleven 6922s) bears a label indicating where it should be plugged in, and the tubes are fitted with damping rings (see sidebar). Installation is easy, though you must be careful not to break off or bend any heatsink fins when installing the lower row of tubes. Then it’s time to replace those 20 screws — unless you wish to use the supplied resistors to change the factory-set loading. According to Larson, tube life should be in excess of 4000 hours, so you shouldn’t have to remove the top cover too often.

The low-gain inputs are factory-set for the moving-magnet standard of 47k ohms of resistive loading and 180pF of capacitance. The high-gain input is set for 280 ohms, which might create problems for “true believers” in wide open (47k ohms) MC cartridge loading. For those wishing to further load down the High Gain side, there are posts near the inputs to which you solder the supplied resistors. (Various combinations of these yield 30, 60, 100, 200, and 800 ohms. AR can supply other values.) You can also change the Low Gain’s 47k ohm setting (don’t for MM cartridges), or increase the capacitance.

I have long been as doctrinaire about the need for loading down MC cartridges as some of you probably are about not doing so. Most MC cartridges suffer from rising high-frequency response due to undamped resonances in the audioband. Yet some listeners prefer the “air” and “spaciousness” of an undamped MC.

I’ve had long, involved discussions on this subject with many cartridge and phono-section designers, and, unfortunately, there is no consensus. When I challenged one advocate of 47k ohm

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**Measurements**

The review sample of the Reference phono preamplifier came to my lab via the manufacturer, where they resolved what had been the cause of the occasional noise problem noted by Michael. I reinstalled the tubes and let it break in for about four hours before I did any measurements.

Voltage gain was slightly higher than specified, at 50.9kDB (Low Gain inputs) and 71dB (High Gain). Both are relatively high figures, implying good compatibility with low-output moving-coil cartridges. Depending on the overload margin, however, there might be some problems with very “hot” moving-magnet models. The input impedance was also slightly higher than specified, at 48.5k ohms and 290 ohms, respectively, but the differences are negligible. The output impedance was set at a low 201 ohms. The Reference didn’t invert signal polarity via either input.

Via the Low Gain inputs (fig.1, top traces), the RIAA error was superbly low. However, via the High Gain inputs (fig.1, bottom traces), a slight low-frequency rolloff (-0.5dB at 20Hz) can be seen, as well as a more severe high-frequency one (-3dB at 11kHz). I suspect that this was due to interaction between the Reference’s transformer inputs and the Audio Precision System One with its 25 ohm source impedance. (Typical low-output MCs have a source impedance around one tenth of that figure.) To check, I looked at the Reference’s spectral balance in my own system using my Linn Arkiv cartridge, the pink noise from the Denon Test LP, and an Audio Control SA-3050A h-octave analyzer. The result was as flat as that shown in fig.1 from the Low Gain inputs.

I had some problems measuring both the preamplifier’s noise levels and the crosstalk. Physically tying the inputs to ground with an RCA shorting plug gave superbly low noise levels, and channel separation that remained above 80dB over most of the audio band. Fig.2, for example, shows a spectral analysis of the Low Gain inputs’ noise floors referenced to 5mV at 1kHz, this equivalent to a signal/noise ratio of 87dB measured over a wide (10Hz-500kHz) bandwidth. However, instead of shorting...
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loading to view on an oscilloscope the rising high-end frequency response of an undamped MC cartridge — proof to me of the need for loading — he responded that he could prove to me that even the best 'scopes ring under such test conditions, thus rendering the results essentially meaningless. [All oscilloscopes can be adjusted not to ring on square waves, so I am a little puzzled by this argument. — Ed.]

Most of the people with whom I spoke conclude that to load or not to load is more a matter of trial and error and of cartridge/phono-section interaction than anything else. So, all true believers in 47k ohm loading for low-output MCs: Before you dismiss this gem as "unacceptable" because it forces you to load your expensive little treasure down to 280 ohms ... read on.

With separate Low Gain and High Gain inputs selectable via a switch mounted between the two, you can have two turntables connected to the Reference simultaneously. Of course, there's IEC jack, so you can play with power cords. (I used an Electra Glide Reference Fatboy.) Front-panel controls include On/Off, Operate/Standby, Stereo/Mono, and Operate/Mute.

It takes at least an hour from power up for the Reference to sound its best, so leaving the unit on and in Standby mode is a good way to go if you don't want to wait the hour. In that position, voltage is applied only to the tube heaters. You save tube life, yet the unit is partially warmed up. Moving from Standby to Operate, there's about a 30-second auto mute before you can begin playback. To avoid potentially dangerous thumps, the Mute switch should be activated whenever you lower or raise the pickup arm or change the input.

Sound

While no acute listener will ever mistake the Audio Research Reference for the PH3 or PH3 SE, all three phono preamps are cut from the same basic cloth.

While no acute listener will ever mistake the Audio Research Reference for the PH3 or PH3 SE, all three phono preamps are cut from the same basic cloth. take the Audio Research Reference for the PH3 or PH3 SE, all three phono preamps are cut from the same basic cloth. That's a good thing — consistency is the mark of a surefooted company. If you object to the PH3's overall tonal balance as being too open, or even bright, you might not like the Ref's sound. Conversely, if you've listened to a great-sounding phono section at the other end of the sonic spectrum — Conrad-Johnson's Premier 15, for example — and found it too dark, stuffy, bloomy, and noisy, the Ref might just be your ticket to analog happiness.

The Reference can handle very-low-output MC cartridges, such as the new Transfiguration Temper Supreme (0.2mV, see this issue's "Analog Corner"), and deliver both dead-silent backgrounds and a sense of unrestricted dynamics — with, of course, gain to spare. Credit the use of step-up transformers for this level of quiet with 69dB of gain.

That said, I did encounter one annoying buzzing sound on the High Gain setting using both the very-low-output Temper Supreme and Parnassus D.C.t cartridges. Although it sounded like a grounding problem, I was unable to eliminate it with a cheater plug or anything else I tried. And it was only on

### Measurements

RCA plugs, I connected the Audio Precision's grounded outputs to the preamplifier with 6' of shielded Canare cable. Though this is theoretically identical in electrical terms, peaks in the noise now appeared at 16kHz and 32kHz. It turned out that the Reference was picking up this noise from a television that had been left switched on but without an input signal in the Stereophile lab. These noise peaks were visible as HF hash on the oscilloscope display. I suspect that the Reference is susceptible to picking up stray RFI on its inputs. This means that while some cartridge and interconnect combinations might work well, others will be more problematic.

Despite the low measured noise floor in fig.2, what noise was present was of very low frequency, and visible as a slight "bounce" in the trace on the 'scope screen. As a result, running a THD percentage vs frequency sweep at a moderate 2.9mV/1kHz reference level into the Low Gain inputs gave what appeared to be an alarming amount of distortion (fig.3, top pair of traces). But almost all of this measured percentage is due to the contribution of the noise; the actual distortion level is much lower. Repeating the measurement at a 10x higher 29mV/1kHz reference level (fig.3, middle traces) revealed that the distortion hovered between 0.1% and 0.2% over most of the audio band, rising only in the high treble and above due to the lack of overload margin at this very high input level.

Surprisingly, the Reference was slightly more linear via the Jensen transformers (fig.3, bottom traces). Fig.4 shows the spectrum of a 50Hz sinewave input to the High Gain RCA jacks at a level (equivalent to 10V out). The highest-level harmonic appears to be the second at 100Hz, which lies at ~70dB, which is appropriately low.

However, the graph is confusing: most of the peaks that can be seen are not harmonics. The very-low-level peaks that can be seen at 120Hz and 180Hz are supply-related spuriae, for example. But two peaks are apparent between 120Hz and 180Hz, one of them as expected at 150Hz, the third harmoni...
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Mr. Gayle Martin Sanders, president and founder of MartinLogan, will join us in unveiling and demonstrating the Prodigy for the first time in New England. Probing questions will be answered; good music will be heard; fun will be had.

Goodwin's High End 781-893-9000
the High Gain setting, so it seemed unlikely to be a grounding problem. Nor was there any other source of hum near the transformers.

At the end of the review period I returned the unit to Audio Research. A factory modification to the grounding circuitry (included in all future production) eliminated the buzz which apparently occurred with only a few low-output MC cartridges. Owners of pre-modification units who encounter the problem when switching to a new cartridge should contact Audio Research for the update.

If you’re worried about hardness or ringing from the transformers, you needn’t—these are not inherent sonic characteristics of step-up transformers. Whatever the resonant frequency of these Jensens, it is obviously way out of the audioband.

The 6922 tube has a signature sound (as does the 12AX7); if you know it, you’re halfway to knowing the basic sound of the Ref without a personal audition—or reading this review, for that matter. The 6922 does not sound “tubeey”; it’s a wide-band, low-noise, relatively neutral device, and that is the overall tonal balance of the Reference phono preamp, though the character of that sound is in the ear of the beholder.

If you want “bloomy” and “lush,” you’ll have to look elsewhere. If you want “plush,” you’ll get plenty of that with the Ref. By “plush,” I mean a tactile rendering of instrumental attack that was fast and detailed without ever sounding hard or etched. The Reference exuded a relaxed, top-to-bottom case without sounding sluggish, congested, timid, or husky—even as it portrayed macrodynamics with breathtaking authority.

The PH3 SE, good as it is, cannot match, among other attributes, the Ref’s overall tonal neutrality; its airy, extended, yet tetch-free highs; its ability to sort out individual instruments on the soundstage (particularly toward the rear); or the ease with which it unraveled instrumental lines and portrayed impossibly low-level microdynamics gradations without clogging up the sonic picture—one of its most important sonic achievements. After hearing the Reference, the PH3 SE’s consistent midrange bloom, while

Measurements

c of the test signal at about 84dB down. The fourth harmonic, at 200Hz, can also be seen, at exactly -100dB. But there is a peak present at 162Hz, another peak 54Hz higher at 212Hz, and another at 266Hz, again a gap of 54Hz.

I have no idea what these peaks are due to, but I couldn’t remove them no matter how I fooled around with grounding or different physical test-gear arrangements. Color me puzzled.

Finally, figs.5 and 6 show the Reference’s THD+noise percentage plotted against output voltage for the Low Gain and High Gain inputs, respectively. As I mentioned in connection with fig.3, it is actually infrasonic noise that most contributes to the measured distortion figure. That noise dominates the low-level readings is revealed by the downward-sloping nature of all the traces in these two graphs: as the signal level increases, the noise becomes a correspondingly smaller proportion of that level. The minima in these curves actually indicate the point where true distortion makes its presence known, which for the 20Hz and 1kHz traces is between 10V and 20V output!

The lowest distortion on both inputs is achieved at 20Hz. But note that these graphs confirm that the Reference has less dynamic range at 20kHz than it does at lower frequencies. In the midrange and above, the Reference has very high overload margins. At 1kHz, the Low Gain input doesn’t clip until 26.4dB above the 5mV reference level, while the High Gain input is almost as good at 25.6dB. At 20Hz, the relevant overload margins are 26dB and 24.6dB, respectively. But at 20kHz, these excellent margins drop to 12dB (Low Gain) and 14.3dB (High Gain). This will not be a problem with conventional or low-output moving-coil cartridges. Use the High Gain input for ultra-low-output models, and the Low Gain input for MCs that you suspect are “hot.” But the Low Gain input is marginal for use with high-output moving-magnets, I feel. Fortunately, it’s unlikely that the Reference will be used with such cartridges.

—John Atkinson
Progressive Audio and Gayle Sanders are proud to introduce the Prodigy. With breakthrough advances in both electrostatic and dynamic driver implementation, this new Martin Logan loudspeaker promises a revelation in a room friendly size.

attractive, sounds like a slight coloration or congestion.

The Ref didn't bloom in the midrange, but delivered convincingly rich instrumental harmonics in that all-important area while more accurately revealing the essential sonic nature of the recordings it reproduced. Yet some listeners may well be left unmoved by the Ref's midband performance because it isn't "bloomy."

There was never a trace of hardness or congestion from this phono preamp. Nor did it err in the opposite direction with an overly soft, ripe presentation. With its vanishingly low noise floor and superior microdynamic delivery, the Reference was, in my listening experience, the champion at resolving inner detail, doing so without spotlighting or highlighting. Details were just there.

I've listened to Nat King Cole's Live at The Sands (Capitol SMAS 2434) a hundred times. I thought I knew every applause, whistle, and vocal outburst on the record. Yet through the Ref I heard a few raucous tables in the back of the club that till now had gone missing in action. More important, details of Cole's fabulous piano playing — his right hand in particular — that had formerly been lost in the haze of what sounds like post-production artificial reverb, were also now there, right below his voice. And the timbre of the piano's upper octaves was fleshed out more effectively than I've ever heard.

The Reference's tonal neutrality, clarity, background quiet, and seemingly unrestricted bass response and dynamics gave it the ability to delineate, more clearly than I've ever experienced, the differences not only between familiar cartridges, but also between new ones under review: the touch of bass emphasis imparted by the EMT TU-2, the slight dynamic constriction of the far more tonally neutral Crown Jewel SE, the Grado Statement's romantic upper-midrange "warm zone" and slight lack of low-bass definition and extension. The Reference revealed more of the cartridges it was amplifying and less of itself.

Give this phono preamp the best source material, such as Classic Records' 45rpm reissues of Belafonte at Carnegie Hall (LSO 6006-45) or The Royal Ballet (LDS 6065-45), and it will distinguish itself from the rest of the pack by its seemingly unrestricted dynamic range, bass control and extension, its ability to separate instruments in space and portray them as three-dimensional entities, and its complete freedom from amusical artifacts. This phono section behaves.

Will the Audio Research Reference phono section be the ticket for every analog lover? Inevitably, no. One man's neutrality is another's stingy midband. Some may prefer a more taut, less volupitous bass line (though no one could ask for better extension), or crisper transients, or less extension on top. Some may prefer a slightly more lush overall presentation, or one with more weight on the bottom, or an overall greater sense of solidity. This is one phono preamp that, with its ultra-high gain and wide dynamic range, can handle resistive loading. I would urge anyone buying it to try 100 ohms if the 280 ohm setting isn't warm or rich enough. For my tastes, with either the Sonus Faber Arnati Homages or the Audio Physic Virgos, I found the 280 ohm factory setting just about right with either the Temper Supreme or the Parnassus D.Ct cartridge.

Overall, the Reference is among the most effectively balanced products I've ever heard. It holds together extremely well, never letting its seams show. If it has any glaring weaknesses or deficiencies, I didn't discover them. Its ability to pass on the sonic character of the cartridge it is amplifying was unmatched in my listening experience.

**Conclusion**

In my July 1999 review of the Conrad-Johnson Premier 15, I wrote: "you'll find some phono preamps that are somewhat quieter, some that offer slightly greater transparency, a few that deliver a shade more extension at the frequency extremes or are better able to resolve low-level detail and perhaps yield slightly greater depth — but few will be as well-balanced and musically satisfying as the Conrad-Johnson Premier 15."

Well, the Audio Research Reference offers all of those things: more quiet, greater transparency, more extension at the frequency extremes, and better resolution of low-level detail. Yet the first
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few weeks I spent with the Ref were underwhelming. Its lack of "character" left me unimpressed. I looked for greater excitement. I expected it to pass on to me heretofore hidden musical truths from my system and my favorite music. I waited for it to break in and bowl me over, blow me away. I waited for it to stop time.

It never did. Over time, though, I came to recognize that the Reference's greatness was in its ability to let through, unimpeded, what was coming from the cartridge connected to it. The sonic step up from, say, a Clavis D.C. to a Parnassus D.C.t was revealed to be far greater through the Ref than I'd previously experienced with any other phono section. The Ref's bass extension and dynamics, while setting new performance standards in my listening experience, revealed their greatness only with a cartridge capable of pushing those boundaries. In short, the Reference added nothing.

Before and during the review period, there were many upheavals in my system and in my life: I reviewed the most expensive loudspeakers and amplifiers I've ever had in my system, the Sonus Faber Amati Homages ($20,000) — and I bought them. I reviewed the $25,000 KR Enterprise VT8000MK amplifiers — clearly the finest amps I've ever heard. And I moved to a new, larger listening room.

Through all of this I had the Reference and my reference: the phono section built into the Ayre K-1. Before completing this review, I made sure to refer back to the Ayre, and to put my previous reference loudspeakers, the Audio Physic Virgos, back in the system. (I've since sold the Virgos, but consider them to be one of the best hi-fi investments I ever made.)

I did not confuse the superior performance of the Amatis or the KR amps with what I was hearing from the AR Reference. Much to my chagrin, in comparison to the $6500 Ref, the Ayre's built-in $1600 phono stage — a really fine performer — sounded smaller, dynamically constricted, and tonally and texturally incomplete. Given the price difference, why should I have expected anything else?

I've gone back to reviews I've written of other phono sections and found some of the same words and phrases I've used to extol the virtues of the Reference. Yet from where I sit now, the Ref's performance is probably superior in most regards. Without having all of those products here now to listen to on my current system, it's hard to be sure. In the final analysis, taste plays a major role here. Though it has less gain and is noisier overall, some may prefer the C-J 15's emotional portrayal of the music.

The only product that I still think betterers the Reference is no longer available: Peter Mares' Connoisseur, a $10,000 hand-built, solid-state unit with point-to-point wiring. That phono section made time stand still. But who knows what it would sound like in my current system? Ah, the vagaries of the review process...

In any case, the Audio Research Reference is a serious contender for the best phono preamplifier currently available. It certainly is among the very best, and an impressive achievement. If AR chooses to make the Reference its last statement on analog sound reproduction, the company will have gone digital on a very high note.

— Michael Fremer
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Accuphase M-2000 monoblock power amplifier & P-1200 Clean Power Supply

Just after I agreed to review the Accuphase M-2000 monoblocks, importer Arturo Manzano began urging me to take the Accuphase P-1200 Clean Power Supply as well.

"Arturo, who's gonna pay $27k for a pair of monoblocks, then another $8200 for a power conditioner?"

He looked at me as if I was making a bad joke. I often do.

"That's a trick question, right, J-107? Uh... all of them?"

That gave me something to think about. If occasionally you wonder just who in the world is buying this ultra-ultra stuff, consider that there must be enough of them to keep these manufacturers turning it out! That, and the manufacturers' desire (which most seem to harbor) to build cost-no-object state-of-the-art products that embody their best efforts. Then there's the trickle-down factor: In the High End, improvements at the $27k level very quickly flow back down the line into $2700 gear.

So let's turn our beady-eyed attentions to the device in question: the Accuphase M-2000 monoblock. And, yes, the P-1200 Clean Power Supply.

$27,000 build considerations

"Yeah, and for that price," I hear you hummin', "it better be made outta gold."

Actually, the M-2000 is built to a very high specification. When the Japanese are into something, they're into it.

The M-2000 monoblocks punch out a claimed 2000W into 1 ohm, 1000W into 2 ohms, 500W into 4 ohms, or 250W into 8 ohms. If you're power-hungry—and, let's face it, these are power-hungry times—the M-2000 can be run bridged for four times the power delivery. A bridged pair per side yield 4000W into 2 ohms, 2000W into 4 ohms, and 1000W into 8 ohms. However, being a person of modest demeanor, I made do with but a single pair.

The M-2000 is strictly a class-AB amp: no wasted energy. It did, however, become fairly toasty after a hard evening's listening session, and idled warm to the touch. The amplifier is powered by a huge 1.6kVA toroidal power transformer. Accuphase reminds us that toroids offer low impedance, efficient operation, and "compact size." I don't know what they're talkin' about: The M-2000's Super Ring transformer is HUGE! It features a near-circular core and circular windings, offering a

M-2000: Solid-state monoblock power amplifier with analog output level meter featuring logarithmic scale (~60dB to 3dB and directly in watts). Continuous average output power, 20Hz~20kHz: 250W into 8 ohms (24dBW), 500W into 4 ohms (24dBW), 1000W into 2 ohms (24dBW). THD: 0.05% with 2 ohm load, 0.03% with 4-16 ohm load. Intermodulation distortion: 0.003%. Frequency response: at rated continuous average output, 20Hz~20kHz, +0/-0.2dB; at 1W output, 0.5Hz~160kHz, +0/-30dB. Voltage gain: 28.0dB. Damping factor: 400. Input impedance, balanced: 40k ohms unbalanced, 20k ohms balanced. Input sensitivity: 1.78V for rated continuous average output, 110mV for 1W output. S/N ratio (A-weighted): 120dB with input shorted, ref. rated continuous average output. Power consumption: 180W idle, 950W in accordance with IEC-65.


Serial numbers of units reviewed: L7Y033, L7Y034.

Price: $27,000/pair.


Dimensions: 18 1/8" W by 9 5/8" H by 20" D. Weight: 82 lbs net, 103 lbs shipping.

Serial number of unit reviewed: E8YS27.

Price: $8200.

Both: Approximate number of dealers: 25.

Manufacturer: Accuphase, Japan. US distributor: Axiss Distribution Inc., 17800 S. Main St., Suite 109, Gardena, CA 90248. Tel: (310) 329-0187. Fax: (310) 329-0189.
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high packing density resulting in low flux leakage and reduced vibration.” In addition, Accuphase explains, the smaller diameter of the ferrite core and the copper windings with “high specific gravity” make for low magnetic losses and low inrush currents.

The incoming balanced signal is connected directly to inverting and non-inverting input stages for true differential operation. The “modular construction” output stage features newly developed high-power transistors that Accuphase says have excellent high-frequency response, current amplification linearity, and switching characteristics. Couldn’t find much from the documentation about what lay between the input and output stages, but there I found 22 output devices configured in parallel push-pull configuration mounted directly to big aluminum heatsinks.

The M-2000’s feedback loop uses signal current rather than voltage. Accuphase describes it thus: “At the sensing point of the feedback loop, the impedance is kept low and current detection is performed. An impedance-converting amplifier then converts the current into a voltage to be used as the feedback signal. Since the impedance at the current feedback point is very low, there is almost no phase shift. ‘Heavy feedback,’ with all its associated disadvantages, is no longer required. Phase compensation can be kept to a minimum, resulting in excellent transient response and superb sonic transparency.” You know they were staying up late sweating the details.

Last but not least, every millimeter of the signal path is gold-plated. That includes the copper traces on the circuit.

**Measurements**

A full set of measurements was taken in the Accuphase M-2000’s balanced mode, with selected measurements repeated in the unbalanced configuration. Unless otherwise noted, the measurements presented here are of balanced operation.

Following the M-2000’s \( \frac{1}{3} \)-power, one-hour preconditioning test, its heatsinks were merely warm. The input impedance measured 49.4k ohms (24.4k ohms unbalanced). The output impedance was extremely low 0.035 ohm at 1kHz, increasing to a measured maximum of 0.038 ohm at 20Hz into an 8 ohm load, and 0.063 ohm at 20kHz into 4 ohms. Such low values indicate that the amplifier’s frequency response into actual loudspeaker impedances should be the same.

The amplifier’s voltage gain into 8 ohms measured 28dB as specified, balanced and unbalanced. DC offset fluctuated between 0.0 and 0.1mV — essentially unmeasurable. Signal to noise (ref. 1W into 8 ohms) measured 95.2dB over a 22Hz–22kHz bandwidth and 88.1dB over 10Hz–500kHz, both unweighted, and 97.4dB A-weighted. The corresponding unbalanced S/N measurements were 93.7dB, 87.5dB, and 95.6dB.

The M-2000 is noninverting from its unbalanced input. In balanced mode, pin 3 is positive. (The normal AES convention is pin 2 positive, but many Japanese products, and a few others, choose to make pin 3 positive. If the rest of your components are pin-3 positive, the signal fed to the speakers will not be inverted. If only the M-2000 is pin-3 positive, the output will be inverted.)

Fig.1 shows the M-2000’s frequency response. It is very flat across most of the audible range, with an audibly insignificant rise of less than 0.2dB from 20kHz to 30kHz. The unbalanced response (not shown) was essentially identical. The small-signal 10kHz squarewave response in fig.2 is respectable. There is a slight overshoot at the leading edge, but no ringing, and a good risetime. The overshoot is also visible in the otherwise excellent 1kHz squarewave performance (not shown).

The THD+noise vs frequency result (fig.3) shows exceptionally low distortion below 10kHz, with some increase at higher frequencies. The only exception is into a 2 ohm load, where the distortion rises significantly at high frequencies, if still to only slightly above 0.1% — arguably, an audibly insignificant level. To get a recognizable distortion waveform out of the noise, I had to use a higher output level than normal.

Fig.4, at 20W into 2 ohms, indicates that the distortion is predominantly third-order, though higher-order components are also present. The result is similar at 10W into 4 ohms (not shown), though the noise is more evident due to the lower level of the distortion. At 20W into 8 ohms (not shown) the predominant harmonic becomes second-order, with some evidence of higher-order harmonics plus noise.

The M-2000’s output spectrum to a 50Hz input at 335W output into 4 ohms is shown in fig.5. This is a superb result, all of the distortion components...
Mr. Gayle Martin Sanders, founder and president of MartinLogan will introduce and demonstrate his revolutionary Prodigy speaker system in its New York Premier at Stereo Exchange.

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boards, the bus bars on the ground plane, and the power transistors, input jacks, and speaker terminals. See? It is made outa gold.

Each M-2000 is about the size and density of a YBA Passion monoblock—Sunno wrestler substantial, but not outrageously huge or heavy. The chassis and heatsinks are clad in attractive, dark-brown Nextel, and thus ringeth not. There's a nice tactile quality about them, the subtly textured finish adding a touch of class to the thick, burnished, golden-hued faceplate and handles. Reinforcing the Lush Life image, the action of the Meter On and front-mounted Power On buttons is nicely weighted.

The M-2000's rear apron is bracketed by a second set of grab-bars for easy schlep-page. Each amp weights 110 lbs, so I found the bars a civilized and welcome touch. Between them are a huge pair of...knobs. (Where's Bill Maher when you need him?) These huge, robust, custom-made speaker terminals were easy to use; they're made of extruded, high-purity brass, and gold-plated (isn't everything?). The large, easy-to-grip molded plastic caps made a breeze of tightening down even the most willful and ornery of cables. (Really, some of them are like mythical serpents!) The capacious "insertion passage" (a-hem) between the supporting posts and the screw-down cap lets even the largest spade-lugs settle in comfortably.

The rest of the rear panel reflects the engineering aesthetic so endemic to Japanese culture, as Desmond Morris might point out. There are single-ended (lateral) and balanced (XLR) input connectors, with an associated input selector and polarity switch. In its uninverted

---

**Measurements**

are well below -90dB (0.003%). Measuring the intermodulation products resulting from an input signal consisting of an equal combination of 19kHz and 20kHz (fig.6), also at 335W into 4 ohms, proved an exercise of equal frustration: All of the artifacts are at or below -80dB (0.01%). The same is true for the measurement taken at 168W into 8 ohms (not shown).

The 1kHz, THD+noise percentage vs power curves for the M-2000 are shown in fig.7. Because of the amplifier's extremely high power output and the limitations of our test load, no attempt was made to measure the M-2000's continuous power into 2 ohms. The amplifier clipped (1% THD+noise at 1kHz) at 439W (26.4dBW) into 8 ohms (114V line), and at 774W (25.9dBW) into 4 ohms (112V line).

John Atkinson used the Miller Amplifier Profiler to examine the M-2000's output power on a slow-duty-cycle 1kHz toneburst, which is more like a typical music waveform. The results are shown in fig.8. Specified at a continuous 250W into 8 ohms, the Accuphase actually didn't clip until 524W (black trace), with 1007W available into 4 ohms (red), 1938W (blue), and 3602W (green)! The distortion level remained low into all these loads until reaching the distortion "knee." (Note that these figures are a little higher than implied by fig.3; this is because JA had to use a line preamplifier to get enough signal to drive the M-2000 fully into clip.)

The Accuphase M-2000's test-bench measurements were outstanding, the only possible exceptions being the slight squarewave overshoot and the distortion into a 2 ohm load—and those stand out not because they're particularly bad, but only because of the exceptional performance surrounding them in all other respects.

—Thomas J. Norton
state, the M-2000 adheres to the rather arcane standard of pin 3 hot, pin 2 neutral; unless you're running a full Accuphase system, you'll want to run it inverted. When I ran the amps uninveted, ie, 180° out of absolute phase, the sound darkened a bit, extension at both ends suffered, and imaging was less precise. An L/R Channel Selector switch can be left in either position for the present; a digital input module is planned for the future. Lastly, there's a standard IEC AC fitting with a 20A circuit breaker in the line.

Up front, the M-2000 is "very luxurious," as K-10 described it. The substantial, beautifully finished faceplate is set off by a large peak-reading power meter "under glass." The look is classy and upscale. I did most of my critical listening with the meters off, but did check them initially while getting to know the amps — what I saw wasn't always what I got. To some extent, the meter reading must be interpreted in terms of the speaker load. The meter is calibrated in decibels and watts referenced to a 2 ohm load: -60dB to 3dB. If your speaker presents a 4 ohm load, halve the reading; with an 8 ohm load, quarter it. Einstein was right: everything's relative. After a while, I just turned 'em off.

**Accuphase specs the M-2000 at a continuous average power of 1000W into 2 ohms, 500W into 4 ohms, and 250W into 8 ohms.**

Peering into the M-2000's décolletage through its mesh top, I was struck by the size of the central-mounted Super Ring power transformer, surrounded by sleek, black, soda-can-sized capacitors.

When I backed up to consider their general form, the plush-looking M-2000s exuded a confident, refined, handsome aspect — in the Japanese idiom, one might say.

**Neither a headbanger nor a wussy be**

Accuphase specs the M-2000 at a continuous average power of 1000W into 2 ohms! Into the JMLab Utopias (3.3-6 ohms), the amps must yield something on the order of 325-350Wpc-plus headroom. And, relatively speaking, that's how they sounded.

Listening to Kruder and Dorfneister's The K&D Sessions (K7 K7073), I normally get off on the deep, powerful bass crunches that take off and pound down the alley. For best effect, an amplifier has to pump out a solid foundation, on which the enveloping sound-stage and vocals can be built. Listening carefully, I tracked through this great two-CID set at room-pulsing levels, the M-2000s putting their broadest shoulders to the task. The result was power and control in the bass near in quality to the Forsell Statement, itself good for about 350W into a load of 4-6 ohms. The bass was good, nicely pitch-differentiated, quite deep-going, fairly well controlled, and just transparent enough to get away with its slight plumminess. The Linn Klimax, monoblock, specified at 500Wpc into 4 ohms, gets the power transfer just right and sounds altogether more tight, snappy, and tuneful.

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**Accuphase P-1200 Clean Power Supply**

W
ingning in at 82 lbs and $8200, this is one serious power conditioner. It resembles the M-2000 in general form, though with a simpler chassis. Up front, a small, round, elegant meter is set into the golden faceplate, along with a meter-setting switch and a substantial on/off toggle.

Accuphase claims the following feature set for the P-1200: AC voltage stabilization based on Waveform Shaping technology, superior Waveform Compensating Power, excellent current capability, and highly effective interference rejection. Basically, like the PS Audio Power Plant reviewed in December 1999 by Robert Deutsch, the P-1200 regenerates clean 60Hz AC to power the components plugged into it. There are four high-quality, three-prong AC receptacles on the rear panel above an IEC mains receptacle. Up front, just below the faceplate, sits an additional pair of receptacles for easy cable routing. Turn it on, the meter lights up, and a three-second delay allows all circuits to stabilize.

The meter displays output power, input/output voltage, or input/output waveform distortion. Output power is shown in watts for convenience, but in fact shows the consumption of all connected components, expressed in volt-amperes (VA). Normally power is expressed in watts (W), calculated by multiplying voltage (V) by current (A). For DC, Accuphase points out, the formula W=VA is fine for representing actual power consumption. But in the AC (alternating current) universe, it's more complex: power supplies aren't purely resistive, and, because of the effects of capacitors and coils, there are always reactance components to deal with.

Most audio gear indicates its effective power draw in watts, but the P-1200 indicates the actual voltage and current draw, which Accuphase calls "apparent power," or VA ("applied" voltage multiplied by current flow). As a result, the reading may be higher than the power draw in watts as specified for the various components connected to the P-1200. The moral: Leave some headroom. In any case, as the name implies, you're good for around 1200W.

Front-end components remained powered by a Power Wedge Ultra 116, or direct into our dual-quad 20 amp hospital-grade sockets. Using the P-1200 as a dedicated power conditioner for the M-2000s, I left its selector turned to "watts" and noted that, as suggested in the manual, the reading bounced around with volume. I was, however, surprised at how steady and unruffled the P-1200 proved when powering the M-2000s; my ears gave out way before the P-1200 even thought of yelling "uncle." Of course, the JMLab Utopias are a relatively efficient load (in the low 90dBs); your mileage may vary.

If you're using more components and asking too much of the P-1200, "the power switch/circuit breaker will start to resonate, and a humming noise may be heard." Mi-mi-mi-mi-mi... unplug that last component! If you're within its bounds, you can use the P-1200's power switch to turn other gear on and off. If you exceed the limit during play, a circuit breaker closes the show until the fault is cleared or the offending component removed. The unit incorporates a current limiter so power surges won't bobble it, and if DC is sensed in the output, the limiter slams shut so that the DC won't get into connected components.

It was interesting to compare...
When I listened to the involved, meandering acoustic bass intro on "Use Me," from Patricia Barber's *Companion* (Pentimento/Blue Note 5 22963 2), the Accuphase proved somewhat less "gritty" and authoritative, a bit softer, with less overall impact and dynamics, than the Linn. Not ponderous by any means—it could sound huge and encompassing—but less lите, quick, and pitch-differentiated than the wee Scots tykes. Understand, the M-2000 was anything but wimpy. But in HyperExpense Super-Amp Land, I like it the Linn way: tight, tuneful, and fast, bay-bee.

So—getting beyond the lighter, slightly less punchy bass that my spoiled self has become accustomed to, I nevertheless found much to enjoy in "Use Me"'s superb acoustic bass intro. It was rich, deep, satisfying, and involving, the full harmonics not sounding so vibrant as to muddy the waters. In general, with a wide variety of material, the *basse profonde* always sounded under control, finely turned and intricate, never bloated or excessive: not bombastic, but subtle.

The profile of the typical M-2000 owner will likely include an appreciation of nuance, elegance, and style—most emphatically not a headbanger, but a midrange-loving sort more Beta than Alpha. If you're looking for a rich, lush tapestry in the mids—where the music lives, they say—and you don't want to bother with tubes (a misguided sentiment, in my view), then look no further than a pair of these. That is, if you can handle the freight.

The M-2000 delivered what I'll call the New Midrange: not thick, euphonic, or glazed-over, but rendered whole by the sheer quantity and quality of information. The natural, unforced detail allowed harmonics to develop, bloom, and fade to black. In that way, the M-2000 was YBA-like, a touch Zen and serene in its presentation, like a tranquil contemplation garden. The midband worked its magic on everything from the lush-sounding "Casino" on *Run Lola Run* (TVT Soundtrax 8220-2) to the gorgeous, flutey flute in Debussy's *Prélude à l'après midi d'un faune*, and his Cello Sonata 1 (*Musique de chambre*, Calliope CAL 9837). During the *Sérénade*, I fell under the spell of the delicacy and shimmer of the strings as they spoke eloquently of mystery and romance. It all hung together beautifully, finely crafted and inviting.

Continuing my search for meaningful midrange, I spun my favorite tracks from *Cellissimo* (DG 439 863-2). We'll overlook the unbelievable group that some insane art director must have coerced cellist Mischa Maisky to wear—if only for the manifest skill and soul with which he invests the works of Bach, Handel, Schubert, Schumann, Debussy, and Bloch, among others. I luxuriated in the sound, letting the intimate ambiance and rich, burnished tonalities overcome me. Heady stuff.

Fanciers of female vocals are housed (not exactly) free with these amplifiers.

incoming and outgoing voltages, flipping the meter and watching the AC become serene, calm, and collected. This could easily be seen when looking at the percentage of distortion riding the incoming AC—which, of course, disappears in the output of the P-1200. But having to get down on my chummy, recalitrant knees to peer at the small, fleshy, hummer meter soon made me give up the pastime of Meter Spotting.

Household power lines are often polluted with distortion on the order of 3%, which can result in clipping of the AC waveform. The 0.2% "ideal" waveform produced by the P-1200 makes for a clean, well-shaped sine wave. Interestingly, one significant cause of clipping is the load reactance of the AC line, "especially as caused by capacitors," Accuphase points out. Here's how they spell it out: In a typical power supply, rectifiers convert AC to DC, and one or several smoothing capacitors store the "pulsating" current. The AC signal is a pulse-type waveform, current flowing only around waveform peaks. Almost no current flows at the rising and falling edges of the waveform, but any resistance (which, Accuphase points out, invariably exists) in the wiring leads to a voltage drop when strong current flows—like at the pulse spikes. And there's your clipping. Though amplifiers suffer this effect, they can, ironically, be seen to be its prime cause!

Clipping adversely affects sound quality because of the unwanted frequency components that are produced. These unwanted harmonics—"impurities," Accuphase calls them—can cause intermodulation distortion, which is experienced as degraded sound quality. As the output waveform of the P-1200 is almost distortion-free, undesirable effects like these are drastically reduced. Presto—better sound.

I used the M-2000s with the P-1200 on the same and on the second leg of positive phase available in our listening area. I listened to the amps directly into the wall supply on the same and on separate phases of positive, and tried that again with API Power Wedge Enhancers in-circuit. After lots of auditioning and note-taking, I wound up preferring the M-2000s plugged into the P-1200, itself plugged into the same leg of positive as the rest of the system, if on its own separate 30 amp line back to the breaker box.

As refinement is the M-2000's middle name, in this case more refinement is better. With the P-1200, the M-2000s sounded "more" in many ways: quiet, expressive, subtle, refined. The bass became a touch tighter and more transparent, the mids flowed even more invitingly than before, the highs were that much more sweet. I achieved a slightly more punchy, more dynamic sound when running the M-2000s from the wall directly, but it was definitely less sweet and refined. I got even more punch using different phases of positive ("Poor Man's Balanced Power," "Fine Tunes," October 1999), and a slightly sweeter, more coherent sound with both amps on the same-positive-phase dual-quad 30A sockets. Going into the wall direct, the API Enhancers made a subtle yet noticeable improvement. In the end, the best, most refined sound was with the M-2000s into the P-1200 on the same phase of positive as the rest of the system. And that's how I reviewed them.

—Jonathan Scull
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a sound experience
The ladies were always rendered extremely palpable and dimensional, lit up from within almost as if by single-ended triodes. Listening to The K&D Sessions again, I was captivated by their seductive sound. While enjoying the pounding Run Lola Run, the English, French, and German vocals physically pulled me into the music, while the entertainingly populated soundstage wrapped around me in the Ribbon Chair. Notes: “It’s a struggle not getting verge! The loft is gone, I’m in the virtual world of filmmaker/composer Tom Tykwer.”

If you’ve a strong romantic streak, the skill with which the M-2000 lays out the babés is just phenomenal. Late one night I went through all three of Patricia Barber’s recordings, enjoying them for the sheer quality and presence of her voice. I was attracted to a highlight in the treble that cut through the rich harmonics and nicely balanced the overall presentation. It was so involving that way.

Male vocals were also finely rendered. Try “Introduction (Remix)” on Lola. It starts with a fantastic, trance-inducing monologue in German that always nailed me to the listening chair. Translation: “Man — the most mysterious species on our planet / A mystery of open questions: / Who are we? / Where do we come from? / Where are we going? / From where do we know what we believe we know? / Why do we believe at all?” (Sounds very audiophile!) The voice was shockingly present and powerfully real, super-ambient and dimensional via the M-2000s. I needed a drink.

Set atop the midrange like crown jewels, the upper midrange and treble tended toward the sweet side of life. If there was any charm at all in a particular recording, I could count on the M-2000 to find it, especially when supplied a quality signal from components like the upsampling dCS gear and the Mark Levinson No.32 preamplifier.

But let’s limn the treble with some vinyl. How ’bout Red & Ross (Concord Jazz CJ-90)? Enjoy the musical conversations between Red Norvo and Ross Tompkins in the middle cuts on each side — they’re almost as fine as that greatest of musical chats, “Rent Party,” from The Timekeepers: Count Basie Meets Oscar Peterson (Pablo 2310-896 and JVC XRCD2). Red’s vibraphone is not nearly as ambient and wet-sounding as most of Milt Jackson’s oeuvre on early Atlantics, but the piano is sharply and beautifully rendered. Red’s background with the wooden-barred xylophone shows through his handling of the vibes in this 1979 recording. He’s a purist, I guess, and doesn’t use motor-driven sustains. It’s a club date and the crowd loves them both — it’s very participatory. The sound was gorgeous and revealing on the M-2000s, especially through the Insid-

If there was any charm at all in a particular recording, I could count on the M-2000 to find it.

Paging George Cardas!

Like any component of high-end pedigree, the M-2000s took time to know and set up correctly, and the fine performance they eventually turned in Chez 10 has a serious caveat attached: They sounded their considerable best only when wired up system-wide with Cardas Golden Reference interconnects — all balanced — and Golden Cross speaker cables. (Designer’s Reference Squared power cords still populated all IEC sockets.) If you own these amps and opt for other than Cardas, I’m sure your dealer will happily supply appropriate wires. All I’m saying is, the Cardas Golden Reference/Gold Cross worked better than anything else on the M-2000s. All other cables imparted an unattractive mechanical, electronic coloration to the sound. Drop the Cardasies in and, ahhhh, now we dance!

George Cardas explains (in his laid-back way, dude) that the top-of-the-line Golden Reference is an extension of his (already excellent) Neutral Reference line. This is New York — it’s a noisy town, lots of RFI. Golden Reference interconnect, $917/m, shrugs it all off with three separate types and layers of shielding. The Golden Reference is claimed to be a low-energy-storage cable with “constant impedance transfer” characteristics. Composite thin-wall tubing surrounds urethane enamel-coated copper Litz conductors, smaller in diameter near the center of the conductor bundle. It sports a low capacitance of 7 pico-farads per foot.

It’s been my observation that cables are voiced, consciously or unconsciously, to mirror the tastes of their makers. Cardas the man talks and sounds just like his cable! George just wants you to enjoy, to let your cares and angst disappear in the flow of the music. In that way, the Golden Reference gave me the color, air, transparency, and liveliness I so much enjoy, while banishing any and all mechanical/electronic effects. Golden Cross speaker cables are, for the record, $1428 per 5’ pair, and perfectly complemented the Golden Reference interconnect in the system.

Cardas cables in place, I discovered a gorgeous palette of tonal colors, even if not presented with the most razor-sharp focus. But at some level of transparency and detail, the magical ingredient gets through and you’ve got music. The Cardas Golden Reference excelled at conducting tiny, finely turned morsels of information that integrated tightly and effortlessly into the weave of the music. It popped the performance out of a quiet noise floor and planted it, fully formed, in our listening space. Relaxed, forgiving, but entirely virtuoso about its work, the Golden Reference can work wonders in the right setup.

— Jonathan Scull
Last week, I was in bed with my wife and she whispered in my ear "what turns you on?" I thought carefully about my answer. "The new Sunfire Theater Grand Mk II. It's truly mondo-cool!" She laughed, "Stop! Now...what REALLY turns you on?" Think man, think. "Uh...the new Ah! Tjoeb 99 CD Player? Five Stars from Audioreview.com!"

According to her, I got two wrong answers. But they're right to me, and this sofa doesn't feel too bad. If you're an occasional sofa-sleeper, you're my kind of audiophile. Here's some more woody material.

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**Digital sources:** dCS 972 D/D converter, dCS Elgar DAC at 24-bit/192kHz; Burmester 969, Forsell Air Reference CD transports.

**Preamplification:** Mark Levinson No.32, BAT VK 50SE, Burmester 808 Mk.V.

**Power amplifiers:** Linn Klimax Solo 500, Forsell Statement, McIntosh MC2000.

**Loudspeakers:** JMLab Utopia.

The M-2000, you might say, was refinement personified. This richness of texture was evident throughout its operating range; it excelled at reproducing finely formed, delicate, nuanced dynamics and tonal shadings. It wasn’t so much the master of detail per se; rather, it seemed to coalesce many finely crafted smaller events into a larger whole. And while I wouldn’t describe the M-2000s as paragons of dynamics or transparency, their soundstage always managed to sound large, airy, and well populated.

**Bottom Line:** Expensive. Sleek. Seductive. Capable. Civilized. Refined. For even greater heights of refinement, at the cost of a smidgen of drive and oomph, add the P-1200 conditioner. In a well thought-out and acoustically tailored system — likely where’s they’d wind up anyway — the M-2000 is highly recommended.

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Rega Planar 3 Class D $595
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"Two synergistic mixes of no-nonsense deck with superb arm (included). Lack of environmental isolation may be problematic (see "Letters" in Vol. 16 No. 10). However, "outstanding performance," MF crowed about the Planar 3. "It's quiet, dynamic... free of obvious tracking distortion or other supposed analog problems, extremely well-balanced top to bottom, offers very deep and reasonably tight bass, and will do no damage to your precious records." Then he threw down his analog gauntlet: "If you're an all-CD kind of audiophile, here's the kicker; I think the Rega 3 will blow your mind, even if you have a very-high-priced spread." Stereophile Rec. Comp. Class D $55 10/99

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B y the end, they'd released over 300 different Original Master Recordings series LPs and 250 Gold Ultradisc CDs. Their eclectic catalog ran from Duke Ellington to Guns N' Roses. And as audiophile remastering triumphs go, they squeezed more rich sound and spacious presence out of Kurt Cobain's masterwork, *Nevermind,* than anyone had ever dreamed possible.

But now, sadly, Mobile Fidelity Sound Lab is no more. (See "Update" also).

"A victim of bigness" is how Jim Benz, former vice president of the 22-year-old reissue label, characterizes what happened to this pioneer of audiophile recordings, which closed on November 19, 1999. "We looked at where we were and where we needed to be to remain current with our suppliers, and it was either we do what we did or wait for people to come after us."

According to Benz, the forces that eventually drove Mobile Fidelity out of business had been coalescing for a while.

"Five years ago we were shipping more product, billing more than ever—the company was having its greatest success. There were more places to buy and sell records: mom-and-pops, local record stores, hi-fi shops, chain record stores and nontraditional retailers, Circuit City, Best Buy, and bookstores like Borders."

"But more places didn't mean you were selling more music. We really didn't need all these outlets. Our product was everywhere, which in marketing terms meant we were also in the same arena as the big boys. Tower Records charged MoFi the same for one cut (an advertising term for each item advertised within a single ad) as it did Time Warner. "At the same time, there was an acceleration of other things to spend your time and money on: the Internet, home theater, computer games."

Already stretched thin, the mostly self-distributed MoFi began to take financial hits from the bankruptcies or closings of retail record chains like Wherehouse, Camelot, and Nobody Beats The Wiz—and, on the wholesale side, the Alliance one stop. The final nail was the sale of M.S. Distributing and the closure of its audio division. In its December 10, 1999 issue, *Billboard* said it had obtained documents that showed that M.S. (based in Hanover Park, Illinois) owed MoFi $128,000. On November 5, 1999, armed with a court order, MoFi reclaimed about $100,000 worth of product from the M.S. warehouse. But it wasn't enough.

"M.S. was our largest debtor," Benz says. "They were 20% of our receivables." Rather than allow the wolves to start howling, the employee-owned MoFi reluctantly decided to call it a day, just as the company's DVD reissues of Merle Saunders and Jerry Garcia's *Blues from the Rainforest* and the SACD of Duke Ellington's *Blues In Orbit* hit the streets.

The powerhouse that would become MoFi began life in 1977 in a garage in Spokane, Washington. Founded by Brad Miller and Gary Giorgi, both of whom have since died, the fledgling venture soon moved to Chatsworth, California, on the outskirts of Los Angeles. In 1980, Herb Belkin, who had been running ABC Records and from whom Miller and Giorgi had licensed several titles, came aboard as president. Five years later, the company moved to Petaluma, in California's Sonoma County, before finally settling in nearby Sebastopol in 1991. Belkin retired from MoFi in 1994.

The first four Mobile Fidelity releases were music that Brad Miller owned. Three featured the dreamy stylings of the Mystic Moods Orchestra, and the fourth was a sound-effects disc of thunderstorms and steam locomotives. Initially, the discs were sold via audio hardware dealers, but soon mom'n'pop record stores climbed aboard, followed—ominously, as it turned out—by the big chain record stores.

According to Jim Benz, the philosophy behind MoFi's remasterings of previously issued LPs and CDs was always "to re-create the experience that sound engineers or artists have in the studio."

"We spawned a slew of imitators," he says. "But I can honestly say that none of them went to the lengths that MoFi did. We used original master tapes, half-speed mastering, protective packaging in the form of rice-paper sleeves, and we pressed on a special vinyl that was developed for quadraphonic sound by JVC. It had anti-static properties and was relatively noise-free."

It was this vinyl—or, more accurately, the lack of it when JVC stopped making the stuff in the late 1980s—that drove Mobile Fidelity out of the LP business for a time. In 1992 MoFi built its own pressing plant in Sebastopol and tried to re-introduce their LP line, but, says Benz, the financial pressures of being the plant's only customer eventually stopped LP production for good in 1996.

In recent years, the most frequently asked question concerning MoFi had to do with the company's often baffling licensing choices. More than once, my response after opening an announcement of upcoming MoFi releases was a puzzled "Why?" Is there really a burgeoning market out there for Moody Blues gold CDs? Did the world really need Johnny Winter's second album dragged back into print? I had always assumed that the company's catalog was hamstrung by record labels that wouldn't license their real treasures. But according to Benz (who says he wasn't directly involved in licensing decisions), licensing material from labels wasn't a major problem. He says that though the company went through "phases" when licenses were more difficult, and that labels were generally more cooperative when it came to licensing for reissue on LP than on CD, most licensing snags were caused by legal problems with the repertoire or missing master tapes. All of which leaves one with the sense that poor judgment in deciding which recordings to reissue played a significant part in the company's demise.

That said, the image I retain is of wide-eyed hordes eyeballing the company's displays at the always-jammed MoFi booth at Stereophile's annual HI-FI Show, ponying up for armfuls of gold CDs or cut-out LPs. It tells me that the company's passing will be felt for some time to come. On a personal note, I'll miss working with one of the best publicists in the biz: Karen Thomas, for whom I wish only the best.

In the press release that announced the company's exit, Herb Belkin said it best: "I, along with audiophiles everywhere, will deeply miss the musical efforts of MoFi."
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KEITH JARRETT: The Melody at Night, With You
Keith Jarrett, piano
Performance ****1/2
Sonic ****1/2

It’s said that a poem should always risk, but never succumb to, the sentimental — it, unearned emotion. Practitioners of the art of jazz-standard balladry up that ante: they take as raw material songs that, in words or music or both, almost always are sentimental themselves, and try to make of them something more, even as they leach away excess sweetness. Keith Jarrett has often been accused — mostly falsely, I think — of burgeoning sentimentality, in his improvised solo concerts, but he has never risked that cheapest of emotions as fully as he does in his new solo-piano disc, The Melody at Night, With You.

With Gary Peacock and Jack DeJohnette, Jarrett has already released no less than 16 CDs’ worth of selections from the Great American Songbook, including two re-recorded here; you’d think he might have little left to say. But the tracks on Melody at Night make music of a sort very different from that of the more ebullient Standards trio. These are deeply intimate, interior, ruminative meditations (“Meditation” is the title of the disc’s single Jarrett original) on what seem these songs’ very souls, and it’s remarkable to hear someone with chops as awesome as Jarrett’s so consistently not use them. The one exception, Ellington’s “I Got It Bad and That Ain’t Good,” on which Jarrett rips off some effortlessly long, graceful runs, is virtuosic in a way that sounds, in this context, almost wrong.

Which constitutes a testament to the delicacy and power of the mood Jarrett creates here. Those familiar with his catalog will find on Melody at Night an entire disc that shares the special tenderness and quiet of “Over the Rainbow” (La Scala, ECM 1640) and “Hourglass, Part 2” (Staircase, ECM 1090/91). Though he does play harmonic and rhythmic variations on at least some of these well-worn tunes, the overall impression is more one of Jarrett simply playing through each song several times, each time at a level of musicality and sparseness more quiet, deep, and profound. It’s hard to imagine even Bill Evans, to whom Jarrett is most often compared, playing this simply or this quietly this well. At his best, guitarist John Fahey also achieves this kind of stillness, whether playing folk, blues, or old Protestant hymns: While seeming to do little more with a song than merely playing its tune and chord progression, Jarrett and Fahey somehow make you hear it as if for the first time.

We’re used to thinking of songs like Gershwin’s “Someone to Watch Over Me” and Heyman-Levant’s “Blame It On My Youth,” both of which Jarrett covers here, as inexhaustible wells that even improvisers of average talents can essay successfully, and they remain so on this disc. But “My Wild Irish Rose”? “Shenandoah”? Jarrett plays the former as a lullaby, the latter as a hymn. The challenge he’s set himself here is one of restraint, and he meets it on every track but the Ellington. This is the paradigmatic example of the “more” that less is so often claimed to be.

There’s also an exquisite hesitancy here that I’ve never heard in Jarrett’s playing before. He has spoken often of how important it is to be “in the moment” when improvising, but that feeling of hearing him discover, second by second, note by note, what the true nature of each of these songs is, has never been so literally palpable — listening to this record, it seems as if one is inside Jarrett’s fingers as they touch the keys, still not sure which ones will be pressed. I sometimes had the eerie feeling that I was a fly on the walls of the rooms in which Jerome Kern or Oscar Levant or George Gershwin gave birth to these songs, their fingers fumbling occasionally, stopping time to linger over a chord, letting it ring while waiting to hear what the next chord or note might be. Remarkable.

The sound, too, is different from any Jarrett has received in his nearly 30 years of recording for ECM. This very close, very dry recording was engineered by Jarrett himself at his home studio, with none of the sumptuously wet reverberation so loved and so well deployed by ECM founder-producer Manfred Eicher. That sort of sound would have been as wrong for this session as would a bravura display of digital pyrotechnics: Jarrett was clearly playing to the room. This is chamber music.

Jarrett has dedicated the album to his wife, Rose Anne Jarrett. It does sound like a love letter, teetering constantly on the edge of the sentimental abyss without once falling in. The Melody at Night, With You is Keith Jarrett’s smallest, bravest, most elemental recording, one that seems determined to not bowl anyone over — its only virtuoso turns are those of silence. It wasn’t until I’d heard it three or four times that I began to realize it just might be the best thing he’s done.

—Richard Lehnert
So begins Philip Glass's newly composed soundtrack for Tod Browning's famous 1931 film, Dracula (starring Bela Lugosi), performed with precision, depth, and abundant richness by the Kronos Quartet. Even given Glass's recent stretch of powerful works, this is handily his best string quartet to date, and may well prove a work pivotal to his future output.

No stranger to film, Glass has composed scores of variable quality for Mishima (also with Kronos), The Thin Blue Line, Kaunth, Koyaanisqatsi, Powaqqatsi, and The Secret Agent. In the last decade, Glass has also revisited and artistically interpreted a trilogy of films by Jean Cocteau, sometimes by re-scoring, sometimes by creating entirely new works inspired by the film.

Like many film scores, Dracula is best appreciated by first seeing the film (the version with Glass's score is out on Universal VHS at the moment, and was

**Why Dracula? An Interview with Philip Glass**

"If I looked at the picture carefully, I saw that most of the scenes were in drawing rooms or gardens or living rooms," says composer Philip Glass of the 1931 Universal Pictures production of Dracula. "You could imagine that, just outside the range of the camera, there would be a string quartet playing. That's what you'd get in a drawing room. The idea of a big orchestra becomes unsuitable. I decided to treat it in the erotic, romantic vein—macabre, but still a love story."

Glass's recently released score to the 1931 horror classic, performed by the Kronos Quartet, is one of his finest works for film to date (see above). Glass was contacted by Universal, which had decided to commission music for the reissues of three of its vintage horror films: Dracula, The Mummy, and Frankenstein, none of which had original film scores.

"The reason they didn't very likely was that the exhibitors in those days didn't have the equipment," Glass explains. "This was the very early days of the talkies."

Glass had a tough time choosing which to tackle. "I was torn between Dracula and Frankenstein, but I was won over by Bela Lugosi. He is such a fabulous, charismatic character. I just couldn't resist that. And there were other things intriguing about the story. To me it's a combination of the Orphée story and the Faust legend—the pact with the devil. It's implied and very explicit—acted out that he loses his soul in exchange for this deal he has of transforming human blood to eternal life. On top of that, there's this quasi-erotic character to it. In the same way that we don't see any blood, we don't see any overt sexual passes made. But you can't miss the fact that here's this older guy with these younger girls. He's surrounded by young girls—the undead three girls from the beginning and the two girls he gets involved with later on."

"Of course, that's part of the outrage of the young suitor—that there's this hairy old guy after his young fiancée. So there's that overlay of eroticism that makes it unbeatable."

"I went back to the original novel. It's quite good. You don't think of it as a gothic novel. It's a very eccentric ghost story in a way, and so beautifully done."

The more Glass watched the film, the more it resonated for him on multiple levels. "When I got the film, I took it rather seriously," he says. "I didn't just put together a scary horror-music score for an old silent movie. I was looking for the underlying issues of the piece — what was being addressed both by the novel and the film. I think it's a wonderful cast, from Lugosi to Renfield to the professor with the Coke-bottle glasses."

"It looked to me like a play that had
been converted into a movie. I related to it very much that way. It looked like they learned the scenes, set up the camera, and filmed it just as if it was a theater piece.

"And some of those line readings are incredible — like, 'Good evening,' intoned in mock-Lugosi strains. Kronos and I have been performing it live, and of course we know all the lines. When we do a sound check, one of us will recite the line to introduce the scene. We have ourselves in stitches. Especially with the Lugosi lines. 'Just some wooden boxes.' [laughter] In some respects, scoring this film was easier than doing a contemporary piece.

"I knew it wouldn't be re-edited the way some films are, so what I was looking at would be my final timings," Glass says. "I still began at the beginning, looked at each scene, and when I got the idea for the music, I wrote it down. I had the luxury of being able to look at the scene and play it with the piano. There are 26 scenes. I probably did a scene a day for a month. It was fairly straightforward — the music came easily. The themes presented themselves without any effort."

Glass's long-term association with Kronos likewise streamlined the process. And a more recent experience — watching director Martin Scorsese edit Kundun — likewise helped Glass to echo Drai's various rhythms.

"He edited Kundun in New York," Glass notes. "It was only a subway ride from my house, so whenever I could I was there for the editing. I began to learn about the rhythm of imagery and the rhythm of music. It's a dance that has to be done together. Marty is an expert at that."

Glass can't even recall the first time he saw Dracula — whether as a child, or later on TV. But revisiting the film stirred his artistic soul. "People had told me, 'Bela Lugosi is not that good,' " he recalls. "I thought they were completely wrong. It's amazing how much he communicates without saying anything. He knew how to strike a pose, how to make you look at him. He really is poetry in motion.

"It's such an elegant portrayal of that character. You pity him, you're sorry for him, and yet you're horrified by the choices he makes and the strategy he uses to unnaturally prolong his life. He builds into his character this complicated person.

"That scene on the boat, when he's just looking at the men — you realize he has no pity toward them. To him, they're just useless debris. That's him at his darkest."

While the film, with its new score, is being issued on VHS and DVD without a theatrical release, Glass anticipates a long life for his music as a concert work. "I expect to be doing it for years," he says. "I've just finished a version of it for my own ensemble, so when Kronos gets tired of performing it live with me — and they will — it'll become part of my group's repertoire." — Daniel Buckley

**ARVO PÄRT**

Frates, Tabula Rasa, Symphony 3
Gil Shaham, violin; Adele Anthony, violin (Tabula Rasa); Roger Carlson, percussion; Erik Risberg, prepared piano; Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra, Neeme Järvi
TF: 58:31
Performance ****
Sonics ****

If you sit in the woods quietly and long enough, things will come to you: your attention will move from world's view of the fly- and spider-eating Renfield's madness and his ultimate control by Dracula. Once the film has been seen, one can better appreciate the superb craftsmanship, artistic range, and organic conception of this complex, darkly dramatic score. — Daniel Buckley

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the larger objects and sounds to ever-smaller details. And the details are where the fun is. That's the way it can be with Arvo Pärt's music, and that's the way it is with the three pieces featured on this fine disc—ideally programmed and performed by one of this decade's outstanding violinists and one of the most versatile and eloquent conductors of the past quarter-century.

In Fratres, a fascinating dialog between violin solo and string orchestra, Pärt ingeniously threads the soloist's lines through the ensemble's whole still maintaining each participant's distinct individuality. Gil Shaham's violin speaks with a bold, powerful voice that at once challenges and matches the orchestra's own fervent utterances. Tabula Rasa is one of Pärt's more consciously minimalist pieces—sustaining repetitive thematic patterns and rhythms that now seem like clichés but were refreshingly new in 1977 when the work was composed. There are several other recordings of this Pärt favorite, including Gidon Kremer's excellent version (ECM 1275), and this one would measure well against any of them except for a few disturbing passages where the intonation is wildly and collectively “off.”

Symphony 3, composed in 1971 and dedicated to conductor Neeme Järvi, is a masterpiece that shows Pärt as he was before the profound, mid-1970s stylistic change that led to today's highly simplified, anti-virtuosic, spiritually motivated style. It's a grand if not particularly lengthy work in the Sibelius tradition of firmly grounded themes, big crescendos, and lots of brass and low strings. Järvi's world-class Gothenburg forces seem to really enjoy this kind of music-making, and we do get the full effect of Pärt's multi-layered textures and broad washes of color.

Enough has been said about the so-called mystical nature of Pärt's more recent scores—not and it's true that he's one of today's most honest and masterful composers of music that builds from a foundation of sincere, unapologetic, religious belief. This disc's music shows Pärt in a more outward, extraverted mode—at least as extraverted as Pärt ever gets. Yet underneath still runs some force of deeper meaning, which, if we listen long and carefully enough, will come to us by way of those little details—the fun stuff that makes Pärt's music so invariably rewarding.

—David Vernier

**Arthur Rubinstein Collection**


RCA (94 CDs). 1999. Nathaniel Johnson, reissue prod. ADD. TT: 106 hours

Performance *****
Sonics *** to *****

Years from now, The Arthur Rubinstein Collection could be remembered as a visionary tribute to one of the century's great artists or the final, grazed gasp of reissuing madness that occurred at the dawn of DVD-Audio. At the moment, I can't help gravitating toward the former: One simply has to be optimistic when a major label like RCA/BMG pours so much effort and money ($900,000) into a sumptuously packaged 94-CD set with a $1400 price tag. Besides, listening to the set has given so many pleasurable hours—its sheer breadth is an experience comparable only to mandatory multiple organs.

Some people may like that, which is one of many questions to ponder (when is enough enough?) as you weigh which Rubinstein discs you already have against what you'll gain by buying this virtually complete, thoroughly remastered document of Rubinstein's five-decade recording career.

Virtually complete? Indeed. This set was compiled with the idea that leaving anything out would make somebody, somewhere yowl—everything Rubinstein ever issued is here. Of course, nobody stops at that anymore. Both the Testament and Russian Revelation labels smoked out gems from the vaults—the former a previously suppressed 1939 recording of Saint-Saëns' Piano Concerto 2 with conductor Philippe Gaubert, the latter a 1964 live recital from Moscow that's easily one of the great Rubinstein performances. Not even counting what lies in European radio archives, there's got to be more in the vaults. Reissue producer Nathaniel Johnson admits to the existence of an unreleased Chopin piano concerto that simply added nothing to the Rubinstein legacy, and there's quite a lot of material from his 1961 series of Carnegie Hall recitals that the pianist himself was strongly against releasing. Besides, live recordings aren't likely to fill lots of gaps: since Rubinstein rarely met a microphone he didn't love, there were few differences between his recording and usual concert repertoire.

How much, then, did the microphone love him back? Unlike Maria Callas and Wilhelm Furtwängler, Rubinstein wasn't a confessional artist. One of the most emotionally healthy individualists in the business, he even soft-pedaled the feel-sorry-for-me brand of pathos many pianists trade in—even when the music seemed to ask for it. This is one of several distinctive features of Rubinstein's Chopin, whose beloved Barcarolle often eluded him. But he was often remarkably spontaneous and candid before the microphone—perhaps more so than in concert. His son, actor John Rubinstein, says that he often feels as if his father is speaking to him through recordings.

I never met the great man or even heard him in person, but I feel exactly the same way. When he played Chopin and Brahms, there were no fine lines between music and performer: They simply fused, often with a sense of the music being made up on the spot. Because his interpretations seem built from the inside out, surface details never call attention to themselves, which gives his playing an honesty and durability.
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He could be flashy, but never slick. And, like any probing mind, Rubinstein had different intimacies to convey through music at all stages of his life. Therefore there’s little expressive redundancy in repertoire that turns up three or more times in this set.

While Rubinstein is always unmissably himself with his unvarnished, bell-like tone and virile bass lines, his early years are marked by a sexy recklessness and the blush of first discovery; his middle years have a bold, lionlike technical and interpretive confidence; and his final years are marked by more deftly colored, even mystery-invoking performances. While listening chronologically, I found myself thinking at every turn, “Yes! This is when he was at his peak!” —only to move on to the next period and think the same thing. More than anything, that quality justifies the comprehensiveness of this set.

At least in theory. Not all the pillars of the Rubinstein repertoire constitute music of bottomless depth. Though his solo-piano repertoire is mostly beyond reproach, I don’t need to hear him (or anyone else) in the Grieg Piano Concerto and Saint-Saëns’ Piano Concerto 2 three different times. That all three recordings of each were included is probably because few will agree on which is the best, and partly out of consideration of his collaborators. Rubinstein worked with some of the best musicians of his time, a good proportion of whom were signed to EMI (his label in the 1920s and ’30s) and RCA/BMG (his label from the 1940s to his retirement in 1976). Thus, one follows him outliving one collaborator after another, generation after generation, from speedy Albert Coates in the 1929 recording of Brahms’ Piano Concerto 2 (Vol.1), to explosive Zubin Mehta in the 1976 Brahms Piano Concerto 1 (Vol.81, and his single recording for London/Decca).

Rubinstein’s discography is a cross section of great performers of the 20th century, with the possible exception of a number of concerto outings in the 1950s and ’60s with such less-than-fascinating conductors as Josef Krips, Alfred Wallenstein, and the aging Eugene Ormandy. That’s why I’m so puzzled by the choices made for Philips’ Great Pianists of the 20th Century series: The second Rubinstein volume (456 958-2) has many of these least inspiring conductors in the Grieg, Saint-Saëns, and Schumann concertos, one assumes because they’re all in good stereo sound. In the Saint-Saëns, Rubinstein was never so stylish as in the 1939 outing with Gaubert (Vol.82); in the Grieg, he was never more passionate than with Antal Dorati in 1949 (Vol.22).

More strong-minded collaborators brought out different elements of his personality, even in unions of dubious compatibility. Beethoven’s Piano Concerto 3 with Toscanini in 1944 (Vol.14) is typically clean and straightforward, even if the conductor gives the pianist far more space to be himself than he gave Dame Myra Hess in the same work. But 30 years later, Rubinstein recorded the Beethoven concertos with Daniel Barenboim (Vols.77–79), an unashamed follower of Furtwängler’s more expansive, romantic style who seems to inspire Rubinstein to the freer tempo modulations that the pianist had no doubt heard from the 19th-century masters in the early part of his career. From hearing his Brahms Violin Sonata 3 (Vol.3) amid the now-outdated (but quite enchanting) portamento of violinist Paul Kochanski in 1932, it would be tempting to pronounce Rubinstein as having come full circle. But the fact is, one finds the flexibility of tempo of his earlier years throughout his discography, just used with different levels of discretion. Rubinstein seems not to have discarded one expressive device for another, perhaps the most obvious expression of that being in the phenomenal 1964 Chopin Moscow recital (Vol.62): If there’s a single evening in which Rubinstein was everything he was and would be, it’s this. He simply plays like a god.

Another special favorite is Vol.23, in which Rubinstein plays Fauré’s Piano Quartet 1 and Schumann’s Piano Quintet Op.44, recorded in 1949 with the great Paganini Quartet (whose recordings have never been issued on CD and probably won’t be). Rubinstein has a way of enveloping and focusing the ensemble energy in chamber music, the result being that, in later chamber music outings, neither the Guarneri String Quartet nor violinist Henryk Szeryng were ever as interesting by themselves as they were when playing with Rubinstein; there’s an unforgettable emotional generosity—not to mention remarkable blending of instruments—in his Brahms Piano Quartets and Dvořák Piano Quintet Op.81 with the former (Vols. 65, 67), and the piano-trio recordings of Brahms and Schubert with Szeryng and cellist Pierre Fournier (Vols. 72, 73, 76).

Among concertos, some of Rubinstein’s best efforts are in isolated outings with Charles Munch (a 1952 Brahms
**WHAT was really telling in my going back and forth from cones to Pods was that, when the Pods were on duty, I would forget what I was doing and just sit there listening. Doesn’t that say it all?**

Bruce Kennett
Listener Magazine, Autumn 1998

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Concerto 2, Vol.22, that’s one of Rubinstein’s most exciting recordings, with the Boston Symphony Orchestra playing as if possessed) and Carlo Maria Giulini (a 1967 Schumann concerto, Vol.53, with all of the philosophical depths customary from that conductor at his peak). Though Erich Leinsdorf hasn’t the rosiest posthumous reputation, many of Rubinstein’s recordings with him are the best in the concerto repertoire: Their Brahms Concerto 1 (Vol.59) is more spontaneous than with Fritz Reiner (Vol.34), and more hearty than with Mehta (Vol.81). Their Beethoven concerto cycle (Vols.57-59) bests the occasionally flabby outing with Krips (Vol.36) and the sometimes labored Barenboim (Vols.77-79).

Collaborations that once seemed fruitful, even classic, seem much the opposite in the context of the complete edition. I once rationalized his periodic chamber-music meetings with Jascha Heifetz as meetings of fire and ice; now that I know Rubinstein better, Heifetz seems to bully the pianist into fast tempos, especially in the 1937 Franck Violin Sonata (Vol.7) and the early-’40s piano-trio recordings (Vol.12) with Emanuel Feuermann (though the early-’50s trio recordings with Gregor Piatigorsky in Vols. 24 and 25 are a bit better). Rubinstein seems similarly inhibited with conductor Reiner, which is not necessarily what one wants in the Rachmaninoff Concerto 2 (Vol.35). Besides, these Chicago sessions seem strangely afflicted with an out-of-tune piano. And though Rubinstein is widely credited with rediscovering and resurrecting violinist Szeryng after his post-war emigration to Mexico, their Brahms Sonata recordings seem a tad clumsy, mainly because Szeryng’s tone is too fat and unwieldy for the subtleties of chamber music (Vol.41).

Not all the music he recorded suited Rubinstein. He needed substance and drama: Chopin and Brahms have both, as do the more serious efforts of Liszt (such as the Concerto 1, Vol.32), which Rubinstein gives a special, long-breathed contour that emphasizes the music’s compositional integrity. His Spanish repertoire, which included Falla and Albeniz show pieces, appealed to him in his wilder, younger years (Vol.2), though the later recordings are strangely tepid (Vol.18). Rubinstein found much fodder in Mozart’s concertos, but not in the sonatas; the concertos, in fact, are surprisingly viable in these more musicologically enlightened times, mainly because he chose the more dramatic, less decorative minor-key works. Also, his tone lent itself beautifully to Mozartean surface sheen. However, the later-in-life recordings of the Mozart Piano Quartets (Vol.75) show Rubinstein trying to make them into chamber concertos, which they’re not.

Music in which the spiritual element is foremost—often the case in late Beethoven—seems to make him uncomfortable. He was such a creature of the earth that Debussy’s and Fauré’s more abstract moments didn’t appeal to him. Even in Schubert’s inward B-flat Sonata—a surprising inclusion in Philips’ Great Pianists series—Rubinstein sounds as if he’s speaking a second language. Schubert’s on-the-beat rhythms have no spring or eloquence in his hands, and the pathos so central to this work is conspicuously absent. And, the Concerto aside, Rubinstein wasn’t neurotic enough for much of Schumann. As much as one enjoys hearing Rubinstein’s distinctive tone and phrasing applied to Carnaval (Vol.51), he simply doesn’t have the emotional extremes for the piece—though his 1976 recording of the Fantasiestücke (Vol.71), with its genial reflectiveness, has long been a favorite. And as for his occasional Bach outings (Vol.8), the clogged counterpoint tells you why there isn’t more.

Because a good 60% of these recordings have been released on CD before, remasterings are a major factor in purchasing decisions. Spot checks against previous releases reveal that the Collection editions are all improvements except for the 1964 Moscow recital, which has far more focused sound on the Russian Revelation issue (RV 10013), though it lacks the encores included here. Those who found RCA’s application of Cello EQ in last year’s William Kapell Edition clean but disembodied might be surprised to find what a fuller-bodied, room-ambient sound this set consistently has. Since EMI and RCA were affiliates in the 1930s, RCA owns the metal parts to Rubinstein’s early recordings, and they’ve been transferred directly and with characteristic success by Ward Marston, always eclipsing their overly filtered predecessors issued by EMI. The mid-period recordings are the majority of what has never been issued on CD before, and the transfers — the 1952 Brahms Piano Concerto 2, for one—are often jaw-dropping improvements over
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the LPs. The Beethoven concerto cycle with Barenboim, which was strangely sonically compromised for being recorded in 1975, sounds impressively rich now. And the late Chopin recordings, which were successful when transferred to CD in 1991, are even more full and hearty, though they're mandatory re-purchases only for the more passionate Rubinstein fans and audiophiles.

Making the decision even more torturous, one never knows how volumes will be released individually, or when. It's at times like this that critics—who get these things free or at reduced price—feel like the luckiest people in the world.

—David Patrick Stearns

**Record Reviews**

**THEN THERE WAS ONE**

**CHRIS CORNELL: Euphoria Morning**


Performance ★★★★

Sonicity ★★★★

**JOHN POPPER: Zygote**


Performance ★★★

Sonicity ★★★★★

**MARK LANEGAN: I'll Take Care of You**


Performance ★★★★

Sonicity ★★★

**When the world's most famous rock singer and producer record an acoustic album of his solo work, you must be prepared.

The album in question is Chris Cornell's Euphoria Morning, and the producer is John Popper, the lead singer of the Blues Traveler. Cornell is well-known for his work with Soundgarden, and Popper is known for his work with the Blues Traveler, both bands being leaders in the grunge-music scene.

There are some engaging songs. "Evil in My Chair," a humorous slice of navel-gazing in which Popper personifies his own sloth and bad urges ("He is watching my TV...flicking ashes on my floor...he thinks I shouldn't be alone..."), has a cool, laid-back vibe not unlike the Eric Clapton of 461 Ocean Boulevard, and sounds quite different from most of the tracks. Popper wielding his trademark frenetic harmonica and scat-singing to great effect. And a roadhouse-styled rocker, "The Domino," provides some appropriately hip-swirling moments à la Blues Traveler.

On the downside, well, some of the material is simply boring. There's a sappy piano ballad ("Home"), a rather maudlin gospel blues ("Lunatic"), and an excruciating seven-minute midtempo waltz ("Fledgling") whose self-help/inspirational message about rising above life's barriers is undercut by a hoary bird/nest metaphor. Summary judgment: Stick with the main gig, John.

Mark Lanegan's fourth solo outing beats the telling title I'll Take Care of You.
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* WORLD WIDE SHIPPING *

Stereophile, February 2000
and pays tribute to artists who’ve inspired him (and whose records no doubt helped him steer through rough waters while jettisoning a heroin addiction). Unsurprisingly, the folk and blues covers essayed here venture into realms where it’s always darkest just before the dawn. The Gun Club’s “Carry Home” is devastatingly pure and direct; Jeffrey Lee Pierce’s lines “You’ll never survive the heat of my heart / My violent heart” seemingly penned specifically for demon-wrestler Lanegan. The man’s nicotine growl suggests only a glimmer of hope as the acoustic guitar of ex-Dinosaur Jr. Mike Johnson ekes out the minimum of optimism. Soul king Brook Benton’s title song is positioned as both a lover’s pledge and a self-help oath, its noisir arrangement (guitar, flute, piano, vibes) lending a hushed, confessional feel. And the gospelish country-folk of Tim Hardin’s “Shiloh Town” (upright bass, piano, fiddle), combined with the straightforward gospel of O.V. Wright’s “On Jesus’ Program,” can’t help but cement the impression that Lanegan’s not only offering homage, but surrendering to a higher power as well.

Elsewhere, Lanegan covers Buck Owens, Eddie Floyd, Tim Rose, and the Leaving Trains (f), his selections never failing to ring true. In the Hardin number he sings the words “Sing Hallelujah” over and over, each time subtly altering the inflection; by song’s end the listener is singing along with him, celebrating his return from the land of the walking dead. Bottom line: Welcome back, son, you’ve made our wait worth it. — Fred Mills

PAULA COLE BAND

**Amen**


Performance **

Sonics ****

U pstart rock thrush Paula Cole hit paydirt in 1996 with “Where Have All the Cowboys Gone?” (from This Fire), ostensibly on the strength of its lyrics’ pro-feminist irony but actually due to how it subliminally channeled a familiar melody hook: the “I want my MTV” bit from Dire Straits’ “Money for Nothing.” Still, the album was a pleasant contemporary twist on upbeat folk-rock styles, and a lot better than any of the insipid debirs (Jewel, Fiona, Meredith, Sheryl) that littered the pop landscape in the aftermath of Hurricane Alanis.

On *Amen*, however, Cole goes straight for the heart of the MOR. This is a “band” in name only, as the players are utterly faceless (including guest bassist and noted Chapman Stick player Tony Levin) and lost in a sea of buffed and polished studio sheen. To Cole’s credit, she’s possessed of an impressive voice, a winning cross between Laura Nyro and Sarah McLachlan; it’s just her personality that’s problematic. Right at the start, Cole signals her chameleonic intentions with “I Believe In Love,” an “uplifting” composition crammed with every contemporary cliché imaginable: soaring strings, chunky muted wah-wah guitars, subby hip-hop drums, and Cole singing in that sort of overwrought, operatic, post–Whitney Houston style that makes Mariah Carey so annoying. Not to mention Hallmark lyrics like “My love burns bright as the sun / The clouds may come, the clouds may go.”

The title cut is up next, this one a calculated stab at “relevance,” what with its “Is God watching over us?” theme amid name checks for Elvis, Betty Page, Marilyn Manson, Jack Kevorkian, Malcolm X, Gandhi, and (ahem) O.J. Simpson. Another string arrangement swirls around Cole’s vocal passion like fey dancing cherubs—but what’s D.J. Premier doing in there with his scratching? Employing another modern pop cliché, it would seem.

It’s downhill from there. In the soggy ballad “La Tonya,” Cole turns into an R&B diva in order to inhabit the persona of an abused ghetto female dreaming of one day getting out. Then she turns around and, with the help of TLC’s T-Boz Watkins, morphs into an R&B duo to chronicle modern-day madness (drive-by, drugs, trigger-happy cops, etc.) in the even soggier, surreal “Be Somebody.” Then she transmogrifies into Queen Latifah to rap about living, dying, and the planets rolling by in the sky in the altogether unconvincing hip-hop/lounge-jazz number “Rhythm of Life.” Yes, that’s D.J. Premier on the wheels of tin once again. Sense a pattern developing?

The only redeeming factor in this load of sap is that Cole, apparently a devout Christian (most songs invoke God’s name or some variation of Biblical imagery), is sincere in her belief that her message of positiveness can make a difference. No one can take that away from her. But just as her music drowns in cliché, so, too, does her lyrics, effectively undercutting any meaningful message. “Whether we be cracker or / Black or brown, red, yellow,” she offers in “God is Watching,” concluding, “From the land or sky or sea / We are family / Wake up and see.”

Ouch. — Fred Mills

THE FIDELITY WARS


Performance ****

Sonics ****

“H ow can she love me if she doesn’t even love the cinema that I love?” muses Hefner’s Darren Hayman on “The Hymn for the Cigarettes”—a philosophical question that could have come from Nick Hornby’s novel High Fidelity. But on *The Fidelity Wars*, the Scottish trio is a lot closer to “low,” combining indie-rock minimalism ca 1983 (Violent Femmes, fellow Scots Josef K) with a pop melodicism that makes stops at Motown, Brian Wilson’s bedroom, and the corner of Bacharach and David. Truth is, the title can be taken literally—this is a song cycle about an up/down relationship, a collection of spiky bed-sit singalongs for heartbroken passive-aggressive boys. Hayman, who writes like Elvis Costello with more warmth and less wordiness, is great at nailing an emotion-al dynamic with a single line, and his physical descriptions (wide hips, gray hairs, odd freckles) animate the songs as much as the lingering pedal steel or sprightly bass lines. He’s especially adept at mingling the poigniant with the barbed, and never more so than when he equates the space between a woman’s thighs with “home” in a song called “May God Protect Your Home.” —Jason Cohen

LEFTOVER SALMON

**The Nashville Sessions**


Performance ****1/2

Sonics ****

U sing as their model the Mavericks’ any-style, anytime eclecticism, this bluegrass jam band has made the disc of their career. The guest list alone tells the story: Del McCoury, Taj Mahal, Béla Fleck, Sam Bush, John Cowan, Jerry Douglas, Lucinda Williams, Waylon Jennings, and John Popper. Not to mention producer Randy Scruggs, who deserves a significant share of the credit for roping in the guests, the good-to-great sonics, and, more important, the polished, appealing tone that pervades the entire record. Even better, none of the guests is misused or turns in a lackadaisical performance. Fleck, for example, has to stretch on the Caribbean-flavored “Dance On Your Head.” Jennings steps up to deliver a heartfelt, easy-going rendition of an original he’s guest-vocalized
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BUDDY MILLER

Cruel Moon


Performance ****

Sonic ****

Steve Earle called Buddy Miller's 1995 release, *Your Love and Other Lies*, "the country album of the decade." It'll be interesting to see if Earle updates his comment now that Miller has raised the ante with *Cruel Moon*, another soulful, masterfully executed testament to the power of traditional country fused with blues and roots-rock.

Miller and his Buddy Miller Band—which includes his wife, Julie, a fine vocalist in her own right—open shows for Emmylou Harris. Harris returns the favor here by lending her always-perfect harmony to the title track. Miller also enlisted Earle, Jim Lauderdale (who co-wrote a couple of the tunes), and Joy Lynn White to help out with this. Miller's third HighTone release. Together they give us an album that's focused on country music like a magnifying glass in the sun—it burns new possibilities into a genre in desperate need of some heat.

From the opening alterna-bluegrass ache and anger of "Does My Ring Burn Your Finger" to the closing, swampy pop prophecy of Pops Staples' "It's Been A Change," Miller constantly moves his beam of revision over the country-music palette, without a throwaway track or a musical cliché. Lean arrangements, coupled with a big backbeat from bassist Byron House and drummers John Gardner and Bryan Owings, and Miller's own economical leads and fills on guitar, are the hallmarks of the album. Whether you're hearing the fevered visions of devils and sex twist out of Julie Miller's ominous rocker "Somewhere Trouble Don't Go," the slow sorrow of Earle's "I'm Not Getting Any Better At Goodbye," or the urban-cowboy lope of "Looking for a Heartache Like You," Miller uses his instinctive, passionate vocals to illuminate the hearts of the songs rather than paint them in garish colors. It just doesn't get any better than the beautiful contradictions and complements of rainy-day soul and country-pop balladry of "Sometimes I Cry," penned by the Millers and Lauderdale—and it might not get any better than *Cruel Moon*. Is it the country album of the year, or even the decade? We'll let Earle and others speak to that, but whether it is or isn't is probably unimportant. What matters is that here is an artist—and an album—not to miss. Twang this heartfelt and smart is hard to come by. —Michael Metzger

on a million times, "Are You Sure Hank Done It This Way?" Ditto Lucinda Williams on her "Lines Around Your Eyes." Unlike most "guest" artists, who come into a studio, toss off their jewels, and get paid, Williams in this case sounds as if she's into it.

For those who like their bluegrass unadorned by any o' them tramp progressive ideas, there's the opener, "Midnight Blues" (with Del and Ronnie McCoury), and "Five Alive," in which papa Earl Scruggs picks a notably close-miked banjo lead.

But *The Nashville Sessions* really opens ears in such ambitious originals as the soaring harmonies and not-too-jammie jam-band rock of "On the Other Side" (with Popper) or the more sprawling, ominous "It's Your World" (co-written with Randy Scruggs).

Throughout everything, the Leftover Salmon boys—Mark Vann (banjo, dobro), Vince Herman (vocals, guitars), Tye North (bass), Drew Emmit (vocals, mandolin), and Jeff Sipe (drums)—move among styles, backing guests, singing leads, and sounding for all the world like the band no one knew they had in 'em. At this point, count me convinced. —Robert Baird

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**Record Reviews**

**short take**

**Cobra Verde: Nightlife**


Performance ****1/2

Sonic ****

"I'm always getting closer to you, but I'm one step away from myself / How does it feel to feel?" From this final couplet of *Nightlife's* opening track, "One Step Away from Myself," it's obvious that this ride through John Petkovic's opinionated, often literate psyche will focus on personal rather than public intrigues. (A notable exception is a re-recording of his "art" rant, "Every God for Himself.") Petkovic is the leader of this ambitious, Cleveland-based hard rock band, and his singing and songwriting here range from the brilliantly layered guitar rock of "Conflict" and the synthy, grandiose "Don't Let Me Love You" to the more straight-ahead, buzzy guitar stylings of "Don't Burden Me with Your Dreams" and, finally, a Weill-like cabaret parody, "Pontius Pilate." Echoes of Bowie and (I hate to say it) Bono frequently fleck Petkovic's singing, while many of his characteristically detailed, dynamically varied arrangements have a decidedly glammy hue. Unusually well recorded for an indie rock disc.

—Robert Baird

**jazz**

**Michael Brecker**

*Time Is of the Essence*

Michael Brecker, tenor sax; Pat Metheny, guitar; Larry Goldings, organ; Elvin Jones, Bill Stewart, Jeff "Tain" Watts, drums


Performance ****1/2

Sonic ****

Given his relatively brief discography as a solo performer, it's surprising that Michael Brecker is considered the most emulated tenor saxophonist among aspiring young sax players—even in Cuba, where students brand him one of the heavyweights. Most of his fame came from his gigs with the Brecker Brothers, the classy fusion band he led with brother Randy in the '70s and early '80s, as well as his stint in the *Saturday Night Live* band and his studio dates with the likes of popsters James Taylor and Paul Simon. Yet his albums as sole leader have been fine recordings that showcase his French-foast tone, passionate playing, and
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-Galen Carol

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improvisational power, especially when the roundness of his notes gives way to shards of shrill ecstasy. Technically superb and emotionally engaged, Brecker blows with distinctive authority.

While overall there’s not a whole lot shaking that’s out of the ordinary on his sixth and latest CD, Time Is of the Essence is nonetheless a solid set with a stellar band, including the front line of guitarist Pat Metheny (playing throughout in the mildly interesting soft-toned zone) and Hammond B-3 ace Larry Goldings (who colors and conveys). Both also contribute to the rhythm section, which is firmly grounded in time by three drummers: Elvin Jones, Jeff “Tain” Watts, and Bill Stewart, each of whom appears on three tracks. As might be expected, there are the straightahead swinging numbers, including the so-so melodic opener "Arc of the Pendulum," and blues-infused tunes like the tasty funk-flavored tribute to Eddie Harris, “Renaissance Man,” on which Brecker turns up the heat and Goldings catches fire.

But the album caries its stripes on its three slower tunes, the first two of which are Brecker originals. The relaxed “Half Past Late” is paced with a perfect low-lights midnight groove and includes Metheny’s best quiet-with-zip solo; “The Morning of This Night” is one of those ballads guaranteed to hush the house when performed live; and Metheny’s “As I Am” captures a mood of sober reflection while featuring Stewart’s creative use of drum-kit colors.

Usually, the last few tracks on over-long CDs (those clocking in at over 70 minutes easily qualify) are anti-climactic duds. Yet here, Brecker saves the best for last. “Outrage” uses a hypnotically repeated motif as the launching pad for Brecker to coil out oblique lines and dance into a reverie of tenor-sax exhalations. It’s his best playing on the disc, and shows off his smarts as a leader: He lets drumming legend Jones open the piece with a blast-off roll, and punch up the proceedings in the middle with a rousing rumble. — Dan Ouellette

On Time Is of the Essence, Michael Brecker hasn’t gone to the dogs.

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states the theme, the saxes chat with the brass, and there's a solid piano improvisation. (No soloists are listed—a big goof.) "Old Miami Sax" finds D'Rivera blowing alto over a repeated riff from his sax partners; the guys trade robust phrases with the leader before a climactic free-for-all. Paquito's lustrous-toned, insistently lyrical clarinet shines on the boleiro "Come Fue," which sports a telling vocal by Lucrecia. D'Rivera's wife, Brenda Felciano, offers an emotive "Siboney."

There are a few pieces with more Latin-jazz edge, among them the enthusiastic title track, which has an intense D'Rivera soprano-sax solo, and the undulating "Chucho." That track is dedicated to pianist Chucho Valdez, who, with D'Rivera, was a founder of the renowned Cuban band Irakere. The classic "Mambo Inn," another showcase for D'Rivera's clarinet, and the driving "Mambo à la Kenton" (the latter written by Armando Romeu, director of the Tropicana's band for 25 years), are also included.

The slightly distant quality of the sound creates the feeling of being in a massive room like the Tropicana; there's even a hint of nostalgia to the audio, as if what you're hearing is far away in time. Overall, the sound is warm, with good detail, instrumental placement, and tonal accuracy. —Robert Baird

**MINGUS BIG BAND**

**Blues & Politics**


Performance ***** 1/2

Sonic ****

Tribute bands—or, even worse, big bands whose leaders are long gone—are often pale, bloodless ensembles desperately trying to recapture some of the deceased icon's magic. But the Mingus Big Band, under the direction of the bassist's widow, Sue, has consistently proven to be vital on both stage and in the studio.

Here they get a little posthumous help in the opening cut from the man himself, via a snippet of Mingus narrating and playing an unreleased improvisation, "It Was a Lonely Day in Selma, Alabama," from a 1965 live date. This segues into his reading/singing of "Freedom," which is overdubbed onto a new recording of the same tune. Near the end, the finale of the 1965 live date returns, seamlessly spliced in as part of a remarkably cogent and attractive bit of studio gymnastics.

The rest of this sparkling album—the sonics even in the opening cut are rich and gorgeously multidimensional—is equally compelling. Though Mingus' more political numbers, like "Meditations for a Pair of Wire-Cutters" and "Oh Lord, Don't Let Them Drop That Atomic Bomb On Me," are the ostensible focus, the lyricism and invention that characterized all of his work infuse everything here. The band is rich in first-call players: trumpeters Earl Gardner and Randy Brecker, reedmen Ronnie Cuber and Vincent Herrings, and bassists Boris Kozlov and Ady McKeay, to name a few. But it's the arrangements, old and new, spiced with inventive solos and lots of genuine, old-fashioned passion for the music, that spark this band, and make them such a force on the bandstand or over the laser. —Zan Stewart

**ANDY SUMMERS**

**Green Chimneys**


Performance *****

Sonic ****

E
evrybody talks about the music of Thelonious Monk, but nobody does anything about it. When "jazz" musicians do undertake one of Monk's compositions, they rarely journey too far afield from the usual warhorses and overroasted chestnuts, and, even then, rarely abide by the spirit of Monk's music, instead content to get out of the heads alive and begin running changes as per usual. Snore.

So imagine my surprise when one of the most engaging Monk recitals to ever come down the pipe emerges from the well-groomed head of ex-Police guitarist Andy Summers. *Green Chimneys* is a defining moment in Summers' creative evolution as a born-again improviser/arranger.

Summers' jazz roots were plain to hear in the Police, where he displayed a propensity for chordal solos and thematic variations over single-line fandangos, and a knowing respect for the pregnant pause, open space, and rhythmic inflection—qualities one would readily associate with Keith Richards, let alone Monk and Miles. However, from what little I've heard of his post-Police solo projects, the guitarist seemed to be casting about for a voice, for a point of departure from which he could stake a claim to his place in the modern-jazz/guitar tradition without sounding like another slumming wannabe.

On *Green Chimneys*, Summers transcends rote fusionoid gestures in a recital that is visionary in its choice of material, courageous in its determination to extend the traditional parameters of what "swings," and ebullient in its sheer joy of discovery. "Visionary?" Sure—while Summers does indeed offer us his take on "standard" aspects of the Monk repertoire (a gentle, bell-like, solo acoustic take on "Ruby, My Dear" and a moody "Round Midnight" with Sting doing his thing in Chet-Baker-via-Elvis-Costello mode), his choice of Thelonious keepsakes is challenging and unconventional. For instance, there's the rarely played "Shuffle Boil," from an obscure 1955 Savoy session chaired by the fine saxophonist-composer Gigi Gryce, in which Monk did one of his few sideman turns (though he also wrote the elusive "Brake's Sake" and "Gallop's Gallop"). There are also three (count 'em) three gems from the best of Monk's Columbia sessions, *Underground*.

Thus we get to hear Monk's only 3/4 composition, the poignant "Ugly Beauty," treated with spatial lyricism, while "Boo Boo's Birthday" is given a soft-shoe turn; it's swung lightly and politely, with telling use of cello and soprano to create a harmonic backwash. Then there are the title tune, "Hackensack," and "Monk's Dream," all given the vamp-and-release treatment, and each time through I'm impressed by how, with only a few well-placed notes, Summers gets bassist Carpenter and drummer Erskine to swing so hard.

While Summers' improves aren't particularly astonishing technically, his fealty to Monk's solo and collective aesthetic is dead on, even when he's giving these compositions very untraditional rhythmic interpolations. Organist Joey DeFrancesco is a real standout, and Erskine's fat recorded sound and interactive glee enliven things throughout, particularly in the down-home stylings and polyrhythm-a-ning of "Bemsha Swing," the skanky bluesiness of "Think of One," and the hip-hop/reggae overtones of "Shuffle Boil."

More telling is the wide palette of expressive sounds Summers coaxes from his old Fender ES-175, discreetly mixing amplifier gain with a minimum of effects to achieve a wide range of timbres—a far cry from the dull, compressed "dark tone" most jazz guitarists settle for. And engineer/co-producer Eddie King achieves a fat, detailed, nicely varied soundstage for each arrangement, making *Green Chimneys* one of the most involving jazz recitals of 1999, and Andy Summers' defining moment as an improviser and arranger. —Chip Stern

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Transfiguration Temper Supreme

Editor:
Thank you very much for your review. We are again delighted that Michael Fremer finds the Transfiguration Temper Supreme so rewarding to listen to. His description of its unique combination of tonal neutrality, incredible detail, and low-level resolution indeed summarize what we call the world’s most musically natural cartridge.

Seiji Yoshioka’s background as a great music lover, concertgoer, and record collector is perhaps tinged with more idealism than some would consider entirely commercially sensible. His personal “mission” to let music-lovers hear more of what is in the grooves of over 40 years’ worth of stereo records led him, almost 10 years ago, to capitalize on the unique potential of both the ring magnet and the yokel design. Bob Graham recognized this potential in 1996, and the rest is history.

Thus Mr. Yoshioka has not “rethought” his Temper design, but indeed refined it. Both Tempers are based on the yokelless ring-magnet generator, accurately placing the moving coil within the laser-cut center of a ring magnet and eliminating the need for pole pieces or yokes. The other cartridge discussed in the review uses a sandwich generator, also a yokelless design. Originally developed by Philips in the 1960s, it places the coil between two disc magnets and is less expensive to manufacture than the ring magnet of the Temper. This sandwich design is used in our less expensive Transfiguration Spirit, which shares the same Graham-sourced silver wire found in the Temper Supreme.

At $1500 suggested retail ($1250/$1000 trade-in), the Transfiguration Spirit has the same relaxed, neutral character as its more expensive sibling. Now that’s progress! MF has a Spirit in-house, and we look forward to his upcoming review.

As part of Musical Surroundings’ selection of musically accurate analog products, we can offer our competitive trade-in programs for music-lovers to upgrade cost-effectively to the Temper Supreme, saving between $1000 and $1300 from its suggested retail of $3800. Please see our letter on p.270 in the October 1998 issue of Stereophile for further explanation.

On the topic of comparable phono stages for the Temper Supreme, we remain at the forefront of the industry in emphasizing the importance of proper system-matching. The Temper Supreme works ideally in most of today’s best solid-state phono stages, such as those from Jeff Rowland, Spectral, Krell, Mark Levinson, and MF’s own Ayre. With tube phono stages, we recommend the Aesthetix, Herron, Joule Electra, and Thor “straight in,” as well as the ARC Reference Phono, Howell, and BAT P10, which all use transformer-coupled inputs. For other tube units—from ARC, C-J, CAT, Jadis, etc.—Graham Engineering is introducing a transformer, wound with silver wire, that will optimize performance for those phono stages. Call or e-mail us if you have specific questions on tonearm, phonostage, or system compatibility.

The natural reproduction of music requires uniformity from the deepest bass to the highest treble, and provides highly articulate, three-dimensional stereo soundstaging without exaggerated tonal colors or dynamics. It should capture the soul of the music and the performance. This is the basis of the listening assessment in Immutable Music’s development of the Temper Supreme.

Seiji Yoshioka, Immutable Music
Garth Leerer, Musical Surroundings

Accuphase M-2000 & P-1200

Editor:
In this season of giving and receiving we are doubly blessed. We were fortunate to be able to give Jonathan Scull our Accuphase M-2000 for review—and even more fortunate to receive a terrific response from him!

Often we hear comments regarding the cost of Accuphase gear, and when the final analysis is in, the results always justify the cost. So, too, with Jonathan’s observations. His comment that “the M-2000 is built to a very high specification” is true, but more succinctly, all Accuphase products are built to a very high expectation.

It’s true that, when considering the finest products from any manufacturer, the attention to detail and the subtlety are what make the difference. With Accuphase, the subtleties are just more obvious. Whether it is the extraordinary fit and finish or the outstanding musicality, Accuphase owners truly cherish their equipment and continually share with us their “pride of ownership.”

Thank you again for the wonderful words of admiration for the M-2000 and P-1200. In a world economy focused on short-term gains and replaceable electronics, Accuphase has earned a place for itself as a designer and manufacturer of reference-quality audio equipment that will produce beautiful music for generations to come.

Art Manzano
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MARIGO AUDIO LAB BMX REFERENCE Ultra 2 power amplifier, two 13' lengths, ($945 each) $350 each. One 6' length ($595) $225. Original owner, mint with boxes. (309) 682-1233.

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This month's episode: First Things First.

I'm on the phone with Audio-Prism's Victor Tiscareno. We're talking system basics.

"You know, Jonathan, before folks go out there and spend $3000 on a power cord, they could spend a whole lot less getting the basics right!"

He makes a good point. It's the right way to cover the bases without spending a fortune. The following DIY projects might cost some sweat equity, but they're low in cost, and offer high returns on investment. So let's don our toolbelts, and...

Live in a sweet old Victorian with spongy floors that flex like diving boards? Can't play an LP without lunching your stylus? Get some cinderblocks and a couple of trailer leveling jacks and head for the basement. Build up a few cinderblock towers under any weak spots you've identified, heave the trailer jacks on top, and jack it up! You might want to add a small block of 2x4 between the jack and the floor above to spread the load. (Hidden benefit: Now it'll be easier to creep to the 'fridge at night.) Keep in mind, the jack/cinderblock/2x4 sandwich isn't meant to be a load-bearing member; you're merely selectively reinforcing the floor above. This little project might cost anywhere from $50 to a few hundred, depending on your house's construction and layout. Your turntable will love you.

If you've got a suspended floor over crossbeams, as we do in our Manhattan loft, put together a stiffening platform from 3/4" MDF. We used two panels, each measuring 5' by 4', butted edge to edge and glued, screwed, and lag-bolted to the floor and the joists below. Paint 'em up in whatever color suits your décor, and you're out only $30 or so for materials. This works wonders as a speaker-and-amp platform. In fact, I've always wanted to do the same under our front-end equipment racks.

A more minimalist, even less expensive approach requires you, a stud finder, and a handful of large Phillips-head self-tapping wood screws. This is especially handy if you have equipment racks or speakers equipped with spikes on an iffy floor. Do some measuring, get down on your knees, and, using the stud finder, locate the joists under the flooring. Having carefully measured spikes-to-spike on your audio stands, try to match the spikes to the crossbeam pattern below.1 Use a power tool to drive in the screws so the heads are 1/4" or so above the floor. It'll be harder going into a crossbeam, but that's what you want. Drive as many screws into those beams as possible. If you get three or even two out of four spikes on each rack matched up with a joist screwhead, that'll be fine. You can do the same with your speakers and level them, as you can the equipment racks, by adjusting screw height for the spikes sitting in them. Just make sure you know where your speakers go before you start drilling!

A couple more low-cost setup tricks:

* * *

**Trick One:** I've already covered how butcher block improves the sounds of audio components — maple better than oak, for whatever reason. And I've mentioned Symposium Rollerblocks, a somewhat costly footer system using ball bearings in shallow, polished depressions atop aluminum blocks. One worthy on the Net suggests using a Dremel tool to make a trio of 1"-diameter circular depressions in the top surface of a butcher block, then sanding them smooth with 100 and 220 sandpaper. Drop marbles or ball bearings into the depressions, and you've got a reasonably sophisticated equipment shelf for about $40. This particular Netizen suggested painting the butcher block black (I disagree) and placing it on a lightly inflated inner tube (I agree). Place your component on the marbles or bearings and listen for improvements.

**Trick Two:** Make your own shelves, or improve on those God gave ya. Let's assume your square-section, hollow-leg rack has thin, rather pedestrian shelves made of MDF — tap one and listen to it rattle.

Constrained-layer damping to the rescue! Get thee to a building-supply outlet and pick up a few steel plates (maybe 16 gauge) somewhat smaller than the shelf you'll use them with. Drill holes in their corners, then glue and screw the plates to the undersides of your component shelves. Tap that bad boy again and you'll be surprised how nonresonant it's become. The steel plate below even provides a modicum of RFI shielding for the component above. And if you're feeling really anal-retentive, run a ground wire from each plate to your system ground.

Alternatively, glue two untreated shelves together. You might try metal plates or another untreated material sandwiched between. (It need not be the same size as the shelf; you can just place some around the edges, or in the middle.) Or you can make your own audio-philic shelves by bonding together several layers of 1/4" MDF, perhaps alternating wood and MDF for maximum damping. And while you're at it, fill those stands with sand. (Use steam-cleaned "pool" sand to avoid varmints and other unwelcome houseguests.) If you want more mass, do what JA does and use a mix of one third No.12 bird shot and two-thirds "play" sand from Toys'R'Us.

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1 If you've been reading "Fine Tunes," you'll have learned about basic room/speaker interactions and how to place audio equipment. If you missed anything, check the "Archives" at www.stereophile.com.
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