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As bassist Reggie McBride ripped out one of those fat, juicy, low-B-string notes during "Over and Over" in Kcb' Mo's Saturday-night concert during Home Entertainment 2001 (held in May at the Manhattan Hilton), my broad smile grew even broader. And I was still smiling the next morning as I listened to violinist Arturo Delmoni play Bach's E-major Partita and third Cello Suite (on viola), and Robert Silverman performing Beethoven's "Appassionata" piano sonata. This is the ultimate hi-fi experience: to have musicians of this caliber playing, in effect, live just for you.

Our full report on the audio hardware we heard at the Show will appear in the September issue, but I'll take this opportunity to offer my thanks to Sony, Blue Note, Chesky Records, Analogue Productions, and John Marks Records, and to music editor Robert Baird, for making the live music events possible at this year's Show. It's great to be able to hear the High End's finest-sounding systems, but it's even better to calibrate what you've just heard against the real thing.

We Are What We Are

As I write these words, it is exactly 15 years to the day since I left the English magazine Hi-Fi News (then Hi-Fi News & Record Review) to take the editorial helm of Stereophile. What has driven my editing of both magazines (and, Carol Baugh, p.10, I certainly do "edit" them) has been the view that the traditional model of a magazine—that it dispense and the readers receive wisdom—is fundamentally wrong. Instead, I strongly believe that a magazine's editors, writers, and readers are involved in an ongoing dialog about their shared enthusiasms. Stereophile's involvement in Shows stems from this belief, and it is in this light that its "Letters" column should be regarded as the heart of each issue.

Two subjects are examined at length in this issue's "Letters": Robert Deutsch's review of the Wavelength Gemini SET amplifier in May, and an exchange I had in the same issue with reader John Wingersman about his decision to cancel his Stereophile subscription because of the language used by some writers, interviewees, and correspondents. These two topics may appear unrelated, but they are in fact intimately intertwined.

Rob Damh has a serious point when he asks (p.11) why Stereophile devoted space to an amplifier that needed the services of a consultant before the review could proceed. Bob Deutsch addresses this and other issues in his response, but I add here that the magazine is the prisoner of its own policy. Once we decide that a product should be reviewed the review proceeds to publication. Period. Regardless of what happens along the way, and with all that has happened reported in the published review.

I adopted this hard-line policy when I joined Stereophile. I had become disillusioned back in the 1970s and '80s by how much at other audio magazines went on behind closed doors. Magazines, interviewers, and editors often appeared to collude in producing a published review that was nothing more than promotional copy. It is not like that at Stereophile. Unlike other magazines, everything that occurs during the review process is "on the record." There is no burying of problems, no submitting of second or third samples without the readers knowing about it, and no reviewers acting as unpaid—let alone paid—design consultants. This policy may not be popular with manufacturers, but readers need to know when a product is a moving target, and when the designer has not sufficiently thought through his or her design goals or has not managed to solve all the design problems.

The downside of this policy, of course, is that each year a few of the magazine's precious pages are wasted on a product that is not ready for prime time—as appeared to be the case with the Wavelength, something we cannot discover until after the review is underway. I would much rather waste the space than quietly collude with the manufacturer to keep the magazine's readers unaware of the product's problems—or even, in this case, keep you unaware that the designer was unable to fix a fundamental design flaw (its suboptimall grounding) without outside assistance.

But I'm sure you're wondering how this correlates with my permissive attitude regarding language that some readers might find offensive. First, it must be understood that, as an editor, the avoidance of giving offense cannot be a primary concern of mine. Over the 19 years I have edited audio review magazines, I have found that pretty much everything I publish gives offense to someone, somewhere. It is the content of what is said that matters, and it is that content that should be judged critically, not the language used.

Second, I agree with Mr. Saliba (p.10) in that it is hard to believe someone when they say they support freedom of speech, yet at the same time condemn others for the choice of language with which they express that speech. And third, I published my exchange with Mr. Wingersman because I thought it would reveal Stereophile's philosophy: that just as we don't censor what our readers say in "Letters" or what our interview subjects say, we don't cover up or ignore things that go wrong in our equipment reports, or are not found palatable by the component's manufacturer.

The late pianist Glenn Gould was often condemned for singing while he played. "If only Gould wouldn't sing, what a pianist he would be," went the critical refrain. Yet the vocalizing and the pianism were both external aspects of a single inner reality. One went in hand with the other. If you want honesty in Stereophile's equipment reports, you have to accept it elsewhere in the magazine's content. If the cost is occasional embarrassment or offense, it seems a small price to pay.

Elizabeth Donovan

As this is the second issue to be produced with Stereophile's new managing editor, Elizabeth Donovan, at the helm, it's past time for me to formally introduce her. Elizabeth joins us from the Baltimore-based magazine Link: A Critical Journal on the Arts in Baltimore and the World, where she wrote articles and reviews, and, as chief editor, crafted the organizing concept of their spring 2001 issue, Link 6: Pilgrimage. This issue includes articles and artwork which investigate topics ranging from the theoretical/political (What is a pilgrimage?) to the personal (What will I find at the end of the journey?) to the somewhat spiritual (What will happen to me on the way?).

Welcome to the Stereophile family of editors, writers, and readers, Elizabeth.
Features

High-End Tunes To Go
The lucky one, with the wind in his hair and the great sounds of Mark Levinson’s Premium Sound System in his ears, Jonathan Scull cruises Manhattan while reviewing the new ML/Lexus collaboration.

Muzio Muses
David Lander talks with Phil Muzio, Madrigal’s CEO, about the three-decade reign of the Mark Levinson brand and the new venture into in-car audio with Lexus.

The Tenor Man Cometh
Having single-mindedly pursued his craft and paid his dues, Joe Lovano has now become one of the dominant jazz voices of his generation. Dan Ouellette reports.

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Readers' wish lists, including: 17 issues per year instead of our more conservative (and calendar-conscious) 12, balance between the expensive and inexpensive (or not), and the actuality of free speech for all, and more.

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High-end news, including dealer-promoted seminars, plus: Music Direct buys Mobile Fidelity Sound Lab, AIX Media Group's DVD-Audio discs, a Princeton professor wins the SDM's Hack Challenge but can't talk about it, compact powered speakers, PDO UK's faulty CDs, the Annual General Meeting of the BFA, and Wes Phillips attends Professor John Lewis' funeral.

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Sam Tellig is introduced to Audio Physics' inexpensive Spark III loudspeaker, and B&W's CDMA NT, the largest speaker in the company's line.

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Michael Fremer gets cleaned up with the Disc Doctor; wound up with cords from Howland, Electra Glide; Wireworld, and PS Audio; and psyched up with the classic build quality of the Triplanar Mk.VI Ultimate turntable.

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Contemplating elements of the sublime in the audiophile quest for happiness, John Marks cautions against confusing the means with the ends.

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What do you write when your boss is in the band? Robert Baird reviews the music at Home Entertainment 2001.

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July's Recording of the Month is JVC's XRCD reissue of the Tony Bennett/Bill Evans Album. Classical features a new disc by Laurie Anderson and two reissues of arias collections by the great Birgit Nilsson. In rock/pop Tim Buckley, The Cash Brothers, and Rufus Wainwright mix it up. And in jazz, the new disc by Charlie Haden and a Mosaic collection of the Vee Jay sessions of Paul Chambers and Wynton Kelly take the stage.

121 Quarter Notes
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Manufacturers comment on reviews of the B&W CDMA NT, PS Audio's Lab Cable, the Balanced Audio Technology VK-75 and VK-75SE power amps, the Grand Prix Monaco amplifier isolation system, the Stax SR-007 Omega II ear-speakers, Myrrad's MDP500, MartinLogan's electrostatic systems, and Musical Fidelity's A3 CD player.

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Jonathan Scall's readers find Circuit Works Conductive Silver Grease and share a recipe for homemade CD mats, while J-10 shares a few thoughts on mats from AudioPrism and YBA.

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Stereophile, July 2001
The love affair between the listener and a recorded piece of music is a special bond. It takes an exceptional kind of speaker to reproduce the music you love.

Paradigm Reference designers understand this bond and are relentless in developing speakers that make this stirring emotional connection possible. Sound reproduction is stunningly natural, detailed and clear. Imaging is open and spacious with pinpoint localization. And, since high-end speakers should also move you visually, these advanced technologies are housed in beautifully sleek, elegant enclosures.

Whether for music or home theater, there is no more sonically coherent choice than Paradigm Reference speaker systems - Art embracing science, science embracing art... A Love Supreme.

"...most certainly a serious high-end contender, and a formidable one... if tonal neutrality is at the top of your list of priorities for speaker performance, and you want a speaker that can play loud without sounding stressed, then you really must listen to the Reference Studio/100."

—Robert Deutsch, Stereophile, Vol. 23 No.6, on the Studio/100
Yup, wishful thinking
Editor:
I can’t wait for my copy of Stereophile to arrive each month…so much so that I wish there were more than 12 issues a year. How about one issue every three weeks, like 17 issues a year? I wouldn’t mind the extra cost. You could then review more less-expensive components. Wishful thinking on my part? John Donzek
South Bridge, MA

Balance, please
Editor:
I’ve been a regular subscriber to Stereophile since around 1990. On occasion (but never for more than a few months) I’ve allowed my subscription to lapse, feeling there was too much of an emphasis on ultra-expensive equipment, I definitely put my vote in for the “balance of cost” across the board approach, from budget to dream, ultra-cost-no-object products.

Stereophile has led me through several generations and several thousands of dollars in seeking the ultimate in stereo sound/systems. (Manufacturers, are you paying attention?) Upon discovering your magazine, I matured from a rack JVC system and Bose speakers to NAID/Adecorn/ Celestion SL700 SE, then to Conrad-Johnson/PS Audio, and now Krell/Meridian. (I’ve hung on to the excellent Celetions). For my office system, I’m just purchasing the Audio Refinement The Complete integrated amp. I’ve followed your policy of using Stereophile’s reviews as a guide to prepare a shortlist, then trusting my ears to the rest. I’ve never been disappointed.

JA and the writing staff, past and present, I thank you sincerely for your efforts and wonderful magazine. I applaud your putting the Denon receiver on last December’s front cover, and your efforts to appeal to a broader audience. Keep up the good work.

Ron Fox
Rfoxonfox13@aol.com

Mission accomplished?
Editor:
I just received the May 2001 issue in the mail and, starting at the beginning, read the “Letters” section. I am amazed that we, your subscribers, get so uptight over what’s on the cover or the fact that there is a review of a product in which we find no interest. I was not interested in the Denon A/V receiver either, but so what? I did show that review to a fellow in my office who happened to have just purchased that unit, and now he reads Stereophile. I say to you, “Good job,” and, in this case, mission accomplished.

I will not question your ethics either, until you put the BMW on the cover, write a glaringly positive review of the car, and include it in “Recommended Components.” Keep up the good work. Your efforts are not wasted here.

Richard Golladay
Roanoke, VA
gollr@roanokeинф.net

He’s going to miss Mikey
Editor:
I have been a longtime subscriber to Stereophile. I even bought all the past issues I could lay my hands on. Now, sadly, my patience has run out. I feel compelled to cancel my subscription.

The quality of recent equipment reviews in Stereophile fails my expectations. It is extremely rare, except in Michael Fremer’s reviews, that meaningful comparisons of performance and price between a unit under review and its usually many competing components are offered. In addition, while I do not have anything against digital recordings (they have their purpose), for you to publish reviews of high-resolution components with the reviewer listening to CDs only is a sad joke.

My goal is not to contribute, even in the smallest way, to putting your magazine out of business. I only want you to do your job the way it should be done. Just honest, straightforward reporting, as you would do for a real friend. It has been done before, even with advertising, so I am not asking for the impossible.

I hope to return to Stereophile someday. I shall be missing Mikey, though.

ZBO
Walnut Creek, CA

Pleased to be back
Editor:
I recently returned to Stereophile (I have been a reader since about 1986) after deciding that the direction you took after the Petersen takeover was a little difficult to take. I found the characteristic superb workmanship of the magazine under your guidance intact, and I think you have done and continue to do a fine job. I am pleased to be back!

Kerry White
KwhiteWhite@aol.com

Thanks, Richard
Editor:
The first section of Stereophile I always turn to and read first is “Record Reviews.” It is as valuable to me as any of the equipment reviews. The music comes first for me.

I am writing to express my praise for Richard Lchnert’s excellent reviews over the years, and in particular his review of Robin Williamson’s The Soul-At-Zero (April 2001, p.222). I would never have come across this CD had I not read about it in Stereophile, and that would have been a great loss. I can’t help thinking that it would have been so easy for the editors to exclude a recording like this one, thinking that it is so unusual no one would be interested. But it is precisely these kinds of recordings that I cherish, and why I consider Stereophile invaluable.

Barry MacMaster
Toronto, Canada
barrymac@interlog.com

Those AKG mikes
Editor:
In the May “Analog Corner” (p.45), Michael Fremer states that a pair of AKG C-12A tube mikes were in the piano for the direct-to-disc recording of Weeknd at
They are C414B/TL11 Vintage TL makes. First, the capsule is a faithful sonic recreation of one used in AKG's classic C12 tube microphones. Above 3kHz the TL11 takes on C12 characteristics, while below this point the response is ruler-flat. Second, the Vintage TL incorporates transformerless ultralinear series electronics for extended low-end reproduction and low distortion.

Maron Horonzak
Stoutsville, MO

SACD & missing the point
Editor:
As both a longtime reader of Stereophile and an avid audiophile, I cannot believe that I have not read before now what I am about to write.

Has everyone missed the point about any new format, not just a high-resolution one? They are always consumer-driven—mid-fi, lo-fi, whatever you want to call it—not audiophile-driven. Since neither DVD-Audio nor SACD (two- or multichannel) offers any convenience advantage over the "Red Book" CD, it comes down to price. I know of no one—I repeat, no one—outside of the audiophile world who will pay $22-$30 for the same (in their opinion) music that can be bought for $12-$14. We audiophiles can appreciate the difference on our high-end systems, but the majority of people will only buy the new format if it "rocks their world," whether low-end, mid-end, MP-3 (God forbid), or whatever.

The bottom line is that for SACD or DVD-A to succeed, the software will have to be competitively priced with what is available now, not twice, or even nearly twice, as expensive. Even audiophiles (unless well-heeled) will not replace their CD collections (or vinyl, if they feel SACD sounds as good) unless they can afford it. No one wants to feel "ripped off."

Jeff Cantor
Brooklyn, NY

SACD has changed everything
Editor:
After reading all the letters in the April issue, which were in favor of the current CD standard, I'm glad I am in the faction that favors a new format. Basically, those in favor of the current standard are digiphiles and closet digiphiles. Like Sam Tellig, they've been caught out living a lie—that's why they are angry.

For the last few years, high-end audio has been in the doldrums because audio has become stale. High-end audio has stagnated to the extent that the only means designers/manufacturers can think of for improving the standard is to reinvent nostalgia technologies, or make hugely expensive components that rely principally on brute engineering rather than good design. High-end audio had become so stale that I was not going to renew my Stereophile subscription when it expires later this year. I figured it had nothing more to say.

SACD has changed everything. This is the first true improvement in the audio standard in history. All other improvements were incremental. Best of all, we now have something of substance to argue about. I haven't been this excited since color TV first arrived. We have a three-way format war; we have conspiracy theories; the losers are already crying "foul"; the digiphiles are on the receiving end this time; the analog brigade is feeling snub; and "Sam's Space" is being converted to "CD Corner" (at da-back-a-da-shop). All we need to top this off is for a high-end marque like Wadia or California Audio Lab to produce an affordable SACD player. What a delicious scenario in which to sell audio magazines.

Peter D'Castro
Richmond, Victoria, Australia
dastrap@telstra.com

Preserving our dignity?
Editor:
While I enjoy the writings of Baltaz and Rabelais, I must agree with the letters in May that admonished the editors of Stereophile to preserve their dignity by finding better ways to express disgust than to take recourse to slang names for ordure.

However, I do approve of the practice of publishing the verbatim transcripts of interviews with personalities, usually from the popular music industry, who bore us with trite slang references to evacuation and scrobilation. When a popular music star threatens to caponize some readers—his exact words were "I'll cut your balls [slang for testicles, for the benefit of some readers with Ph.D. degrees] off"—we know by his trailer-park language what class of people he has chosen to emulate. By printing exactly what he said, we, the readers, know that we cannot respect him as we do someone from the realm of classical music, where, because of more advanced intelligence and culture, people demonstrate a better command of language.

There was something more offensive than the greasy language for which so many of your readers chided you in the May 2001 issue. It was the interview with Steve Hoffman, whose discourse was con- fabulated into such teenage baby-talk as to subject us to such fashionable verbal bunceles as "I sit in the sweet spot and I'm like..." and "These guys, they knew what they wanted..." Mr. Hoffman may be a competent recording engineer, but his authority is diminished when he expresses himself in such slovenly language.

Dr. Barney Vincellette
Houston, DE

Where do you get off, Stereophile?
Editor:
Hey, Gordon G. Punam ("Letters," May 2001, p.8), how about starting up your own magazine? The Michigan Audio Society seems to have its elbow on the pulse of the audiophile community, so it seems the next logical step. Why stop at the general stereo amplifier market? How about Krellophile or Audio Research Monthly? I suggest that Stereophile hire you as the marketing genius you so obviously are. (Can't have you giving away these unrequested marketing surveys for free, after all.)

In your view, Stereophile is committing suicide by trying to appeal to a broad range of tastes; better that they limit their reviews to a small section of the marketplace and cater to the fancies of forward-thinking organizations like yours. That way, when Stereophile goes tits (women's bumpy things, for John Wingertsmann in the same issue) up after about six months, they can rest easy knowing they did right by the future-proof fellas of the Michigan Audio Society.

And to Steven Helbley and John Wingertsmann (May, pp.11-12); For God's sake, pull it in a notch! Helbley, you better be careful, 'cause the boys at the Michigan Audio Society are gonna be some pissed off with those cracks about "old Levinson and Krell." And did you have to say "shit" in your letter? The ever-vigilant Wingertsmann probably blew a hamstring leaping for the word processor to alert Arkinson that someone said a cuss word.

As for Wingertsmann, I think we can all be thankful that he is open-minded and for free speech; if he weren't, he'd probably be writing right-asseled letters to the editor of Stereophile.

And to you guys at Stereophile: How dare you produce a magazine that offers a broad range of reviews and testing procedures and takes on the new developments in the industry with a logical and reasoning approach? How dare you sell advertising space in your magazine to manufacturers of equipment so that you can turn a profit like any other business? Where do you get off writing reviews that contain negative remarks and then openly publishing manufacturers' responses so that everyone with half a brain can see that you're not selling out? If this continues,
Is it the balance that makes a BMW a BMW? Every BMW boasts a near-perfect 50/50 front-to-rear weight distribution. Because perfect balance is the key to perfect handling. In fact, it affects virtually every aspect of a BMW's performance, brilliantly enhancing acceleration, braking, and cornering. So every BMW responds as if it were reading your mind.
you will force me to renew my subscription every year. And don’t kid yourself—I will continue to renew until this behavior stops.

Madeleine Graham Abbott
mga@ehus.net

The role of the editor?
Editor:
I was quite surprised and disappointed with your response to Mr. Wingert’s letter in May 2001. You stated, “I do not see it part of my role as an editor either to alter [a correspondent’s] word choice, or to bowdlerize the offensive words…”

On the one hand, you acknowledge the offensiveness of some of the language carried in your magazine and acknowledge your role as the editor. However, it seems you have lost your way and “watered down” your job, along with its responsibilities.

As I understand it, an editor edits. To “edit” is defined in Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary as follows:

1a: to prepare (as literary material) for publication or public presentation… e: to alter, adapt, or refine esp. to bring about conformity to a standard or to suit a particular purpose. 2: to direct the publication of…”

I read this definition to mean that you, as the editor, not only have the option but the responsibility to “shepherd” the processing and content of your publication. Of course, you always have the opportunity to simply not carry the offensive correspondence, rather than wipe it across our faces.

I have been a longtime reader of and subscriber to Stereophile and still periodically (no pun intended) get a lot of satisfaction from reading your publication. However, I feel that we are bombarded from so many angles with objectionable language and situations throughout all forms of media. Have we really come to the point where you are just throwing up your hands and indicating that it’s not your job to direct the standards of this once venerable publication? Wow! Carol Bangh
cbangh@uwbell.net

Freedom of speech?
Editor:
Please forgive me for taking valuable space and time to talk about something that is unrelated to the purpose of your magazine. In a letter published in May, a Stereophile reader asked you to cancel his subscription. Either his reason for canceling doesn’t make any sense or I am totally confused.

He was concerned about the use of certain four-letter words in your and your readers’ writings. He said that he supports freedom of speech and people’s right to say and write what they feel. But then he went on to say that you have stepped over the line by publishing foul language. You offended his personal sensibilities by using profanity beyond what he finds to be acceptable.

So it seems to me (and logic seems to be on my side) that 1) he doesn’t really believe in freedom of speech, or 2) he believes that only he and some others—but not all others, including yourself—should have freedom of speech. Now, if you were to ask him if he believes in freedom of speech, he would most likely say “yes.” If you asked him if he believes that only some people should have freedom of speech, he would likely say “no.” Yet he obviously wants to have control over the speech of others; and if you, for one, are not willing to concede to him, he doesn’t want to read your magazine.

This type of thinking is far more dangerous to the well-being of the vast majority of individuals than are four-letter words written in a magazine intended for adults. In a world in which what are essentially criminal gangs have been legitimized—albeit in a legal but not moral or ethical sense—he would steal your freedom of speech, as governments around the world have stolen freedom of speech (as well as many other things of value) from their citizens.

That having been said, let the music play on. And while it is playing, will you join me in my continuing dream that someday we will be able to experience what true freedom brings. Good night, Mr. von Mises and Mr. Hayek, wherever you are.

Michael Saliba
New Orleans, LA
Saliba@koyno.edu

See this issue’s “As We See It” for further discussion of this subject.

—JA

It is what it is
Editor:
Over the past few issues, I’ve seen “Letters” devolve into “this magazine sucks” or “no it doesn’t” debate forum of almost cartoonish proportions. I’ve been a reader and/or subscriber for about five years, and I must say, I’ve failed to see any substantive change in the magazine over the last 12 months. Many would like to believe that Stereophile “sold out” to become a good corporate citizen, but I really don’t think that’s true. The magazine is what it is, and sometimes that can be darn frustrating.

Robert Deutsch’s review of the Wavelength Gemini monoblock in May (p.125) is a great example of how the more things change at Stereophile, the more they stay the same. For $5000, you get a pair of ridiculously low-powered tube amplifiers
designed around tubes that haven’t been produced in 50 years? Okay, I’m still listening. You need to hire an electrical engineer in order to bring the amp’s “buzzing” down to an “acceptable” level? Come on! How can you recommend a product that needs aftermarket tweaking to even function properly?

I realize one can read the review and draw his own conclusions, but there has to be a point where the reviewer needs to say “Wait a minute. There are hundreds of high-end amps on the market selling for $5000 or less that can reproduce recorded music very well. Why on earth would someone buy this one?” And yes, Mr. Atkinson, I read your footnote on p.129, and I don’t think it was enough.

Reviews like this really create some doubt about the reliability of your reviewers. Because many products recommended in Stereophile are hard to find and available to many readers only through Internet or mail-order, many of us wind up buying based merely on an excellent review. I had a chance to audition most of the components in my own system before buying, but originally hunted them down based on “Recommended Components.” When one decides to build a hi-fi system and plunk down $10,000–15,000, one should be able to rest assured that the products that one is buying (or even going out of the way to hear in a showroom) will at least function properly. I don’t think there is even a question here.

The fact of the matter is, there are plenty of $5000 amplifiers on the market, and the vast majority of them sound very good. An even vaster majority function properly as-is, with no professional consultation required.

First of all, Mr. Damm, it’s an unfortunate fact of the reviewer’s life that products submitted for review sometimes malfunction or interact unfavorably with the review system. The manufacturer almost invariably claims that these malfunctions or unfavorable system interactions are highly atypical — and fairness demands that they be allowed to correct the problem. We allow this at Stereophile, with the important proviso that everything is on the record, so that readers have full access to this information.

In the case of the Wavelength amplifier, the problem was a ground loop in the system, and the usual remedies were not effective. As I noted in the review, Gordon Rankin told me — and I have no reason to doubt his word — that this problem was not present in his system, and he’s heard no similar complaints from his customers or dealers. This would seem to imply that the problem is not with the amplifier, but with system interaction. I called on Neil Muncy because of his expertise in dealing with these “systemic” problems. His assessment was that the problem could be solved by a simple wiring change in the amplifier.

I then had a choice. I could proceed with the review with the amp as-is, but this wouldn’t be fair to either the manufacturer or the readers, in that there was reason to believe that the amplifier was not performing optimally in this system, so any conclusions would have limited validity. A second alternative was to ship the amplifier back to Gordon Rankin so that he could make the minor wiring change. This would effectively put the review on hold — very inconvenient, given the pressure of magazine deadlines.

The third option was to allow Neil Muncy to make the wiring change as agreed on with Gordon Rankin. This is the option I chose, and the wiring change did exactly what Muncy had said it would do. (Had the problem persisted, the amp would have gone back to Wavelength.) All of this is reported in the review, and readers can judge for themselves what weight to give it. (By the way, several readers on the Single Ended Triode forum at www.audioasylum.com thought that I was being too tough on the Wavelength, giving undue prominence to the discussion of problems.)

As to the question of why on earth someone would buy this amplifier, I attempted to answer this question in the review by describing the Gemini’s sound in the system. The Gemini, as I also noted, is not the amplifier for everyone, and I have tried to provide information — including the chronicle of my experience with the grounding issue and tube problems — that would allow readers to decide whether it’s the amplifier for them. There are, indeed, other good-sounding $5000 amplifiers on the market, and I certainly would not recommend buying the Gemini (or any other expensive non-mainstream product) without an audition and local dealer support. It sounds really good, though.

— Robert Deutsch

Call him an optimist

Editor:

As a longtime reader of Stereophile, I strongly support the present mix of objective testing and subjective reviews. While most readers, including myself, are primarily interested in how a component sounds rather than how it measures, the test data can often provide interesting insights.

That said, I must take exception to the “commentary” by John Atkinson in his test report on the Wavelength Gemini amp (May 2001, p.127). John criticized Gordon Rankin’s decision to use an AC heater supply instead of a “high-precision” solid-state DC regulator, saying that he could see no reason for this other than philosophical—to avoid using any solid-state devices in the Gemini.

Unfortunately, the matter is not that simple. A tube heater supply can have a major impact on the sound of an amp or
The V12 is a different breed of Cary that delivers high power performance in a combination of class A single-ended triode and true-balanced push-pull technology. The new V12 is created by a stunning combination - the world famous CAD-805 sound stage, the glorious midrange of the CAD-300-SE, and the supercharged power of the CAD-211M's.

The V12 is designed with a fresh and uncompromising push-pull circuit in every criteria. In reality, think of the V12 as four, single-ended class A amplifiers, operating in a combined balanced configuration. Fully regulated dual driver power supplies. Dual vacuum tube current sources, along with dual output power supplies, one for each channel.

Drive the V12 with string quartets, female vocalists, and jazz, or really step on it with rock and roll and full symphonic performances. The V12 sounds as good as it looks.

- 100-watt-per-channel stereo amplifier.
- Zero feed back, balanced design.
- Class A, 50 watts per channel in the triode mode.
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- Designed for all loudspeakers, 2 - 16 ohms.
preamp. All other things being equal, the solid-state DC regulator can make the sound cleaner and brighter compared to an unregulated DC supply or, especially, an AC supply. This is where the designer’s judgment as to sound priorities comes into play. Does the regulator provide greater transparency and detail, or does it make the tonal balance anemic and unmusical? Gordon’s choice may indeed be a significant contributing factor to the amp’s warmth and musicality, even though in this case it comes at the high cost of significant hum.

The issue of AC vs DC heater supplies may seem arcane, but it is part of a larger trend. I believe that the high-end community, manufacturers and consumers alike, is reevaluating some of the so-called “improvements” in audio design made during the past 25 years, and we are finding that in many cases we have thrown the baby out with the bathwater. Just look at some of the design “improvements” implemented more or less across the board during this time: metal-film resistors replacing carbon resistors, plastic “designer” capacitors replacing oil and paper capacitors, plastic bypass capacitors in parallel with nearly all capacitors, solid-state diodes replacing tube rectifiers, removal of chokes from power supplies, widespread use of solid-state regulators, and silver-coated wire in place of solid copper.

Speaking very generally, each of the changes described above tends to make the component’s tonal balance leaner and brighter. Is it any wonder that many high-end systems, even those with tubes, now sound too lean and too bright? Some can overlook the skewed tonal balance and focus on the improved imaging and apparent detail. But many more of us are shaking our heads and wondering whatever happened to that warm, rich tenor sax.

One solution, I believe, is to look back at the classic designs from earlier years and reevaluate what we gave up. Gordon Rankin is clearly doing this, but so are companies closer to the mainstream, like Audio Research (tube rectifiers and tube regulators), Cary (oil caps and tube rectifiers), Balanced Audio Technology (oil caps), and Ayre [and Musical Fidelity—Ed] (power-supply chokes).

Call me an optimist, but I think this bodes well for the future. We can learn from history.  

David A. Vorhis  
Salisbury, MD  
vorhis@shore.intercom.net

Call him critical  
Editor:  
After reading with interest Michael Fremer’s review of the Red Rose Music R3 loudspeaker (May 2001) and carefully digesting John Atkinson’s test data, I find it hard to believe that this little speaker sounded acceptable by Stereophile’s standards. I appreciate that JA’s comments were very tactful in giving the benefit of the doubt to the product in light of the glaring disparity between its perceived performance and its test measurements. I’m sure that JA is a very kind, sensitive person, and that his remarks were not sponsored solely by his required corporate “charm school” response, but were made taking into account his respect for Mark Levinson, a truly remarkable audio product contributor. Even the best don’t always get things right.

The following is meant to be constructive criticism. I’m not in agreement with John or Michael if they imply that the integration of the ribbon tweeter and cone woofer was “skillfully woven.” I do agree that integrating two drive-units with greatly differing radiation patterns into an acoustically acceptable two-way speaker is not an easy chore. The test data show that the large response drop near the crossover is quite likely caused by a loss of lower tweeter-band response, as shown in fig.3 of the review. This would result in the broad, ragged response dip shown in fig.4. It appears that a ribbon tweeter should have been chosen that would permit a lower crossover frequency, or a woofer chosen with an allowable higher crossover frequency.

The fact that the ribbon tweeter rings at about 8kHz should have been cause for its rejection in the initial design considerations. Typically, a tweeter that rings at frequencies above the range of human hearing can be tolerated, but for one to exhibit a high-Q ring near the center of the tweeter’s range is unacceptable. The data shows the tweeter Q at 8kHz to be 2 or above. No wonder John said it sounded “fizzy” on pink noise. That this little speaker sounded acceptable (not exceptional) is more an accident of its polar radiation response.

The responses of the two drive-units should have been overlapped slightly to preclude the suckout, but unfortunately this was not possible because the ragged out-of-band response for both the tweeter and the woofer were not properly attenuated by the crossover.

Sorry, but I have to wonder if the review would have been as favorable had this speaker been provided to Stereophile by a less prestigious manufacturer.

Bill Cassaday  
Show Low, AZ
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**US: CHICAGO**  
**Barry Willis**

Out of action for more than a year, Mobile Fidelity Sound Lab should be returning soon. Chicago online retailer Music Direct has purchased the remastering and reissue specialty record label, according to an announcement made April 24.

Sebastopol, California–based Mobile Fidelity built a large and loyal following in the audiophile community, beginning with its release of high-quality half-speed remasterings of popular recordings in the 1970s. The company benefited from the CD revolution in the 1980s with a series of extremely successful “gold” reissues, but in the late 1990s suffered a cash crunch—the result of bad debt from a bankrupt distributor—even as it was experimenting with remasterings in the SACD and DVD-Audio formats.

The shuttering of the company last year was a shock to many who had come to rely on Mobile Fidelity for excellent-sounding discs. “Mobile Fidelity broke open the market for audiophile recordings,” stated MoFi’s former director of new technology, John Wood. The introduction of gold discs put MoFi on an expansion path, but last year the label’s major distributor went out of business, leaving MoFi a substantial amount of money.

Wood is consulting with Music Direct about the technical direction MoFi will take. “Music Direct owner and president Jim Davis has extremely high standards, as evidenced by his other products. He’s full of energy, and I expect great things for MoFi under his direction. Everyone involved is really excited about where this is going,” Wood commented.

In late April, Music Direct—which worked with Chicago’s Premonition Records in the release of Patricia Barber’s first albums, and also distributes DCC vinyl recordings—acquired all the rights to MoFi’s inventory, processes, patents, and brand name. MoFi will reportedly retain its own identity, but no new release schedule has been announced.

Inquiries about Mobile Fidelity Sound Lab should be sent to Rob Gillis at Music Direct, 318 N. Laflin St., Chicago, IL 60607-1006. Tel: (800) 449-8333 or (312) 433-0200.

**US: HOLLYWOOD**

**Kalman Rubinson**

One of my pet peeves is the large proportion of SACD and DVD-Audio releases that have been remastered from older originals that have much less resolution and quality than these new media can convey. Another is that the multichannel mix is often arbitrary, sometimes placing me in a relation to the performers that I find unnatural and in conflict with what I hear at a live event. Still another peeve is that, in the absence of a truly universal machine that can play CDs, SACDs, DVRs, and DVD-As in any channel configuration, I must make musical choices that are limited by the answer to the question, “Will that disc play on my machine?”

AIX Media Group (www.aixrecords.com) has some very good answers for these problems. First, all of their DVD-Audio/Video discs consist of new performances recorded in up to 16 high-resolution channels and mixed to 5.1 channels. While it’s easy for a new company without a back catalog to commit itself to new multichannel releases, AIX has made some interesting choices. Note that they call their discs “DVD-Audio/Video,” not “1DVD” or “2DVD-Audio.” That’s because these are dual-sided discs: The DVD-A side has a hi-rez (24-bit/96kHz), discrete 5.1-channel program, but without watermarking or any other compromise of the audio signal. The DVD-V side has stereo and Dolby Digital 5.1-channel audio as well as full-motion video of the same program. The result is that you can buy an AIX DVD-Audio/Video disc now and enjoy it on any DVD player. Later, if you get a DVD-A player, you can flip the disc and take advantage of the better-sounding new medium. Of course, you can always flip it back to see the video. As for additional compatibility, I am now listening to (and watching) the AIX sampler in stereo courtesy my DVD-ROM drive. Need I add that the sampler is also Web-enabled?

**Calendar**

Those promoting audio-related seminars, shows, and meetings should fax (do not call) the when, where, and who to (212) 886-2809 at least eight weeks before the month of the event. The deadline for the September 2001 issue is July 2. Mark the fax “Attention Stephen Mejias, 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.

**CALIFORNIA**

- The Bay Area Audiophile Society (BAAS) welcomes new members. BAAS schedules periodic designer and dealer demonstrations, fosters communication and camaraderie among members, and distributes High Note, an informative newsletter. For further information, please contact Dennis Davis at (415) 381-4228 or e-mail bluedeer@value.net.

- Audible Arts (812 S. Winchester Blvd., #150, San Jose) is proud to announce the opening of Silicon Valley’s newest high-end audio and home-theater store. Audible Arts is an authorized dealer for Red Rose Music, Plinius, dCS, Rogue, 47 Lab, Art Audio, Parasound, Creek, Jolida, Silverline, Meadowlark, Gallo, Audes, JPS Labs, pARTicular Design,
**Industry Update**

DVD-Video has the option of multiple camera angles from the beginning, and the AIX DVD-A/V programs have this, plus interviews, other materials, and something wonderfully new and sneaky. To my knowledge, the AIX discs are unique in having dual listening perspectives: Stage and Audience. Some folks like to be completely surrounded by the performers. Others, like John Atkinson and me, prefer to maintain their distance. With an AIX disc, you can just tap your remote and jump from pit to podium. Absolutely fascinating.

The sampler disc is available and really whetted my appetite for more in this format. The musical content is of high quality and ranges from a live performance of The Fabulous Thunderbirds' "Tuff Enuff" to Beethoven's Symphony 6 with Zdenek Macal and the New Jersey Symphonny, with lots of jazz and other good stuff in between. While I generally preferred to be in the audience, I was surprised to find that the Stage mix of Brahms' Piano Quartet in f, Op.34, was perfectly acceptable, and made following the score easier than ever. I'll bet you can't resist continually comparing AC-3 with DVD-A, or the Audience and Stage mixes. In addition, the sampler contains some very nice system-setup instructions and tests.

The first release of AIX DVD-Audio/Video discs should coincide with the publication of this issue of Stereophile. Distribution is being handled by BMG, so the discs should be available at all the usual retail outlets for $24.98 each.

**US: New Jersey**

**Barry Willis**

Back in September 2000, the Secure Digital Music Initiative issued a public challenge that offered cash rewards for successfully uncovering and removing watermarks from recorded music. The challenge was met by a number of hackers, most notable among them Professor Edward Felten of Princeton University’s Computer Science Department.

Felten and a group of colleagues—graduate students at his own institution as well as researchers at Rice University in Houston and at the Xerox Palo Alto Research Center in Silicon Valley—made quick work of several SDMI watermarking technologies, including one by Verance Corporation that had already been licensed for commercial use by music publishers. The SDMI “Hack Challenge” was a public affair, but when Felten and his group decided to go public with their research, SDMI officials put up stiff resistance — so stiff that Felten’s team withdrew their paper from presentation at the Fourth International Information Hiding Workshop, held in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania the last week of April.

The group was threatened with lawsuits for violating the “click-through agreement” they had signed when they accepted the challenge, according to SDMI Foundation secretary and counsel Matthew J. Oppenheim. In an April 9 letter addressed to Felten and his group, Oppenheim—who is also senior counsel for the Recording Industry Association of America—told the researchers that “any disclosure of information gained from participating in the Public Challenge would be outside the scope of activities permitted by the Agreement and could subject you and your research team to actions under the Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DCMA).” The DCMA was enacted toward the end of the Clinton administration to placate the recording industry.

Oppenheim’s letter, misaddressed to “Princeton, NY”—Princeton is in New Jersey—was leaked by an unknown party and has been reproduced on several websites, including one that offers a full reprint of “Reading Between the Lines: Lessons from the SDMI Challenge,” the paper Felten and his associates had intended to present in Pittsburgh.

No technical information was provided to participants in the Hack Challenge. They were given two samples of music, one watermarked and one clean, and a third sample of another piece of watermarked music without a clean copy for comparison. From the three, Felten’s group — and others working independently — were able to “reverse engineer” the technologies used and extract the watermarks, which were verified by SDMI “oracles.” They defeated four of the six watermarking technologies presented, but could not verify whether or not they had succeeded with the remaining two because of problems with the oracles. Felten has stated that he believes that any information-protection scheme can be overcome using techniques like those he and his group used. “There is no code that can’t be cracked,” he has often said.

Legal threats, however, can discourage even the most diligent researcher. Even though they had not accepted the payment offered by the SDMI to successful crackers, Felten’s group withdrew their presentation, which had been scheduled for 10am on Thursday, April 26. In their paper, the authors mentioned that the SDMI challenge “was constructed in a way that made it impossible to even start analyzing the technology.” The fact that they succeeded doesn’t bode well for the future of watermarking.

In the meantime, Digimarc and Verance Corporation, two competitors in the digital watermarking race, welcome anyone interested in high-

**Calendar**

and more! For further information, please visit www.audiblearts.com or call (408) 690-2188.

**Connecticut**

- For information about the *Connecticut Audio Society*, visit www.the-atom.com/cas or call Carl Richard at (860) 745-5937.

**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**

- For details of upcoming monthly meetings of the *Boston Audio Society*, samples from their publication, *The Speaker*, and membership information, visit http://www.bostonaudio.com, e-mail dbsystems@attglobal.net, or call (603) 899-5121.

**Nevada**

- * Premiere Home Entertainment, Las Vegas' newest high-end audio and home-theater store, would like to invite you to celebrate our one-year anniversary. We will have special events scheduled throughout the month. Please stop by 2300 N. Rainbow Blvd., or call (702) 877-0222 for more information.

**New Jersey**

- The *New Jersey Audio Society* welcomes anyone interested in high-
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Beauty is in the details...

Wadia
A Division of AUDIO VIDEO RESEARCH, INC.  795 Highland Drive, Ann Arbor, MI 48108  734.975.4217  www.wadia.com
have been swapping accusations over patent infringements.

On Wednesday, May 2, Tualatin, Oregon–based Digimarc was granted 28 patent applications for digital audio watermarking technologies that it had filed for between 1993 and 1995. The US Patent Office issued a “Notice of Allowance” approving Digimarc's patent claims, and on the same day informed the company that 74 of the 94 claims made in Digimarc’s US Patents #5,636,292 and 5,850,481 had been approved as “patentable.”

The approvals coincided with Digimarc’s announcement of a new video watermarking technology that is intended to protect video content distributed over the Internet. “Digimarc’s early patent filings contain a wealth of pioneering watermarking technology relating to audio, video, and still imagery. We have established a large portfolio of landmark patents in still image and video watermarking, and we are now broadening our portfolio with more key patents in audio watermarking,” said Digimarc CEO Bruce Davis.

Davis saw approval of the claims as validation of litigation that Digimarc had launched earlier this year against its competitor Verance Corporation, citing infringements of patents for technology used to hide watermarks in digital audio files and in other types of media. The notification from the Patent Office will enable Digimarc to pursue its case against Verance, which it had put on hold while Patent Office officials examined the evidence. Davis described the notification as “a great outcome, reaffirming the validity of the vast majority of the claims in these two early patents. We expect the re-exam certificate to be issued later this year, which should permit us to immediately resume the Verance lawsuit.”

The day after the Patent Office made its rulings public, San Diego–based Verance Corp. emphasized that claims made in three of Digimarc’s patent applications were rejected and will remain under reexamination. Digimarc’s celebratory statements were premature, according to Verance executives, who pointed to rejected claims as proof that the dispute is far from resolved. “We are pleased with the Patent Office’s rejections and remain confident that Verance will be absolved of any infringement of those claims, if they survive the reexamination proceedings,” said Verance CEO Robert Warren.

Whether the two adversaries will resolve their dispute in or out of the courtroom isn’t clear at this point. Digimarc has applied for more than 200 patents on its technology.

The annual meeting of the Stereophile’s editorial policy is to review single items in considerable depth, while the UK magazine Hi-Fi Choice, for which I do most of my hi-fi writing, focuses mainly on group tests. Each approach has advantages and disadvantages. When doing singleton reviews, I’m always conscious of the difficulty of placing a product in any sort of market context; when tackling a group, I’m very aware of being unable to do full justice to any one model.

Both methods offer useful insights, but a bonus of the group test is the way it can sometimes give a glimpse of the bigger picture. For example, way back in 1993—around the time the home theater and custom-installation bandwagons were beginning to roll—I decided that someone should test the in-wall loudspeakers that were beginning to appear. I made appropriate holes in my solid-brick walls, assembled a group of likely suspects, and set to work.

By the time I was done, I was able to make two clear generalizations. First, that the mechanical integrity of the speaker mounting was the most important factor in determining sound quality—most of those early in-wall speakers had very flimsy spring-clip mountings, a situation that’s much less common today. Just as interesting was discovering the considerable acoustic advantage of flush-mounting a loudspeaker into a genuinely infinite baffle. This effective-ly removes both box-edge diffraction effects and rear-wall reflections, with an immediate result of the removal of two forms of coloration we’ve almost come to take for granted. Indeed, the performance of a pair of little KEF CR160 6.5” coaxial Uni-Q drivers, rigidly fixed and left open behind, can be quite astonishing, and show just how much unwanted garbage a conventional box can add. The logical next step, of fitting a pair of 15” Tannoy dual-concentrics (the alnico magnet drive-unit used in the Westminster Royal), had true state-of-the-art aspirations.

Recently, I thought it would be interesting to try out half a dozen of the compact powered speakers that seem to be becoming more popular here in Britain since the advent of multichannel sources. The majority of these had roots in pro audio, where powered and active speakers have long been the norm, but what suits the pro side won’t necessarily satisfy the hi-fi enthusiast.

It became pretty clear during the tests that the amplifier used in the powered speaker tended to have more influence than the loudspeaker components, and that the brands with hi-fi heritage tended to have the edge over their pro equivalents.

Calendar

performance 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 annalogg@aol.com or to markjmills@earthlink.net.

NEW YORK

• Friday, June 22: The Audiophile Society welcomes Rogue Audio, presenting their Magnum Series, in addition to the Model 99 preamp and Model 120 monoblock amp, Call David Nemzer at (718) 802-0183 for details.
• For information on the monthly meetings of the Long Island Music and Video Society, call Lee Grosberg at (516) 239-9004.
• 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 nutrologists from September through June, call Roy Harris at (516) 489-9576.

VERMONT

• Sound Essentials, Vermont's high-performance home audio specialist, is looking to organize a music- and audio-enthusiast club. Activities would include monthly gatherings, guest speakers, group discounts to the VSO, and
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— Brent Butterworth, Home Theater, May 2000

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audio rivals. Generally, active drive seemed to confer real benefits in the coherence of fine detail in the high frequencies.

Linn's loudspeakers are convertible active/passive designs, and its interesting to find that the tweeter in the active version of their 5140 model is driven some 3dB "hotter" above 4kHz than in the passive version. The high frequencies of an active speaker seem to sound cleaner than an equivalent passive design; there's therefore less need for the designer to "hide" the tweeter to avoid it sounding too "obvious." That ties in rather neatly with my review (in the October 2000 Stereophile) of the Naim NBL speaker, which I criticized for having too "hot" a treble, probably because the passive crossover design had been arrived at by transferring the balance chosen for the original active version.

The most interesting group test of all was a comparison of eight high-end power amplifiers, all priced between £1400 and £3250 (approximately $2000-$4500) and split evenly between tube and transistor types. I had last group-tested amplifiers in the late 1970s, and did so then mainly because the received wisdom in the UK at the time was that all amplifiers sounded basically the same. Though I didn't hold that opinion, I remember finding it quite difficult to hear the differences among the various models.

I don't think many in hi-fi today would dispute the relevance and importance of an amplifier's sound. This time around, it seemed absurdly easy to hear quite obvious sonic differences among the models. This was strong evidence that specialist hi-fi really does make progress over the long haul, despite (or because of) its often "retro" tendencies.

If I was surprised at how easy it was to hear amplifier differences, I was no less surprised to find how easily the tube amps outclassed their solid-state rivals, even though all the source components I was using were themselves solid-state. As theory predicts, the transistor amplifiers could go louder, and generally did a better job in the bass. But they lost out big time to the tube units in midband dynamic expression, time coherence, and transparency.

Attempting to make comparisons across such a technological divide is difficult, but in my judgment only one of the solid-states (an Electrocompaniet combo) had an overall quality comparable to the tube designs, and the differences within the tube group were themselves substantial and fascinating.

Of course, eight amplifiers, all of UK or European origin, is too small a sample to be truly representative, but since that group test I've found it quite difficult to reassemble my regular Naim solid-state amplification. I keep missing the midband deliciousness that only tubes seem able to supply.

At the same time, it's a blessed relief to get back to full remote control. The trouble with going thermionic is that you're expected to don the hair shirt of 20th-century ergonomics at the same time. Of the eight amplifiers, all four transistor models offered remote control of at least input switching and volume, whereas the four tube models were able to muster just a single remote volume control among them.

I think I could cope with the extra heat output of tubes, and with the need to re-tube every once in a while, but the real problem in going thermionic is that the habits of 10 years of remote control are very hard to break. I know in my heart that my system would actually get less use if I had to get up every time I wanted to change source or adjust volume.

**UNITED KINGDOM**

**Peter van Willenswaard**

Recently, a message landed in my e-mail box concerning the corrosion of some CDs produced by PDO UK. Although the note itself dated from December 1999, the CDs in question were produced from 1988 to 1993 and began to show problems years after that, so the information still has value. The note was signed by Richard Howard, production manager of Hyperion Records.

If you should have one or more CDs that played well before but have lately developed playback problems, it might be worth your while to read Hyperion's message (reprinted below). If the problem CDs were made by PDO UK, the company will replace them. I quote:

"A note about corroding CDs manufactured by Philips & Du Pont Optical UK Ltd (PDO):

"The pressing factory PDO has acknowledged responsibility for producing some CDs between 1988 and 1993 using a lacquer which was not suitable to withstand the corrosive effect of the sulphur content of paper used in the printing of CD booklets and other paper parts. The problem has been extremely disruptive to us and has caused much embarrassment. We can only apologize for any alarm and inconvenience caused and assure you of our commitment to your satisfaction.

"The symptoms of the corrosion are obvious. Audibly it manifests first towards the end of the disc (ie, the outer edge) and sounds not unlike rhythmic LP surface noise. Visibly it manifests as a coppery-bronze discoloration, usually on the edge of the label side of the disc. (NB: It is not the

**Calendar**

**VIRGINIA**

- **Down To Earth Audio** (15 S. College Ave., Salem) is proud to announce that it's been appointed an authorized dealer for Granite Audio. We also are the exclusive dealer for Accusound Loudspeakers, and an authorized dealer for Belles (PM1), Briston, Classé, Creek, Kora, Pro-Ject, Straight Wire, Thule, Totem Acoustic, and more. For further information or an audition, call (540) 375-0080, or visit www.downtoearthaudio20m.com.

- **Hi Fi Farm** is moving into its new facilities in June 2001. We welcome all to our Open House and seminars throughout the months of July and August. We'll introduce many new products from companies like Piega Loudspeakers, Audiomeca, Aioia, B&K, and more. The new building is located at 1650 Scruggs Rd., just one
overall yellow tint which is common to all PDO pressings. This is due to the addition of a tiny amount of yellow dye which PDO adds to the polycarbonate for cosmetic purposes.)

“At the time that PDO were manufacturing the affected CDs for us, they were also pressing for other classical labels and we suggest that you check any discs you have from ASV, Unicorn-Kanchana, Pearl, DGG, IMP, Decca and Collins. Given the nature of the problem of corrosion, in that it progresses over time, we recommend that you check any suspect discs on, say, a six-monthly basis. The name of the disc manufacturer is usually (but not always) engraved around the center hole of the disc in the transparent area. If there is no manufacturer’s name shown at all then it would be worth checking with PDO. They have agreed to replace any CDs which are corroding as a result of the defect. If you have reason to believe that there are discs in your collection made by PDO which are showing signs of corrosion, contact PDO directly.

“Customers should not return faulty discs to dealers, distributors, or to Hyperion. They can, if they wish, return the disc to PDO but it is not necessary. Initially at least, just a letter will do. If they do return any CDs they should send just the disc, not the jewel case or printed matter, because PDO will replace only the disc.”

UK customers can contact PDO’s Helpline at Freepost BK1080 Blackburn BB1 5HR. Tel: 0800 387063. Overseas customers should contact PDO at Philips & Du Pont Optical UK Ltd, Philips Road, Blackburn, Lancashire BB1 5RZ, England. Tel: (44) (0)1254-505354. Fax: (44) 1254-54729. PDO also has an e-mail address dedicated to this problem: pathurnshelfline@compuserve.com.

UNITED KINGDOM

Paul Messenger
The Annual General Meeting of the British Federation of Audio (BFA), held April 10, was a good opportunity for key members of the industry to get together and chat without the pressures of trying to run a hi-fi show exhibit at the same time.

Retiring chairman Gordon Provan delivered his annual report, pointing out the value of the BFA as an industry representative body able to attract substantial government subsidies to help members exhibit at some overseas shows. (The Las Vegas CES and the Frankfurt High End Show receive such support, but not the Moscow or Shanghai events.)

The past year has seen good trading conditions in the UK and the US, with some recovery, however sporadic, in the Far East. Mainland Europe has remained weak, due to the high value of the British pound. Signs are that the expected US slowdown might be balanced by a gradual recovery in Europe.

The BFA’s finances are in good shape, and treasurer Stephen N. Harris was elected chairman for the forthcoming year.

US: NEW YORK CITY

Wes Phillips
On Tuesday, April 17, 2001, New York said farewell to jazz pianist and composer John Lewis in a personal ceremony at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. More than 5000 New Yorkers from all walks of life attended, but the most visibly represented community was that of music.

I arrived early and took a seat about a third of the way back from the nave — everything closer was already occupied. The first person I saw was Ken Burns, now part of the jazz community, and then I realized that the elegant woman in the row in front of me was Maya Angelou. Lew Tabackin stood next to me for a while, talking to Percy and Albert Heath — all three breaking off repeatedly to greet impeccably groomed gentlemen of a certain age, many of whom I recognized from decades of album covers and concert footage. Suddenly, a lean figure in a beautifully tailored double-breasted suit was standing silently next to me. It was David Chesky.

“I studied with Professor Lewis,” David said. “This is hard for me to take in — somehow I thought he’d live forever.”

David wandered off, talking quietly to other guests, and after a while, the service began. Performances by Wynton Marsalis, Jim Hall and Percy Heath, Toshiko Akiyoshi and Lew Tabackin, Dick Katz, Jimmy Heath and Eric Reed, and the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra alternated with personal recollections by Alunet Ertegun, Gunther Schuller, Gary Giddins, Stanley Crouch, and George Wein. It was touching, personal, and — oddly enough, given the size of the venue — intimate.

Lewis the man seemed close at hand — the respect offered by the musicians was palpable, and the personal recollections went back nearly 60 years. I felt Lewis’ spirit most strongly, however, when George Wein was at the podium. He read a letter he’d

Calendar

mile from our current location. For more information, call (800) 752-4018 or visit www.hifiarm.com.

WASHINGTON

• 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) 281-8512 or Earl at (206) 907-8026.

• Premier Audio & Home Theater (5218 University Way, Seattle) is proud to announce the addition of Wisdom Audio speakers to our line of high-quality electronics. Wisdom will join Conrad-Johnson, JMlab, Audio Refinement, Art Audio, Simaudio, Meadowlark, Audio Physic, AudioPism, Harmonic Technology, Alpha-Core, Goertz, Analysis Plus, and more. For more information, please call (206) 985-0209.

• Wednesday, June 20 and Thursday, June 21, 5–10pm: Definitive Audio (14405 NE 20th St., Bellevue, WA) presents The Home Theater Experience, including showroom debuts from Linn Products Scotland, B&W, Runco, and Madrigal. Representatives from Linn, Runco, Transparent, Revel, Mark Levinson, Proceed, Madrigal Imaging, Meridian, Dynaudio, Sonic Frontiers, Marantz, Paradigm, Lexicon, and Rotel, among others, will be on hand to demonstrate and discuss their products — some never before seen by the public. Valet parking, catering. For further info, please call (425) 746-3188.

BRAZIL

• The Hi-Fi SHOW 2001, sponsored by the Brazilian magazine Clube do
received from David Chesky, who described Lewis not as a great man or a jazz legend, but as a teacher and nurturing spirit.

I asked David if he'd let us publish that letter here to honor John Lewis' accomplishments as a teacher.

"I never knew John Lewis. I only knew Professor Lewis.

"When I was a young student, I had the privilege of studying with Professor Lewis. I am grateful to him not only for teaching me, but also for having enough faith to give me opportunities to create a life in music. After all these years, I've realized that Professor Lewis taught me the meaning of a special word — the word is elegance. Elegance is not a word for the young. It takes maturity and living to understand this word. Professor Lewis, like his music, was the epitome of elegance. In today's world we are bombarded with fluorescent colors, but Professor Lewis' music was like a beautiful watercolor. A perfect Zen simplicity of elegance and grace.

"The last time I saw Professor Lewis was at Clark Terry's One on One session. I had no problem calling all of the musicians by their first names — Clark, Monty [Alexander], Billy [Taylor]. Though over 20 years had passed since school, when it was Professor Lewis' turn, the words 'John Lewis' would simply not roll off my tongue. It was 'Professor Lewis, take one'.

"When he started to play I was still the student, and he was still the teacher. And as I listened to his music as a mature man, all the lessons made sense. Now I can fully appreciate elegance." — David Chesky, Student of Professor Lewis.

Audio e Video, takes place August 3–5 at the new Centro de Exposicoes da Camara Americana de Comercio (Exposition Center of the American Trade Center — CCEXPO-AMCHAM). The top audio and video event in Latin America, the show will feature more than 120 high-end audio and video manufacturers from around the world, occupying 60 rooms and covering 28,000 square feet. For more info, visit www.clubedoaudio.com.br.
Verity Audio Teams Up with Audiophile Systems

It gives us great pleasure to announce our appointment as the sole U.S. distributor for Verity Audio loudspeakers. Having had the opportunity to use these speakers with our dCS digital converters, we've come to appreciate their unique capacity to resolve the detail available from today's new high-data-rate music formats as well as CDs upsampled to 24/192.

As those of you who have known us for the last thirty years realize, adding new lines is not something we do lightly. But, rarely have we found a product that impressed us as much as Verity. As just one example of their perfectionism, even though their drive units are among the most consistent in the world, Verity takes the additional step of computer matching the drivers to be used in each pair of loudspeakers. And the frequency sweep of each individual driver is permanently archived, allowing Verity to supply a precisely matched replacement in those rare cases where a repair is required. This is the type of attention to detail that has resulted in the Fidelio receiving a Class-A recommendation from Stereophile.

More Raves for the Arcam A85 Integrated

A couple of month's ago we quoted from What Hi-Fi?'s five-star review on the Arcam A85. This month the raves continue with Hi-Fi News saying, "Thankfully, besides showing how clean and detailed a modern amplifier can sound, the A85 pays attention to the elusive goal of 'musicality'. Unlike some superbly-specified amplifiers which aim at all cost for, say, vanishingly low distortion, the Arcam A85 could nimbly communicate music to the listener... Arguably, today's finest amplifier under [$1,500]."

And, Hi-Fi Choice put it up against a whole pack of amplifiers, most of which cost more than the A85. Their results are summarized in the table below and typified by the following quote:

"Perhaps the most striking praise came from one who pointed to detail in the relative silences between notes in the Brahms recording that was simply not audible through most of the other amplifiers."

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<th>Sound</th>
<th>Value</th>
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<td>Arcam A85</td>
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<td>Creek 5350SE</td>
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<td>Exposure 2010</td>
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<td>Marantz PM17 MKII</td>
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<td>Thule Sprit IA60B</td>
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<td>YBA Integre Alpha DT</td>
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Now that’s a soundstage.”

Dr. Malcolm Omar Hawkins1 was speaking. He and I were listening to the Audio Physic Step loudspeakers at HI-FI ’96.

I concurred with the Professor. It was the kind of soundstage that audiophiles dream of, where walls disappear and the space of the recording replaces the acoustics of the room.

I never got around to reviewing the small, stand-mounted Audio Physic Step, but I remembered that demo. So when I received a call recently from Frank Huang of Audio Outlet, in Mount Kisco, New York, I was all ears.

“Sam, you like great inexpensive speakers, don’t you?”

It was Frank’s way of introducing something he thought might be good for the column — grist for the mill!

“Nah, Frank, I’ve given up on cheap speakers. I want to review the important stuff. From now on, no speakers under $10,000/pair.”

I couldn’t faze him.

“You like a soundstage, don’t you? You like value for money? You’ll love the Audio Physic Spark III.”

Such a salesman!

I drove over to Frank’s showroom, where he’d set up the speakers, according to the importer’s instructions, in the middle of the room. The listening chair was close to the back wall. I turned off the lights and settled in to listen. Sure enough, the village of Mount Kisco became Soundstage City.

“Yours for a mere $2495/pair,” said Frank cheerfully, when he popped into the listening room a few minutes later.

Listening in the darkened room, with eyes closed, I could not locate the speakers. Yet within the vast soundstage, seemingly freed from the physical boundaries of the room, the imaging was incredibly precise. Vastness without vagueness… impressive!

It’s not unusual for a minimonitor — like the Audio Physic Step — to produce a vast soundstage with precise imaging. But this was a full-range floor-stander with some real bass below 50Hz. Some balls. I was sold — on doing a review, that is.

The Spark III is the smallest, least expensive floorstander in the Audio Physic line. Like the other speakers in the line, the Spark III is made in Germany and was designed by Joachim Gerhard, company founder and chief engineer. He’s a man with a mission, apparently: to get you to listen in the nearfield, if at all possible, and to build speakers that really excel when set up for nearfield listening. (Some speakers just don’t lend themselves to nearfield listening, as I’ll discuss later.)

I immediately called Allen Perkins, of Immedia, the US importer, and arranged for a review pair. Now maybe I could have a soundstage to challenge that of my friend Lars. (The Swede always has a soundstage.)

My guess is that the Spark III, like most small speakers, is probably best suited to small- to medium-size rooms. The Spark (for short) stands 39” high and weighs 37½ lbs. Its front baffle is as narrow as possible — only 6” wide. An integral wooden base (which the dealer or end-user must attach) tilts the speaker back 7°.

You might think the speaker would easily tip over, but it doesn’t — the base, which allows for spikes, stabilizes it. The base measures 9” wide by 12” deep, so the footprint is small. A slot in the base vents the port on the bottom of the speaker cabinet.

The cabinet is made of medium-density fiberboard (MDF) and finished in a wood veneer — your choice of cherry or black ash as standard, mahogany or bird’s-eye maple for $200/pair extra. Fit and finish are excellent — but I just might go for those exotic finishes.

As for biwiring, Nertz! (That’s not a German word but an American one, popularized in the 1920s by Eddie Cantor.) A single pair of gold-plated, high-quality speaker terminals is provided at the bottom of each speaker cabi-

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1 Malcolm’s head of the Center for Audio Research and Engineering at England’s Essex University, and occasionally contributes to Stereophile.
net, close to the base. Good thinking—you might need some extra length of speaker wire to get the speakers where Herr Gerhard and Herr Perkins say they “belong”—in the middle of the room.

Front grilles are provided, but you know better than to use them—these are audiophile speakers. Be a mensch and just store them in the box, or put them on the speakers only when the in-laws arrive. I thought the Sparks looked rather nice naked. (Marina no doubt wishes that I did.)

Impedance is given as 4 ohms, sensitivity as 89dB/W/m. The frequency response is specified as 38Hz-40kHz, ±3dB. No one could say that the Spark is topped-off! Who has such hearing? Batman? And how could it possibly matter, listening to CDs?

Yet the highs were not tipped-up, either.

Tonally, I thought the speaker sounded on the slightly dry side of neutral. Not a bad thing, necessarily—I noted no artificial sweetening. But I did welcome the liquidity of tubes—or of a tube-like solid-state amp such as the Belles 150A or Rega Mira 2000 integrated.

I listened, as recommended, in the nearfield, and found that the Spark III sparkled aplenty with the 25W Quicksilver Mini Monos—in my listening room, anyway. The room, with alcove, measures about 17' by 21'. I thought the Spark and the room were sized right for each other.

I tried the McIntosh MC2102 tube amp, even though this $6000 stereo amp might be deemed pricey to use with a $2500/pair speaker. A more likely combination might be the new 60Wpc Conrad-Johnson MV60—I’ve always liked whichever amp was the bottom of CJ’s tube line, starting with the MV45. If you’re close to Mount Kisco, you’ll be able to hear this combination at Frank’s place. Alas, the MV60 did not arrive in time for my deadline.

For most of my listening, I chose the Musical Fidelity A3CR preamp, with its astonishingly good line stage, and the equally impressive A3CR power amp.

To get the most from the Audio Physic speaker, I had to listen, as recommended, in the nearfield.

For CD, I used the Rega Jupiter CD player as primary source.

The Spark is a two-way speaker with three drivers. The twin Nomex 5½" midrange/woofers are manufactured by Peerless, in Denmark. Importer Perkins surmises that the cones are made of a composite of paper pulp and carbon fiber. It’s light, stiff, and no doubt fast—as I was, once. Connected in parallel, the Peerless drivers cross over at 2.25kHZ to a "ring radiator" tweeter made by Vifa, another Danish driver manufacturer.

The tweeter has a metal phase plug in the center, surrounded by a cloth radiating area. The cloth, according to Perkins, is a kind of artificial silk manufactured in Germany by Dr. Müller (a company, not a person).

The voice-coil former is made of Dr. Müller’s cresar silk fabric, in the center of the radiating area. Thus, the voice-coil activates the tweeter from a ring in the center of the radiating area, not from the edge of the tweeter. This allows for lower distortion, according to Perkins, and a frequency response that stretches out to 40kHz.

It also allows the crossover point to be set low enough—at 2.25kHz—to avoid problems in the upper midrange. As Perkins told me, midrange drivers tend to distort at the upper end of the midrange. “If you let the tweeter drop down enough, the midrange driver, or pair of drivers, won’t be covering frequencies it shouldn’t. If you hear distortion in the highs, maybe the midrange driver is more to blame than that the tweeter.” He was not referring to Audio Physic speakers, of course.

At first, because I had other speakers in the listening room, I tried listening to the Spark in our living room, at a distance of about 12' from the cabinets. The soundstage and imaging were more than okay, but fell short of spectacular. But if I listened up close—to about 5' from the speakers—things improved considerably. Unfortunately, I was sitting on our coffee table. (Better not let Marina see!)

To get the most from this speaker, I had to listen, as recommended, in the nearfield. That didn’t mean I had to place the speakers exactly as Perkins recommended, but the closer I got to the suggested sweet spot, the better they sounded—the more, let us say, they sparked. (Those setup instructions are yours to browse for free at Immedia’s website. Go to immediasound.com, then click on Audio Physic.)

If possible, listen with the speakers in front of your room’s long wall. (If you have a squash listening room, as I do, it probably won’t make much difference.) Bring the speakers far forward—not a third of the way into the room or 3' from the rear wall, but halfway into the room.

Now spread the speakers far apart—by even as much as 7' or 8'. Play with the toe-in to achieve the best center fill and focus the sound. Start with the speaker axes crossing just behind your listening chair, which should be as close to the rear wall as possible.

That’s it—soundstage city. Cables can be a problem, though —snakes on the carpet. Practically speaking, the Audio Physic Spark will probably work best in a dedicated room, where speaker placement comes before furniture placement.

If you want to read more stuff for free on the internet, go to http://speakerbuilding.com/content/1039. There you’ll find an interview with Joachim Gerhard by Lars Myttig. Another audiophile Lars! The brackets show where I’ve tidied up the text a bit. (Nice of them to publish the interview in English!)

“For me, [there is no question that speakers, except for dipoles or line sources, benefit by being listened to in the nearfield,” Gerhard told Myttig.

“I don’t like time delay; the sound should be heard only once...”
Exceptional Sound
No Exceptions

All Rotel Home Theater and Hi Fi electronics are exceptional. Each product is carefully designed and manufactured using select grade components and follows a proven design philosophy we call Balanced Design. The RMB1075 featured here is a prime example of Balanced Design. It incorporates a perfect blend of superb electronic engineering, eloquent industrial design and musical emotion. RMB1075 will deliver 120 watts into all five channels during the most explosive movie pyrotechnics, or reveal the smallest musical details at a fraction of the power, all with crystal clarity. Exceptional sound, no exceptions. Hear all of our Rotel components at your authorized specialty audio dealer.
that come from the side [are] delayed and disturb the image….”

Gerhard offered this wisdom on placing speakers in a room:

“When you are going to talk in a room, do you go to the corner? To the back wall? No, you go to the middle. Try it out yourself. [Have] someone talk in your listening room while [this person] walk[s] around, and find where the sound is most pleasing. Good [speaker] placement is for free.”

Other benefits accrue from nearfield listening. Room problems become less of a worry; you might find you can avoid expensive room treatment. Your amplifier will seem more powerful, as Antony Michaelson of Musical Fidelity pointed out to me. Your 50Wpc amp might sound more like 100Wpc. You won’t be wasting all that power trying to fill up the room. You can save money — power’s expensive, and power corrupts.

This type of setup doesn’t work with planar speakers, such as MartinLogans, Quads, or Magneplanars. Don’t even try. Also, certain speakers don’t seem to lend themselves to nearfield listening, especially large floorstanders whose multiple drivers need distance between the cabinet and you in order to integrate. If you own a pair of stand-mounted minimonitors, you could get especially lucky. The suggested setup worked like a charm with the Triangle Titus XS, for instance.

Here’s something I found interesting. When I set the Sparks about a third of the way into my listening room, I found that the bass was a little shy and dynamics were slightly lacking. Sparks did not quite fly. Still, I got a terrific soundstage, especially when I brought my listening chair up close, to about 5’ from the cabinets.

Halfway into the room, though, the bass firmed up and dynamics greatly improved. Talk about spark — the Sparks really jumped! Yet there was nothing bloated or overdone about the bottom end.

“That’s some of the best bass you’ve had in your listening room,” opined my friend and colleague Lars Fredell. “And that’s a soundstage.”

“Exactly what Professor Hawksford said. By the way, Lars, we’re listening to a mono recording…”

Naxos had sent me some of the Jascha Heifetz 100th-anniversary reissues — recordings from the 1930s and ’40s, when the great violinist was at his peak. There was Heifetz, standing in the center, fiddling far behind the loudspeakers — as if mono, indeed, didn’t matter. Or SACD. Or DVD-Audio. Don’t get me started.

Any complaints about the Spark? Not at $2500/pair. I heard no stridency or peaky quality in the treble, indicating that, hey, maybe there was something to Dr. Müller’s artificial silk.

I have heard more refined trebles, however — as from the JMLab Micro Utopia ($5000/pair plus $1000 for stands). I could have done with greater definition, more delicacy — but I’d probably have to pay more. I thought that the overall tonal balance was a little dry, as I’ve said, but I never found

**Vastness without vagueness—perhaps no other speakers have pulled off such a disappearing act in my listening room.**

... the Spark edgy or irritating. Finally, while the bass was extended, dynamic, and controlled, the very deepest bass notes were missing.

The big things were the soundstaging and imaging, of course — nothing short of spectacular. Vastness without vagueness. Perhaps no other speakers have pulled off such a disappearing act in my listening room. How did Herr Gerhard do it?

I suspect by paying attention to a combination of things: the 7° tiltback; the narrow front baffle; and the three separate chambers at strategic points in the cabinet, lined with French bitumen (a tarry, rubbery substance). Why French bitumen? It’s better, apparently.

As Perkins pointed out, Audio Physic tries “to use minimum damping to keep the sensitivity up and the sound as open and quick as possible. This also results in less stored energy.”

I was really stunned by the sound quality of these speakers. Soundstage matters. And because of their spectacular soundstage, the Sparks got me closer to live — even with historic recordings.

The Spark might light your fire, too. If you’re shopping for speakers for about $2500/pair, it’s a must-audition.

**B&W CDM9 NT**

Now for a speaker that appears to thrive with more conventional room placement.

It’s the B&W CDM9 NT, the largest model in B&W’s CDM family of speakers. (I reviewed the CDM1 NT last November, in Vol.23 No.11.) The speaker stands 39½” high — same height as the Audio Physic Spark — by 8” wide by 12½” deep. But it weighs 58 lbs — about 20 lbs more than the Spark.

The MDF cabinet is finished in a choice of real-wood veneers: black ash, red-stained cherrywood, or cherrywood. I suggest you avoid the black ash — why take a fine wood veneer and spray-paint it black?
The CDM9 NT's frequency response is given as 38Hz-25kHz, ±3dB. Sensitivity is stated as 90dB/W/m, and nominal impedance is given as 8 ohms with a minimum of 3 ohms. That dip might be a little tough on some amps, low-powered tube amps in particular. B&W recommends 50-200W of amplifier power. Price is $2600/pair.

The 61Wpc (count 'em) Rega Mira integrated amplifier proved to have enough muscle to drive the CDM9 NTs in our living room, and this was an especially fine-sounding combination — warm, rich, relaxed. Not perhaps the most lively sound — the CDM9 NT lacked a little...what? sparkle? — but it was a sound I could easily live with. I also tried the slightly more powerful (85Wpc) Creek 350SE, which also did a credible job of driving the B&Ws.

How low could I go in terms of power? I knew better than to even try the 3.5Wpc Sun Audio SV-2A3, but I thought that the 25W Quicksilver Mini Monos might do the trick. Alas, I thought the amps were too mini to give me the dynamics I wanted.

For most of my listening, I used the Musical Fidelity A3CR preamp/powers-amp combo. I used a Denon DCD-1650 CD player as a transport into a Monarchy Audio 24-bit/96kHz DIP, into an MSB Link DAC III with upsampling and Power Base. The Rega Jupiter CD player also paid a brief visit.

In our living room, the CDM9 NTs replaced the exiting JMlab Micro Utopia loudspeakers — I can't keep everything, alas. The Micro Utopia is a stand-mounted monitor, of course; when you factor in stands, it's more than twice as expensive as the CDM9 NT.

Still, I did not feel myself deprived. Oh, the JMlab Micro Utopia gave me more treble refinement — the top end was smoother. And this French speaker gave me more overall resolution, too. But the B&W CDM9 NT gave me a richer, fuller bottom end and a somewhat more liquid, full-bodied sound overall. The upper midrange and treble, while not as refined, struck me as even more sweet — a B&W hallmark that has made the marque a favorite among classical listeners.

My wife, Marina, missed the piano-black elegance and exotic woods of the Micro Utopia, but allowed that the CDM9 NT, too, is a beautiful piece of furniture. And the look is intriguing, with the Nautilus-derived tweeter almost floating on top of the speaker. (The back of the tweeter's teardrop-shaped tube is nestled inside a rubbery, anti-resonant polyethylene surround.)

This is the same tweeter found in the CDM1 NT, and in all NT-series speakers but the center-channel model. The tweeter is derived from but not identical to the one used in B&W's top-of-the-line Nautilus series, as I explained in my writeup of the CDM1 NT in November 2000.

The idea of the teardrop-shaped tube is to soak up energy radiated from the back of the 1" metal-alloy dome, so that little or none of the energy is reflected back to smear the sound.

The B&W CDM9 NT gave me a richer, fuller bottom end and a somewhat more liquid, full-bodied sound overall.
OK. We admit it. We are not really home theater guys. Since 1973 we have been building some of the world’s best two-channel electronics exclusively for high-end audio systems.

So when we decided to introduce a new power amplifier that home theater enthusiasts could use in their systems, we simply took the easiest route by building what we know best: a high-end Audiophile power amp that rivals anything else on the market.

So, what's home theater about our new PowerFrame amp?

Simple. You can add as many or as few channels as you need. No compromises, no sweat. Buy it for your two-channel setup because it is nothing short of awesome.

Add up to 4 more channels in the comfort of your home, whenever you wish. Truly plug and play and easy to install in minutes.

Each module is a self-contained power amp complete with transformer and supply. 200 watt stereo, 300 watt mono, there’s even an integrated amp you can plug in.

This is the revolutionary new PowerFrame system from PS Audio. Frames are available as either MultiFrames or SingleFrames.

Call us or visit our web site for more details. Our web site is chock full of free tips, and valuable information that you can use regardless of your setup.
finally, the “perfect sound forever” chickens have come home to roost. “CDs Forever — No Scratch That,” a splashy story in the February 2 Wall Street Journal, reports that there may be up to “300 million damaged compact discs out there.” According to the article, written by a WSJ staffer, “An estimated $1 billion to $4 billion of unusable CDs [are] piling up in American living rooms.”

Turns out that digital slobs face the same music as the analog variety — only in time-release fashion. If you don’t handle your LPs with care, the damage is immediate. With CDs, it may take some time, but eventually they either skip or won’t play at all.

Is this news to you? Of course not, but it is to millions of suckers who believed the hype they inhaled during the mid-’80s — including, according to the WSJ story, articles in both Time and the Washington Post, which declared CDs “virtually indestructible.” Some myths die harder than others: the WSJ story repeats the one about CDs sounding better than LPs.

Meanwhile, the article reports, a multi-million-dollar industry has been built on resurrecting damaged discs that don’t play at all or stick in one place like a — a — a broken record.

The Disc Doctor’s Miracle Record Cleaner
It’s not quite a multi-million-dollar biz, but between the vacuum-cleaning machines from VPI, Nitty Gritty, and Loricraft, and the fluids we spill to keep them operating, vinyl fanatics drop relatively big bucks on the pursuit of clean records and, we hope, pristine, silent surfaces.

My record-cleaning fluid of choice is The Disc Doctor’s (www.discdoc.com) Miracle Record Cleaner. I also use non-alcoholic Torumat TM 7-XH, mostly on noisy or scratched LPs, which seem to benefit from its slight lubricating action. (My original Disc Doctor review ran in March 1997, Vol.20 No.3.)

Recently, some readers complained about the non-availability of Disc Doctor’s record-cleaning products, so those products were removed from last April’s “Recommended Components.” The Disc Doctor, aka H. Duane Goldman, is a genuine chemist; he called to explain what had happened, and to assure me and you that his products are currently available. The supply problem had been caused by a changeover to a new applicator pad material and supplier, necessitated by the old supplier running out of the material.

I give the Disc Doctor’s cleaning fluid and applicator pads my highest recommendation.

and not being able to obtain more. Because the initial batches of the new pad material would not hold the backing adhesive properly, the fastidious Duane refused to ship any pads until a remedy could be found. The problem has now been solved, and pads are now available in sizes to fit records of every diameter.

Currently, a pint of Miracle Record Cleaner (good for 300–350 average-condition LPs) and a pair of brushes cost $62.40, including postage and handling. Buying a quart instead of a pint costs an additional $14.50. That much should keep you in business indefinitely — unless you’re a ritual cleaner who never stops to actually play records. (You know who you are.) I asked Goldman to send me some fluid and two new pads.

As I wrote in my original review, Miracle Record Cleaner contains no isopropyl alcohol, which, according to the Disc Doc, extracts the fillers and extenders used in most vinyl formulations to increase elasticity. A stylus coursing through brittle vinyl can cause tiny chunks to break free, which is one of the causes of pops and ticks. However, Goldman’s research convinced him that alcohol-free solutions were incapable of removing the mold-release compounds used to keep records from sticking in the press; his final formulation contains a very low concentration of the water-soluble alcohol 1-hydroxypropane (n-propanol).

The rest of the fluid is purified water and a number of “modern surfactants” (you don’t want to be using old-fashioned surfactants, do you?), namely sodium ethylenediaminetetraacetate, ammonium dimethylbenzenesulfonate, and triethanolammonium dodecylbenzenesulfonate. If you want to mix up your own record-cleaning formulation, you won’t find these ingredients at your local Target (proper French pronunciation: “Tarjay”). Miracle Record Cleaner is a semi-concentrate that can be applied as-is to extremely dirty records, though Goldman recommends a 2:1 cleaner/distilled water solution for most LPs.

Disc Doctor’s applicator pads, which look like sections of licorice 1-beam, are made of a rubbery kind of material stiff enough to exert sufficient pressure on the record, but soft enough to give under excessive force — should it slip out of your hand, it won’t destroy the record you’re trying to clean. The pad itself is a broad expanse of black plush material that efficiently holds and spreads the fluid deep into the grooves. You’ll feel that as you lift it off the record.

The Disc Doctor’s suggested methodology (complete instructions included) is different from mine, but whatever you do, you can’t simply apply his fluid and then wipe or vacuum it off. You must finish the job by applying steam-distilled water, which is why the brushes are sold in pairs, one for the fluid and one for the distilled water. The DD likes to air-dry his records in a dish rack. I prefer applying fluid with his applicator pad, removing most of it with an Allos Orbitrac (but not to the point of total dryness), then dousing the record with distilled water using the second brush, and finishing by vacuuming the LP dry. The distilled-water bath and careful rinse are mandatory — if you let a residue of Miracle fluid dry on the LP, it will appear as a milky-white discoloration, and you’ll hear it as lots of crunchy noise. If this happens, it’s not a problem: it comes off with a distilled water bath.
When you’re finished, your records will be clean, and will sound as good as they can—which can range from dead silent to better than you thought possible. My original copy of Fritz Reiner and the CSO’s 1954 recording of Strauss’s Also sprach Zarathustra (RCA Living Stereo LSC-1806) looked perfect but suffered from a swishing sound at the beginning. I vacuum-cleaned it with other fluids many times but heard little improvement. After repeated applications of Miracle Record Cleaner, the record is now almost dead silent. I give the Disc Doctor’s cleaning fluid and applicator pads my highest recommendation.

**Excruciating AC Cord Comparison… Kept Short**

Think about it: Electrical juice flows from the power-generating station to a substation, through miles and miles of cable to a pole in front of your house, and then to your circuit breaker and wall socket. That a 6’ length of cord from wall socket to component should make such a big difference don’t make no sense!

I’ll leave it to others to tell you about filtering, RFI rejection, amount and type of conductor, winding geometry, and other reasons—don’t ask me why AC cords should make any kind of significant sonic differences. But they do.

I chose to compare three 6’ cords using the Howland HP-100 preamp as the source: Howland’s own cord upgrade ($538, not currently in production), the Electro Glide Fatboy ($2000), and Wireworld’s new Silver Electra Series III+ ($550). I then compared the Fatboy, Silver Electro, and PS Audio’s Lab Cable ($600, reviewed by Robert Deutsch in December 2000) using the Chord CPM 3300 integrated amplifier (reviewed elsewhere in this issue).

LPs used in the comparison included: DCC Compact Classic’s reissues of Joni Mitchell’s Court and Spark and Nat King Cole’s Love is the Thing, Mosaic’s superb boxed set of Bill Evans’ The Final Village Vanguard Sessions, June 1980, Analogue Productions’ indispensable reissue of Janis Ian’s Breaking Silence, an original black-label Vanguard Stereolab pressing of Ian and Sylvia’s Northern Journey, various takes from the recent Groove Note direct-to-disc sessions with the Bill Cunliffe Trio (reported on in the May “Analog Corner”), and an original EmArcy and a Speakers Corner reissue of The Clifford Brown All Stars.

With the Howland HP-100, Howland’s own cable was very detailed, but way too bright and etchy for my tastes—which surprised me, because those guys are obviously such good listeners. Electro Glide’s Fatboy combined the Howland’s detail with stunning background silence, lush mids, rich midbass, and well-controlled deep bass, with an overall vivid three-dimensionality and focus. Not far behind and far less expensive was Wireworld’s Silver Electra Series III+. It sounded ever so slightly “filtered” on top, but produced the most tactile images. It also made me realize that, in my report on the Naim Stageline phono section in the June issue’s “Analog Corner,” I was hearing the effects of the decisively coherent Wireworld cord as well as the sound of the phono stage itself. My mistake in not divulging the cord used in that review: the Silver Electra III+.

The expensive and very stiff Fatboy proved best overall in showcasing the Chord’s astonishing speed and delivery of detail and transients, but both the Wireworld and PS Audio cables created lusher sounds, with greater midband delicacy and rounder images. Playing Classic’s ultradynamic 45rpm reissue of Gershwin’s Cuban Overture (RCA Living Stereo/Classic LSC-2586), I was astonished by how different the power cords made the record and the Chord sound. Electro Glide’s Fatboy revealed the mechanical nature of record playing and spotlight the tape hiss while revealing amazing detail. The Wireworld and PS Audio sounded quite similar, but tamped down hiss and noise while creating a blacker background behind lush images. While the picture was somewhat softer overall, the transients of Earl Wild’s piano still sounded impressively fast and natural, and overall three-dimensionality and image depth were superb. The differences these cords made to the overall sound of my system were not subtle.

Bottom line: With a rich-sounding tube amp, I’ll bet the Fatboy would sing. If you’re addicted to speed and detail and can drop two grand, you’ll appreciate its performance, but Wireworld’s Silver Electra III+ and PS Audio’s Lab Cable, both priced at only $600, provided a richly relaxing, nonmechanical musical presentation that some will prefer, depending on the rest of their system and their musical tastes.
The Tri-Planar Mk.VI Ultimate ($3250 with 1m cable/RCA plug termination or 10" wire to RCA-jack junction box) builds on earlier versions with a larger-diameter headshell tube, a larger damping trough, and redesigned bearings featuring handmade hardened and polished needle cones. The clamping yoke that couples the headshell and bearing tubes has also been redesigned, and a new lead damping insert is said to enhance imaging and extend soundstage depth. The main armtube also features improved damping via nine layers of internal material and annealing (i.e., heat-hardening) of the armtube itself.

While I was curious to hear what sonic effects, if any, these subtle design changes might have on the arm’s already superb performance, I was equally interested to see if Mai would continue building the Tri-Planar with Papier’s care and attention to detail. Most of the arm’s many parts are still being made by Papier’s machinist in Maryland and sent to Minneapolis, where Mai resides.

Right out of the box, it was obvious that the Tri-Planar’s build quality is still top-notch. In fact, the parts finish appeared superior to the sample I reviewed in 1997. Drilling an armboard was easy—the Tri-Planar is affixed with three screws, and there is no large-diameter central shaft. If you have an electric drill and some rudimentary mechanical skills, you can mount the Tri-Planar yourself with just a bit of care.

The instructions, however, need thorough rewriting, and the www.triplanar.com website contains incorrect price and product information. Dung Mai assured me that these errors will be corrected, but “I’m not Superman,” he kept telling me over the phone. “I’m not asking you to leap tall buildings in a single bound, dude—just get the price right on your website!”

The Tri-Planar’s cartridge-alignment hardware has been upgraded, and my sample came with an optional WallyTracktor laser-cut alignment gauge made specifically for the Tri-Planar, which is not surprising—Wally Malewicz, too, lives in Minneapolis. I’d wished for that in my 1997 writeup, and sure enough, it made cartridge alignment easy.

I still have a beef with the Tri-Planar’s headshell design: the screw slots are way too wide. When you loosen the screws to adjust overhang and zenith, the cartridge can slide laterally, which is not good. The narrower slots on most other headshells prevent such unwanted movement.

Most of the Tri-Planar arm’s many parts are still being made by Papier’s machinist in Maryland and sent to Minneapolis, where Mai resides.

Thank you Lennon Sisters!

Here’s what Sam Tellig was Talking About!
A few issues ago, Sam gently mocked me with a comment about mobile record players. For those of you too young to remember, or who thought he was kidding, here’s a photo of the late, great Lawrence Welk enjoying “Highway Hi-Fi” in his 1956 DeSoto convertible. The players, made by CBS-Columbia for Chrysler, featured a new 7” format record, the XLP, which provided up to 45 minutes per side thanks to its 16¾ rpm speed and its pitch of 550 grooves per inch—twice the density of a standard LP. Playback required a special 0.25-mil stylus tracking at 2.5gm—about half a gram less pressure than, say, a $7600 Clearaudio Insider needs to track a regular LP in your living room! A flywheeled motor (there’s nothing new under the sun) kept the ‘table’s speed stable under impossible conditions, and an ingenious arm design supposedly kept the stylus in the groove even around hairpin turns.

Tri-Planar Mk.VI Ultimate tonearm
Back in late 1997, when I reviewed the Tri-Planar Mk.V Ultimate tonearm, designer Herb Papier asked if I knew anyone interested in taking over the company. Herb is getting on in years (he’s an octogenarian), and while his mind was and still is sharp, his dexterity was slipping. I couldn’t help him, but Dung Tri Mai, a young, enthusiastic analog fan (see “Analog Corner,” March 2001), hooked up with Herb and bought the company.
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The Tri-Planar was one of the first—if not the first—captured-bearing tone-arm to offer easily adjustable VTA and azimuth adjustment. It's a two-piece design: a short section attached to the bearing assembly, and a longer one sitting above that holds the headshell. The two are connected via a substantial, machined aluminum yoke assembly fitted with dual locking screws.

The azimuth tube means that there is, in effect, a mechanical connector separating the arm from the bearing, but the yoke design is so massive and mechanically secure that I have no reservations about it whatsoever. In fact, the dual tube system has an advantage: the lower tube attached to the bearing assembly means that the bearing height will remain close to the plane of play, thus minimizing warp wow caused by forward/back deflection as the arm describes a vertical arc when tracking a warp. The only other tonearm I know of that maintains the bearing at the plane of play regardless of VTA setting is the Immedia RPM-2.

Azimuth is easily adjustable via a worm-gear drive that rotates the longer armtube around its vertical axis. However, due to the headshell's offset angle, the actual rotation pitches the stylus forward and back as well as from side to side. Only a rotation at the headshell can provide ideal azimuth motion, but it involves a more serious compromise: reduced arm rigidity.

VTA adjustment is via a substantial tower assembly topped by a dial attached to an internally mounted, locking worm-gear drive. The tower mechanism is one of the design's weak points— it also supports the entire arm mechanism, which hangs off of one side. When you unlock the tower to change VTA, the weight of the arm assembly causes it to list to the right. Lock the tower and the arm rights itself, but this design is not the last word in stability in a system in which infinitesimal changes in geometry can have profound sonic effects.

The silicone damping trough, fitted forward of the bearing housing, features an adjustable screw that allows you to easily control the amount of damping actually applied to the system. Damping applied at the pivot point, as found on the Graham and VPI arms, is not nearly as effective.

The Tri-Planar is claimed to feature a decoupled counterweight, which would have the effect of creating a pair of much smaller resonant peaks on either side of the single peak you'd find with a hard-coupled counterweight. But there's no way the relatively hard elastomer rings inserted in the arm's various counterweights could possibly act to decouple them from the tonearm/cartridge system's resonant frequency, which should be around 121Hz.

A resonant frequency of 12Hz is considered ideal because it puts the resonance above warp/wow (most warps create oscillations below 10Hz), but below the lowest musical frequency (around 201Hz). The last thing you want to do is excite and accentuate the resonant frequency, whether with music or with warps. The resonant frequency of a truly decoupled counterweight must be equal to or below the system's resonant frequency, hopefully around 12Hz. A stiffly suspended counterweight such as the Tri-Planar's will have a much higher resonant frequency — probably in the audio bandwidth, which is not a good thing at all. If I bought the Mk.VI Ultimate, I'd try removing the inserts and replacing them with hard metal sleeves.

**Tri-Planar Mk.VI Ultimate: Fundamental Sound**

I auditioned the medium-mass (11gm effective mass) Tri-Planar Mk.VI Ultimate with the low-compliance Clearaudio Insider and the medium-compliance Lyra Helikon and Transfiguration Temper Supreme cartridges. With all three, the resonant frequency fell within the desired range.

The sound of the Tri-Planar had not changed appreciably since I last auditioned it: It offered unerring, rock-solid image and soundstage stability.

**In Heavy Rotation**

1. Shuggie Otis, *Inscription Information*, Luaka Bop LPs (2)
2. Led Zeppelin, *III*, Classic 180gm LP
5. The Blind Boys of Alabama, *Spirit of the Century*, Real World CD
6. Tim Buckley, *Morning Glory Anthology*, Rhino CDs (2)
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**The Fifth Element**

*John Marks*

Nobody Wants a ¼” Drill Bit!

One of the most thought-provoking insights I’ve ever heard from anyone came from a marketing teacher. He claimed that, in the entire history of the human race, nearly all of the ¼” drill bits that have been bought were bought by people who did not want ¼” drill bits. What happens is, ¼” drill bits are bought by people who want ¼” holes in something. *Thwack!* Ah, enlightenment.

The makers of Stanley tools are more rewardingly thought of as being in the “hole-enabling” business than the “drill-bit” business. The value of this kind of head-thwack for business people is that it allows them to look beyond their products’ externalities to see what their customers actually want. If you understand that you are not in the drill-bit business but in the hole-enabling business, you’ll keep on the lookout for new technologies or products that can satisfy your customers’ real needs, even if what you end up selling is not necessarily drill bits. The lesson: Once we understand what it is we’re trying to accomplish, that usually stays the same; it’s our means of accomplishing that goal that evolve.

When I was a kid, carpenters used spirit levels — elegant brass-bound hardwood affairs encasing calibrated glass tubes filled with tinted alcohol or oil. Today, homebuilders routinely use self-calibrating, visible-laser-level-line projectors to get the entire framing job or set of kitchen cabinets put in place, all with respect to one consistent horizon. There’s still a place for the old mahogany spirit level, but it is now in small jobs and enclosed spaces.

Relevance: I want to begin a constructive dialog about the nature of the business or hobby we are in. High-end audio may be purely a stereo-equipment-collecting hobby for a few people, but, I think, not at all many. Just as there are some, but not that many, people who collect antique radios or phonographs, working or not.

In much the same way as the drill bit is a means to an end, for most of us, stereo equipment and recordings are also means to ends. But the stereo equipment situation is certainly not as clear-cut as the drill-bit example — other dimensions and nuances are involved. The spirit level was a beautiful object in its own right, as well as a symbol of a master carpenter’s dedication to craftsmanship. Today, the contractor who shows up with a laser rig to help build your addition is making a statement that he is not a ham-and-egger. In much the same way, the ownership and use of stereo equipment embodies values ranging from the utilitarianism of an electric pencil sharpener to the technological and design élan (and pride of ownership) of a fine watch or camera, which are valued far above their functional utility.

But I don’t want to get wrapped around the axle of pitting great-looking components that assertedly sound “ch” against industrial-looking components that assertedly sound great. I want to delve much deeper.

By “deeper” I don’t mean analyzing anyone else’s psyche reductionistically, so I can then triumphantly declare “Aha! His mother didn’t breastfeed him, so of course he thinks he needs a power amp with big glowing tubes!” Instead, I want us to develop some penetrating collective insights into what makes us tick as audiophiles, so we can work together to correct what is not so good in the hobby, and maximize and share what is good without question.

I don’t think of myself (in my www.mrsds.com mode) as being in the compact disc business, or even in the recorded-music business. I think of myself as being in the business of trying to enrich peoples’ lives with beauty and truth. The recordings are a vehicle, but so is the music. Some of John Marks Records’ most successful CDs — not as measured in sales, but in terms of achieving their purpose — have been bought and enjoyed (often more so than by anyone else) by people from all walks of life who know nothing academic about classical music. They just want some beauty in their lives, and they recognize it when they hear it.

So exactly what is it we are trying to accomplish? I have given this a lot of thought over the past 39 years, ever since I learned that certain pieces of violin music made me weak in the knees while others left me cold. The nature of the human approach to music finds fascinating parallels in the history and psychology of buildings and architecture. There is a ritual, the origins of which are almost lost in the mists of time, that requires upon completion of the structural framework of a major building a topping-off ceremony in which an evergreen tree is hoisted to the roof peak. This tradition dates back to pre-literate times in Northern Europe. The tree is intended to disguise from the hostile and jealous gods above the audacity of a human building’s rising higher than the surrounding natural landscape, and to symbolically integrate the building into the larger world.

In his seminal book *A Pattern Language*, architectural critic Christopher Alexander makes the point that people feel most comfortable in buildings with roofs that can be reached and touched while standing on the ground. We want to live in something built on a human, not titanic, scale. This desire shows some of the same apprehension about rising too high as is reflected in the topping-off ritual. (There are disaster movies about high-rise skyscrapers, but not about vacation cottages.) And, of course, there’s the Greek myth about the chap who could be killed only when he was suspended above the ground, out of touch with Mother Earth.

From all this and much more, I have concluded that people want to feel that they are in touch with things that are larger than themselves, but in such a way that they feel connected rather than overwhelmed — perhaps even connected and with some degree of control.
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This is why art, music, dance, theater, and wine have shared fans since ancient times — they seem to connect us with other realms — yet have also served as pitfalls for those of precarious inner

I've never met anyone who really wanted to spend a thousand bucks on a power cord or set of interconnects. I've only met people who wanted to be happy.

equilibrium, who risk the danger of being overwhelmed or losing control.

This notion of controlled connectedness might be useful in thinking about why we feel compelled to spend serious money on a stereo — money that others might spend on a bass boat or a red convertible or a foreign vacation. I think if we have deeper insights into the valid reasons for doing what we do, perhaps we can do a smarter and better job of doing it.

I could brush my teeth for five minutes using the electrons that have arrived here bearing anguished cries for help from people torn between choosing the Coriolis Effect Deluxe Rev.3.2 Power Cord and the Shamelessly Hosing Neither Balanced Nor Unbalanced Tofu-Filled Mystical Interconnect as the more suitable destination for their thousand bucks. In nearly every case, that's asking the wrong question.

I've never met anyone who really wanted to spend a thousand bucks on a power cord or set of interconnects. I've only met people who wanted to be happy.

Please read those last two sentences again, then pause to think about them. Thank you for doing that. Now: There may be limited circumstances in which spending a thousand bucks on a power cord will not only make someone happy, it might also be the single most optimally cost-effective thing to do. Though possible, this is unlikely, because it's usually the result of confusing means and ends.

Do we want to buy a drill bit or do we want to put a hole in something?

Once we get our minds out of thinking that we're in the hobby of buying stereo equipment and begin thinking about ourselves as being in the hobby of

working to create a feeling of connectedness with things that are larger than ourselves, our horizons are suddenly a lot wider than: I have decided to buy this power cord rather than that interconnect. It's also a more interesting world, and it costs less to play in.

These ruminations shall continue...

**Elemental Reading**

A *Pattern Language*, cited above (Oxford University Press, 1977), is Christopher Alexander's attempt to catalog, systematically, vernacular, or home-grown, architectural forms and elements from around the world in order to make them applicable to a range of uses, from city planning to interior design. Much of Alexander's effort has been expended in putting into thought and word his insights into why so many features of the pre-industrial English and Welsh villages, homes, and rooms he studied still seem so self-evidently "right." His achievement lies in not mistake externality for intrinsic function, and his explanations as to why something works never stray far from his conviction that buildings should be built for people to live in or use.

Even if you have no immediate need for architectural inspiration, *A Pattern Language* is so filled with gentle flashes of illumination that opening it at random is a pleasure you should not deny yourself. And if the relevance is not yet
"Cable Changes Everything"

"With Harmonic Technology Pro-Silway II interconnect in place of the old cable, there was a significant change: The bass firmed up and rejoined the music, the midrange took on a richer, more full-bodied texture, and the top remained extended, detailed, and ultra-revealing, but not quite as bright."

"Later, I inserted the Harmonic Technology Pro-9 speaker cables, and things improved even further in the same directions."

"Finally, I substituted Harmonic Tech's Magic Woofer speaker cables, which are intended for full-range use and for the woofer half of a biamped or biwired system."

"The sound had grown more musically satisfying with each cable upgrade, but with the Magic Woofer cable, the system finally began to communicate the music's emotional center..."

"...When I tried another expensive set of interconnect/speaker cables, then one more 'reasonably' priced. Neither of those sets was able to pull it all together as well as the Harmonic Tech cables..."

Michael Fremer, Stereophile, January 2001
clear, ponder this: Two of the world's three best-sounding concert halls were built along vernacular lines, decades before calculus was successfully applied to acoustics. (And despite all the higher math, the third hall ended up a virtual clone of the first two.)

One of the few attempts to apply the precepts of A Pattern Language to contemporary residential design is Sarah Susanka's The Not So Big House (Taunton Press, 1998). Some of the rooms look as though they might sound quite good, while others look like home-audio purgatories. If Ms. Susanka hears about this, she can give me a jingle; I might be able to give her some helpful suggestions.

**Elemental Recordings**

Bass is good, and room-filling sound is good, but natural reproduction of the human voice is an absolute necessity if a stereo system is to give long-term enjoyment—and multiple voices up the ante. But most of my favorite choral recordings consist of great music and great singing and "eh, let's not talk about it" sound.

Here, culled from the general onslaught, are five all-around great choral recordings that you should own (in addition to the previously recommended Telarc recording of Brahms's German Requiem, Robert Shaw conducting), so you can use them to evaluate a new component or unfamiliar system:

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**Renessanse for kor**

may be the best

all-round unaccompa- 

ried chamber-choir 

album that 

can be had.

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**Heinrich Isaac, Missa de Apostolis,**

The Tallis Scholars (Ginell CDGIM 023): The original New Age music, so to speak. Entrancing singing, with great stage depth and acoustical envelopment.

**Gregory Vocalis, Renessanse for kor**

(Kiku FXCD 39): Creamy, seamless tonal production and a warmly wonderful recording job. A more immediate recording, and lighter in texture and tone than the Tallis Scholars, this may be the best all-round unaccompanied chamber-choir album that can be had. A desert-island favorite of mine, as well as of Bob Ludwig and Arturo Delmoni. Available from Audio Advancements, (973) 875-8705, www.audioadvancements.com.

**Cunfratrna di a pieve di a Serra, Laude (Albiana & Casa CDAL 009):** Time-capsule 12th-century lay Franciscan chant from Corsica. The voices are about what you'd expect from village men chosen for their piety and willingness to work together in passing along a tradition, but music-making seldom gets more authentic.

**Arvo Pärt, Te Deum (ECM 1505):** Stereophile's "Recording of the Month" for March 1994 is a work of uncompromising austerity and immense seriousness, but also totally lacking the hollow self-importance and confrontational ugliness that undercuts so much contemporary music. A milestone—don't miss it.

**Geoffrey Burgon, Cathedral Music**

(Hyperion CD1A66123): Contemporary neo-Anglican cathedral music of uncommon melodic and harmonic subtlety. Burgon's Nunc Dimittis for choir with organ and trumpet is deservedly a modern classic.

Questions? Comments? jmrcds@jmrcds.com.

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**The Fifth Element**

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Who else wants to escape from Audiophile Prison?

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They had me fooled
I got mixed up in the wrong crowd. I was one of Them. An Audiophile. Don’t get me wrong. We meant well, it’s just that we were—well, we were misguided.

As Audiophiles, we had to accept certain “truths.”
• Listen critically. See if you can hear more of the little sound effects in your recordings—chairs creaking, cash registers ringing, doors closing, back walls of concert halls, “air around instruments,” etc.
• Search for that one perfect record. Find that one elusive record or CD that will finally be good enough for your system. Remember, regular records or CD’s are only good for mid-fi systems.

• Every month a new speaker review will lead you to Audophile heaven. Last month’s speaker just isn’t good enough.

Guess what? None of that stuff was true. We were brainwashed.

I’ve escaped from Audiophile Prison. Given another chance. So it’s my duty to reveal the real story...

What the Audio Police don’t want you to ask
Audio is like real life. Simpler is better.
• Why do “high-end” speakers make all the Audiophile sounds, but they sound boring?
• What happens to the delicate musical signal when it runs through a complex speaker crossover?

• Why does a speaker measure well but sound mechanical?
• Why do I feel relieved when I stop listening?

Now Here’s the Big Lie
Horn speakers “color” the sound. No self-respecting Audiophile could possibly listen to horns.

Listen, I wouldn’t come near a horn. But almost by accident I heard the Avantgarde Hornspeakers. I was confused. They didn’t have any of the horn colorations I’d been told to expect.

Instead, they were fun. Even CDs I’d almost thrown away became compelling. And the secret began to unfold...

Here’s the scary part—
The most obnoxious speaker colorations are still out there. They’re way worse than the Audio Police will admit. Nobody’s doing much about it, either. Two of the worst colorations come from compression and room reflections:

The truth is, compression always destroys the music. There are many forms of compression. All are deadly. Here are a few:
• When you compress the dynamics you alter the performers' intent. Remember, the dynamic shifts in music are the primary carriers of its emotion. No emotion, no fun, no involvement.
• The harder a speaker has to work to make the music, the higher the compression. Low efficiency speakers just have to work harder to produce sound. You get temperature and displacement compression. And high coloration.

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true story: I got tagged for doing a howling 90mph on the way back to New York on the Jersey Turnpike late one night and got off with a warning.

I was pulled over by a beefy young Trooper, lights blinking furiously. "Oops, [leth leh]," he said, waving his badge to me. "Local police will check the papers and my license, then check out the Lexus very carefully with his flashlight. There was much oohing and ahhing.

"Got a GPS (Global Positioning System) I see," he said. "Yeah, officer, the SC 430 is only one of two in the New York area, the other's at the Javits for the car show! Hard top goes down into the trunk, and it's got an amazing Mark Levinson audio system in it! Hey, I don't own it, I'm a journalist, I just play a rich man on TV! I get to play with it for a couple of weeks, then bye-bye."

He was smiling, "How's your license, Jonathan?" he asked. We were on a first-name basis by then. (K-10 had the good sense not to blow cigarette smoke in his face.)

"Clean as a whistle!" I chipped. "Okay, lemme see what I can do for you," he said as he headed back to his cruiser.

At the Consumer Electronics Show last January, John Atkinson and I were asked by Madrigal Audio Laboratories if Stereophile would like the use of Lexus' hot new SC 430 coupe for a month or so. We could then write up the Mark Levinson Premium Sound System contained within, of course.

We looked at each other. Nah...

[in best Chris Rock voice] JUST KIDDING!

It all seemed like a dream. But in early April, there it was — a gleaming SC 430 with pearlescent white-over-tan interior, being off-loaded in front of cemapUSA's offices on Fifth Avenue. Such a spectacle.

It attracted attention like... well, like Marilyn Monroe the night she sang "Happy Birthday" to JFK? Like Julia Roberts on the phone begging you for a date? Hot, hot, HOT! (Where's Buster Poindexter when you need him?) A guy in a Range Rover told me Toyota makes the best cars, bar none — and would I mind if he gave the Lexus the 20/20? I got innumerable thumbs-ups from strangers, and huge, approving grins met K-10 and me no matter where we drove.

The question thrown at me all too often by less couth Noo Yawkahs was: "Hey! How much you pay?" Everyone gets their 15 minutes of fame. Slowed down in traffic and trying to vary what had become an almost inevitable dialogue, I told one guy, "Too much!" Which elicited the following outraged response in prototypical Noo Yawkese: "Hey! You tellin' me..."  

Stereophile, July 2001
I can't afford that thing?

Thankfully, the traffic opened in front of us and the SC 430's quad-cam V8 whooshed us into the sunset before further mayhem ensued. Even the toll-taker on the Jersey Turnpike, stirred from her stupor, chirped, "That the new Lexus? Cuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu
We are driven!

here are nine custom-engineered speakers in each SC 430. When I settled my bustle into the luxurious seats and took it all in, I spotted a pair of circular tweeters mounted close in on the “sail” (where the air vent window used to be on older cars) next to the A pillar. These turned out to be 3/4” titanium-dome numbers with ferrofluid cooling and neodymium magnets to give very low distortion, about which Muzio is pretty adamant. “In a car, in the nearfield, you sense distortion as harshness and brightness.” Below each tweeter, just under each door’s upper sill sits a 2 3/4” midrange driver. placed there because it has the same directivity characteristics as the tweeter — important, as there’s no center speaker. (A center-channel front driver is used in the GS 430 and GS 300 to create a better image across the dash, while the LS 430 and SC 430 use horn-loaded compression drivers to achieve a high level of directivity in the audible frequency range to aid imaging.) Each door bottom carries a rigid 6” by 9” neodymium/Kevlar-composite cone midrange driver.

Moving to the back seat... uh, forget it. It’s not much more than a nicely upholstered package shell, or a space for your Louis Vuitton duffel — wow, it’s cramped. The rear double-bucket seat might be okay for midgets with no legs, but not any man. If you managed to wedge yourself back there, as did our long-suffering photographer, you’d notice the rear side-panel grilles, behind which are 4” mid-high ceramic-magnet (not neodymium) drivers, and feel the 8” subwoofer behind the back seat cushion. The sub’s driver once again uses a neodymium magnet, with a copper-clad aluminum voice-coil and a special surround for long excursions.

And can that baby woof! The bass gets way down there, especially with the top up because of the improved acoustic environment mostly due to space being properly pressurized, as well as the trunk not having the hard top sitting in it. The sub driver even sports a patented spider of aramid fiber — a very strong, lightweight, and heat-resistant polyamide.

Muzio recounted how he worked with the vehicle designers to redo the rear “seat” profile and sculpt its (very upright) back for optimal acoustical output from the sub. They even named the system: IVE, for Integrated Vehicle Enclosure.

The trunk can be viewed as a custom enclosure with baffles molded in as part of the trunk to best tune the chamber. Of course, there are two conditions of operation, as they, ML, characterize it: Top up “and a-way we go,” as Jackie Gleason would say, or top down, more: “Step these way, cherie.”

“The internal volume of the chamber changes when the top’s down, and the compensation we designed for that is a big part of the story,” Muzio explained. “Getting a good tonal balance both ways was one of the real obstacles to overcome in such a relatively small cabin.” In short, it’s a sophisticated systems approach, like everything Madrigal does, and Muzio feels he’s succeeded with his baby.

“Setting on top of the drivers as you do in the SC 430, you’ve got to start out with much less distortion. So all EQ is digital because you’ve got to watch out for phase shift in a car environment — the customers will pick that up in a New York minute.”

On the Road

Hey man, what — you think it was, like, bad?

No way. It sounded fantastic. The only problem I had was with all the maniacal people yelling at me “How much?” There was no question that there was anyone who didn’t just after it. Even babes eyed it thoughtfully.

The bass could shiver your liver, matey. On Peter Knud’s Peace Orchestra (G-Tone G-CID 004), the low bass synth set the annunciation a-vibratin’. (A few pre-production prototype units turned up, nothing serious.) With the top up, the bass was always truly awesome.

There was a nice transition to the upper bass and midrange proper, which you’d never guess was coming from the door. You can use the controls to adjust the mids and highs just so, not to mention the bass, which has a subwoofer module; the headunit tone controls are executed by the DSP in the amp.

I listened to the system for hours on end with a variety of discs. And with the mid and high controls no CD was too out of hand to deal with. I could make any CD I played sound enjoyable in the movable feast that is an ML PSS-equipped SC 430, top up or down (but with slightly better sound with the top up) — all while moving along cutely at a blistering pace while adjusting the heated seats just right for my tushy.

Sound fade front to back and left to right is also available, of course. Old man. And the head unit can swallow six CDs — no need to head for the trunk. A glossy but slightly sticky door on this pre-production car brings down to cover the radio/CD/tape controls. (But I couldn’t find the Cannon or eject buttons, apologies to Ian Fleming.) The Global Positioning System glides back into the center of the dash and a nicely finished cover slides over it on key-off, while the wheel motorizes back into the dash. Shaken, not stirred — right, old chap?

Sportsmen! Step across the line!

So who are the buyers of the Lexus SC 430 with Mark Levinson Premium Sound System?

“We wanted a system so that music can play an important part of the emotional experience of riding in the car,” said Muzio. Even at 120mph with the top down, as Outlaw Phil confesses to have done.

It was a gas dropping the top to the many catcalls and motorin’ in the still-cocoon-like luxury of the SC 430. Getting nippy? Pull over, mash a button while staring into the eyes of the beauty sitting next to you, and pop that hard top back in place. Hold the button past its “I’m done!” ping and the windows slide up, too.

While I’m sure the larger LS 430 proves a more friendly environment for high-end car audio, the pleasure of the SC 430 lays in its choice of scental realms: closed-top lux or open-top motorin’, Corinthian leather up the pipeek, and the finest-sounding car stereo I’ve ever heard. And that vague... oh, don’t ask.

What can I say? You can afford it and it’s your taste? Go for it!

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"The good news is that Analysis Plus Oval 9 copper cable is "excellent - it out performed my (very expensive but no longer available) Yamamura 6000...""-Michael Fremer, Stereophile, January 2001

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Muzio's CEO
Has Listened
And Has Heard
The Future

Muzio

Madrigal's chief executive officer is known for working well into the night, but that's been a goal of his since boyhood. For many years he dreamed of becoming a professional guitarist, and even dropped out of Yale to satisfy a ravenous musical appetite. "Enough of trying to be a Renaissance man," Phil Muzio recalls thinking at the time. His aim was to be out there on the bandstand making music.

Muzio was born in 1954 and grew up on his family's 47-acre vegetable farm in North Haven, Connecticut. (The land, which his Sicilian-born grandfather bought in 1902, is just a 35-minute drive from Madrigal's Middletown headquarters, where Mark Levinson, Proceed, and Audio Access components are manufactured and the marketing of Revel speakers is handled.) At age 16 he took a part-time job at a New Haven audio shop called David Dean Smith. The eponymous Mr. Smith was one of America's first hi-fi specialty dealers.

Phil subsequently entered Yale, but left after his freshman year to study music at the University of Hartford's Hart School and at the University of Bridgeport, where his teachers included the jazz guitarists Sal Salvador and arranger Neil Slater and . He continued to work at David Dean Smith and, one Thursday evening in 1974, he recognized a young musician who strolled onto the sales floor—a bass player, whose picture had appeared on a Paul Bley album cover.

That chance meeting with Mark Levinson was the real start of Phil Muzio's career, which now occupies more hours—day and evening—than he ever envisioned it would.

David Lander: You began working at Mark Levinson Audio Systems in 1974, two years after the company was established. What were your duties in the early years?

Phil Muzio: I was first doing odd assignments for Mark—delivering things, picking things up. When I started working inside the company, Mark had launched Mark Levinson Acoustic Recordings, and I was inspecting records, doing listening tests and final quality assurance, particularly on the LNP-2 preamplifier. Then I became associated with his engineer at the time, Tom Colangelo. He was overloaded, and he gave me a circuit schematic he needed breadboarded. I had done a lot of that work. I was a hi-fi hobbyist, and I had built several of my own preamplifiers by going into the basement at David Dean Smith and pulling the schematics out of the backs of service manuals and asking a lot of questions of the people in the service department. I built the board and returned it to him in a couple of hours, and he fired it up, and it worked. So he went to Mark and said, "I need this guy in the engineering department." It just kind of snowballed at that point.

Lander: By 1980, you were managing the engineering department. What did it consist of?

Muzio: There were five people, primarily Tom, but zero degree engineers. It was a design department.

Lander: Was Mark still using John Curl or Richard Burwen designs, as he had done at first?

Muzio: No. We weren't getting any designs from John Curl or Richard at that point.

Lander: Many years ago, you began doing listening tests on equipment under development. That voicing, as you call it, helped create the large, spacious, enveloping sound that characterizes Levinson. What, specifically, are you listening for?

Muzio: I'm not one who gets off on saying that our sound is accurate. Anybody can say "We strive for accuracy." In point of fact, today, products from different manufacturers sound as

Stereophile, July 2001
widely different as they did 20 years ago. The sonic signature is really a personal choice. Bottom line: We're in the entertainment business. Our goal—and we've said this consistently for 30 years—is to re-create the original musical event. That goes beyond saying a violin sounds like a violin and a trumpet sounds like a trumpet. I'm talking about being able to convey the emotional message that the artist can convey in a live performance. Our job is to re-create that within a home.

**Lander:** What specific sonic characteristics do you focus on in order to get the job done?

**Muzio:** One is resolution, the detail available in a live musical performance that gives you the cues that trick you into thinking you're there. If it's a live recording there are cues from the audience. In a piano recital, it's being able to hear pedals being pressed. There's a level of resolution that's key to creating that illusion.

Another one is dynamics. Without that, you'll never believe that it's really music. Acoustic instruments are wonderfully dynamic—they get loud real fast, they get very quiet. You have to be able to optimize the electronics so they don't limit the capacity to put the dynamics of a performance in the room.

And imaging, the localization of the performers. You get that with the first notes played in a live performance. You know where people are across the performance area, but you also know who's close, who's far away, who's in the back and off to the right. And then you also get a sense of the space. You have to be able to convey that because, on most recordings, all that information is there.

**Lander:** You've said that you got out of the live music business because you ultimately decided you weren't good enough to succeed as a top-level performer. Before that, though, you did play professionally. Does that experience inform your in-house listening sessions?

**Muzio:** I had a lot of experience playing in big bands. That never describe it as warm. It's brash. When I read reviewers who say the trumpets were harsh, I never know if they're commenting that they don't like the way trumpets sound or they don't like the way the system is re-creating the sound.

**Lander:** You've said it varies from project to project, but how many hours might you spend in the listening room evaluating a product during development?

**Muzio:** Hundreds. We start very early in the design of a product, in engineering, because there are decisions that need to be made at a topological level. This doesn't happen with every circuit block in every product; it's up for grabs. There's a lot of science here. Ninety-nine times out of a hundred, a product that's designed with good engineering practices, good basic physics, good electronics principles, etc., will outperform a product that isn't.

We place a high value on proper design practices and good bench measurements, but there's a flip side to the product-development process. We don't sell the measurements—we sell the experience, and the experience happens in the listening room. It's evaluated by people with their ears. Those two things go hand in hand. You advance the electrical design, and you confirm it in the sound room. From our experience, we know that certain circuit blocks within a product are more influential than others.

We have a whole library of topologies—and we advance them, they evolve. There are a lot of areas in digital design where the library continues to grow, because we're doing more products that have more digital parts to them than ever before. So our guys may come to me and say, "These three circuits all measure well, we think they're all valid to use in this block, but we need you to listen to them to see which one sounds better."

**Lander:** These days, you listen along with Tom Calatayud, a senior design engineer. Is that so there's someone present who can pinpoint the technological reasons why you're hearing—or not hearing—something?

**Muzio:** That's part of the reason. We have a pretty stable crew here, and a number of the key players in engineering have gone through this process with me many, many times. They understand what I mean when I say certain things. They know what I expect.

**Lander:** And, I would think, specific electronics problems create certain sonic aberrations.

**Muzio:** There are certain sonic characteristics to a system that has ground-loop problems. If it does X, Y, and Z, you have ground-loop problems. There's a whole library of those kinds of things. There's a history that builds up year after year after year.

**Lander:** Do you know which version of a circuit each prototype under evaluation is using?

**Muzio:** I never know what choices I'm making. I may know that tonight we need to confirm the feedback loop parameters for a particular amplifier.

*"We don't experiment with our customers on immature technologies."

was good training. I know that people don't have long aural memories, but I do believe that something develops.

**Lander:** "The ear educates itself," is how Rudy Bozak—that grand old man of loudspeakers—one put it.

**Muzio:** Correct. I've spent my life listening, and I think I have a sense of when something sounds right. "Right," to me, means it sounds like it really does occur in the room. And I think I have a sense of why things sound wrong. I was in the rhythm section, so to my left the saxophones were in front, the trumpets were in back. I always got a kick out of people saying, particularly with tube equipment, "It's so musical. It's so warm." If you've ever listened to a trumpet live, you'd

[Phil Muzio in the engineering lab with a new Mark Levinson No. 434 mono amplifier and a Proceed video output card.]
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PLEASE BE SEATED, THE NEXT PERFORMANCE IS ABOUT TO BEGIN.
**Lander:** What are your feelings about the future of SACD and DVD-Audio?

**Muzio:** I stopped playing the horses, so to speak, some time ago, because I found it to be unproductive. With SACD and DVD-Audio, we're talking about formats that, performance-wise, have a lot of potential. What I think is important to the marketplace today is compatibility.

**Lander:** What do you feel is the essence of the multichannel experience?

**Muzio:** It's going to get better, because the mediums that are conveying it are getting better. There was always an argument to be made for a center channel, even back in the early days with LPs. Stereo was adopted because it was an appropriate convention for the day. If multichannel is done properly, it has the potential to provide a more convincing illusion of the original event than stereo does. There's no absolute ideal number of channels.

A lot depends on the room; one of the reasons multichannel has the potential to be significantly better than two channels is more transducers in the room. When you put more transducers in different positions in the room, acoustically it will even out a lot of the anomalies that the room creates when you have only two sources of sound. I think multichannel offers the opportunity for a wonderful musical experience in the future. It can go well beyond the point to where we've advanced — and what we do with two-channel is superb today. The day is long gone when you introduced a lot of significant compromises to a two-channel reproduction experience by delivering it through a multichannel system. Multichannel gives us the opportunity to take that further than we can dream. That, to us, is a lot of fun. We come in every morning, partially, because it's a lot of fun.

**Lander:** I would think working to create best-of-class products is a great deal of fun for your engineers.

**Muzio:** It's important to every single one of them. It's what they'll tell their friends about when they're having dinner with them on Saturday night.

**Lander:** How big is the engineering group responsible for products like the Levinson No.40?

**Muzio:** I like to combine the product-development engineering staff for hardware and software with the staff at Revel doing loudspeaker design and the industrial design staff. The total design group for five brands is 23 people.

**Lander:** Your predecessor, Sandy Berlin, was a firm believer in industrial design and took a very unusual step when he hired Dave Barson to set up an in-house department back in 1989. Does the fact that Dave is still here tell us something about your views on the subject?

**Muzio:** It's extremely important. We're in the entertainment business, and the entertainment we offer is in somebody's home. Typically, these people are luxury buyers, and the environment they create in their homes is very important to them.

**Lander:** There are five brands in what you call the Madrigal Group. Levinson, of course, came first. Sandy Berlin conceived Procédé in 1986 and introduced the first Procédé product in 1989; his strategy was to move into lower price brackets and new market sectors with it — specifically, home theater — rather than leverage the Levinson brand name and risk compromising its image. Audio Access is a 14-year-old company that has always specialized in multi-zone audio distribution equipment and was acquired by Sidney Hannan. After Hannan International's acquisition of Madrigal in 1995, Sidney and Sandy collaborated on Revel, a company specifically created to produce speakers that were a match for your company's electronics. The Revel

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"We've all experienced home theater with poor audio. One with great audio is worlds apart."

**Lander:** You've promised that the Mark Levinson No.40 will provide the best of both the audio and video worlds. That product, which you've shown in prototype form at shows, combines an audio processor and a video processor, each in its own enclosure. It's the first Levinson unit for audio/video applications. Once it goes on sale, Mark Levinson will no longer be an audio-only brand.

**Muzio:** Right. I don't think remaining an audio brand would be very much fun. What we do and the way we do it does not apply just to music.

**Lander:** Given Levinson's traditional role as a leader in the field, what does this transition imply for home music reproduction?

**Muzio:** It's going to get better, because the mediums that are conveying it are getting better. There was always an argument to be made for a center channel, even back in the early days with LPs. Stereo was adopted because it was an appropriate convention for the day. If multichannel is done properly, it has the potential to provide a more convincing illusion of the original event than stereo does. There's no absolute ideal number of channels.

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*Stereophile, July 2001*
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factory, though, is in California, and we’re sitting in your office in Connecticut. What, exactly, is Madrigal’s relationship with Revel?

Muzio: We manage all activities of that brand, just like Mark Levinson.

Lander: Your newest brand name, Madrigal Imaging, has so far been confined to a pair of video projectors, 8” and 9” CRT models. What goals did your people have in mind when they combined all these brands under one umbrella?

“All Madrigal products are manufactured at our facility here in Middletown or in Northridge.”

Muzio: We’re a vertically integrated company. The mandate, today and going forward, is to design, develop, and manufacture discreetly branded turnkey systems. If you look at all the ingredients here, these are the ingredients of systems.

Lander: How does the Madrigal Group’s vertical integration benefit people who buy your equipment?

Muzio: We see the opportunity to increase performance and reduce complexity. Products that are designed together can perform better. We’re achieving greater performance by offering a system approach. Second is interoperability and ease of use. We want to integrate the operation of the system, to take the complication out of it for the end user.

Lander: You actually manufacture most of what goes into your products.

Muzio: We feel that the optimum way to maintain the level of quality, the level of performance, and the consistency is to maintain control over the manufacturing. All products are manufactured at our facility here in Middletown or in Northridge. The only thing we outsource is PC assembly for surface-mount technologies.

Lander: You’ve stressed the fact that through-hole PC board assembly — the manufacture of boards employing conventional resistors, capacitors, and parts with leads — is done here. Why is that so important?

Muzio: The way you design circuit boards has an effect on the sonic performance of a product. Parts need to be laid out on boards in particular ways, which appear to be random. Designing PC boards to be manufactured in a fully automated way can limit performance. We assemble ours so that we can combine the best characteristics of analog design with the efficiencies of semi-automatic assembly.

Lander: Is there a way for audiophiles to determine whether specific products use boards that were designed for sonic performance as opposed to manufacturing convenience?

Muzio: If someone takes the top cover off a product and sees assemblies with resistors, capacitors, and leaded parts that are laid out in a very symmetrical, corn-row manner, then nine times out of ten they have not been laid out for optimum sonic performance. They’ve been laid out to be built by an automatic machine.

Lander: You’ve had a longer, more intimate association with the Mark Levinson brand during its first 30 years than anyone else. What single word or phrase do you think most closely characterizes it? Music?

Muzio: Emotion.

Lander: What can Stereophile readers expect in the brand’s fourth decade?

Muzio: The evolution we’ve always been known for.

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Now at the top of his game, tenor saxman Joe Lovano thrives on the adventure of making music in the moment.

Dan Ouellette

Joe Lovano should be physically and mentally exhausted. In a two-week stretch earlier this year, the husky tenor saxophonist played a two-night engagement at Birdland in New York City, leading a quartet exploring the music of John Coltrane during his Giant Steps period; began working on new arrangements for some pieces from his own Rush Hour album, which he then performed with a different quartet and the Pro Arte chamber ensemble at Third Stream maestro Gunther Schuller's 75th-birthday-celebration concert in Boston; began making preparations for yet another quartet gig (different players yet again) in Philadelphia, playing music from last year's 52nd Street Themes album (Blue Note 96667) and debuting new material from his latest CD, Flights of Fancy: Trio Fascination, Edition Two (Blue Note 27618); and planning his show the next night with the same quartet, a mini-set of Miles Davis tunes from the trumpeter's Prestige days for the noon-to-midnight Wall to Wall Miles Davis event, featuring more than 170 musicians paying tribute to the jazz icon in a free concert at Symphony Space in New York. So... beat and depleted?
Far from it, says Lovano during our conversation in a Blue Note Records conference room. "It's the dilemma of a creative musician," he says in an upbeat manner that suggests that "dilemma" is not really the right word. "I love being in different situations with different people. It keeps me and my music fresh. That's so much better than playing with the same quartet or quintet, doing the same repertoire month after month, city after city. I've done that and know what it's all about. It's good because you can get into a routine, but I'm just into a different time in my career."

Translated, this means that Lovano, a heavyweight on the New York jazz scene in the 1990s, is these days riding the crest. He can pretty much record what he pleases (Blue Note president Bruce Lundvall gave him carte blanche years ago); opportunities flow freely toward him (at a commission from the Monterey Jazz Festival to work with Schuller on new orchestrations of Davis's Birth of the Cool material, and an appointment to fill the Berklee College of Music's newly created Gary Burton Chair in Jazz Performance); and, after six nominations since 1994, he's finally won a Grammy, for Best Large Jazz Ensemble Album, for 52nd Street Themes.

Lovano takes it all in stride—as if the kudos coming his way these days are part of the jazz terrain: Do your homework, pay your dues, find your voice, follow your passions, and reap your rewards when the time is right. He's a brawny guy who looks tough—an imposing figure you wouldn't want to cross on a dark side street. In the last few months, to complement his thick moustache, he's grown a muggle-shaped beard that would make him look meaner still were he not so prone to grinning. He's a grizzly bear in appearance, a teddy bear in spirit, whose favorite word to describe colleagues is "beautiful."

At January's International Association for Jazz Educators conference in New York, Lovano made an appearance at a public blindfold-test panel. He arrived half an hour early in floppy hat and heavy coat, hoping to remain incognito for a spell before going onstage. But he was found out immediately by a fan and was soon caught up in jazz talk. He's like a favorite uncle who's genuinely pleased to see you, even if you're a distant relative.

And when he plays his horn, Lovano can flutter like a bird that's just left the nest, or blow like he's going to burst a seam. He's a hefty sight onstage, but when he loses himself in a soulfully melodic improvisation he often nimbly dances in step. His firm roots in jazz tradition don't hinder him from playing with robust glee.

Onstage and in person, confidence oozes from Lovano, who benefited from a supportive bond with his father, Tony "Big T" Lovano—a Cleveland tenor saxophonist who gigged with Tadd Dameron, jammed with John Coltrane, but never left Ohio for greener jazz pastures. Tony Lovano fed young Joe with music and got him an alto sax when he was six. The schooling came at home and, more importantly, on the field trips.

"I learned how to be a musical risk-taker from my dad," says Lovano. "He took me around with him to sit in with guys from his generation. All night long I would sit and listen to the band, and then he'd invite me up at the end of the last set for a couple of tunes. Doing that not only gave me confidence, but also a relaxed approach."

For Lovano, the experience was both exhilarating and frightening. "Sure, when you're a kid, you're scared and the adrenaline is running. But knowing how to sit in on a gig was an important early lesson. Sometimes my dad would just split and I'd have to end the tune. Now, that was a big lesson." He laughs heartily, "You can play a solo, but to take the tune out, play a tag where the rhythm team is following you ... well, that you can't learn by practicing at home. You have to learn it by playing."

Lovano went on to sit in with a number of notworthies, including Sonny Stitt, Clet Baker, Rashied Ali, and Bill Evans. "Going to a club with your horn and not even knowing an artist personally but knowing their music is an amazing experience. I felt like I just wanted to play with these cats."

Still, he recalls that his first time on the bandstand with drummer Elvin Jones, on a 1973 date in Cleveland, was a bit nerve-wracking. "I was playing in a group opposite Elvin, so I asked him if I could sit in. He said to come up next set. He was beautiful and very gracious about it. But when I came onstage, he got up from behind his drums, got in my face, and said, 'Don't mess me up.' And I thought, 'Oh, boy, here goes.'"

But Lovano passed muster and sat in with Jones the next four nights as well. Between then and 1987, he substituted for saxophonist Pat La Barbera, and in 1987 joined Jones' Jazz Machine for a European tour. Years later, Lovano enlisted Jones for his own Tio Fascination, Edition One album (1998, Blue Note 33114), which also starred bassist Dave Holland.

Lovano is a case study in a musician who single-mindedly pursues his craft. He performed throughout high school in his own bands, playing at weddings and the like, often as a substitute for his dad (who would double-book himself), then send Joe in his stead, and earned enough money to attend Berklee in 1972. That's when he realized he was on a no-looking-back course.

"I never thought about having a career in music. I was just trying to learn how to play. I wanted people to dig me, especially my dad's peers. But it didn't dawn on me that this was my life until I was able to pay my own tuition bread and not rely on my folks."

Lovano put in a year's stint at Berklee, where he met several future collaborators, including pianist Kenny Werner, saxophonist Billy Drewes, and drummer Joey Baron, all of whom appear on Flights of Fancy. He soon hooked up with two jazz organists, Lonnie Smith and Jack McDuff, the former of whom brought Lovano to New York for his first experience in a recording studio. Still based in Boston, the 23-year-old saxophonist then joined Woody Herman's Thundering Herd, a gig that lasted from 1976 to 1979.

"All that time playing with my father's generation prepared me for playing with Woody," Lovano says. "When I came of age and joined the Thundering Herd, I was excited to play for Woody. I wanted him to dig me, to hear something in my sound that he liked. Someone like Woody could have been intimidating, just the way he stared at you when you played."

"I love being in different situations with different people.

It keeps me and my music fresh."

Stereophile, July 2001
Well, he gave me the stars, but I also made him smile.”
Saying this, Lovano beams and laughs.

During his stint with Herman, Lovano settled into a spacious loft in the then-iffy New York neighborhood of Chelsea. After leaving Herman’s employ, he launched himself fully into New York’s jazz life. He gigged for two years with the Thad Jones–Mel Lewis Orchestra at its weekly Village Vanguard date, played with numerous other topnotch players, including Carla Bley and Charlie Haden, and later had a high-profile tenure with a fellow Berklee alum, guitarist John Scofield. But arguably Lovano’s most important performances took place in veteran drummer Paul Motian’s trio, formed in 1984 and featuring another Berklee pal, guitarist Bill Frisell.

“The trio emerged from Paul’s quintet that he put together in 1981,” says Lovano, who notes that the three will celebrate their 20th anniversary of playing together with a week-long gig at the Village Vanguard in August. “We played a lot, all over New York and all around the world. We played a variety of material, from Billie Holiday to Bill Evans, as well as Monk and Paul’s originals. We were constantly exploring together. It’s this trio that gave me the confidence to do Flights of Fancy, recording trio performances with different sounds other than just bass and drums.”

Fanciful flying defines that album, Lovano’s latest. It features four different trios—Lovano’s working group of bassist Cameron Brown and drummer Idris Muhammad; 70s-era buddies Drewes and Baron, an unusual combo of harmonica ace Toots Thielemans and pianist Werner; and an out-leaning meeting with trumpeter Dave Douglas and bassist Mark Dresser—engaging in explorations of Lovano originals and a scattering of standards treated to unchêd renderings. The sessions are marked by heightened listening and quality of dialogue, and range in mood from the mysterious and pensive to the lyrical and gently swingy. It’s not so much a blowing date as an intimate adventure in timbre and a musing search for a common language.

Flights of Fancy boasts 11 different instrumental configurations. Lovano not only exhibits his horn arsenal of mostly tenor sax (with soprano, straight alto, and C-melody) and bass and alto clarinets, but also his drumming prowess, on the free, tumbling “206,” with Douglas and Dresser. In addition, Lovano mixes trios on three tracks, including an introspective-todancing take on John Coltrane’s “On Giant Steps,” the Thielemans-Werner meditation giving way to a gusty jaunt with Brown and Muhammad.

“I’m playing with musicians here that I’ve had relationships with for years,” Lovano says. “I tried to write the music for the different personalities and the different trio combinations. Trios, Fascination, Edition One, with Dave Holland and Elvin Jones, opened the door for more explorations of working with a trio setting. That album was the beginning. I knew I wanted to do another trio project, but I wasn’t sure what form it would take until I did a three-night date with Toots and Kenny at the Iridium a year ago. We only played standards, but the music was so magical and every second so amazing that I knew I had to record that group.”

Other parts of the four-trio equation were Lovano’s desire to record his two-year working band of Brown and Muhammad (for which he had written a lot of material), to document his longtime friendship with Drewes and Baron (during their Boston days, the three frequently jammed late nights at Drewes’ home above an office), and to reestablish links with Douglas (who was Lovano’s student when he taught at NYU in the 1980s).

“The focus of this album was not to focus on myself, but to develop an open and beautiful dialogue within the structure of tunes,” Lovano explains, noting that a trio is ideally suited for this exchange. “You can hear it clearer without a fourth person in the mix. There’s a clarity in a trio. That’s why piano trios have been so popular throughout this music’s history.” He cites such influential trios as Benny Goodman/Teddy Wilson/Kennet Krupa and Lester Young/Nat King Cole/Buddy Rich, and stresses the strength of 1950s trio outings by Miles Davis and Sonny Rollins. “They taught me how to be relaxed in the music, to recognize that not all the spaces in a tune need to be filled.”

In its musical expansiveness, Flights of Fancy is a microcosm of Lovano’s recording career. Each tune is distinctive, a quality he attributes to putting personality above music itself. “You can play the same tune, but the feeling and mood will be totally different because of the guys you’re playing with.” Likewise, in Lovano’s catalog of recordings, and especially since signing with Blue Note in 1991, no two albums are alike. Noteworthy releases included his breakthrough disc, Tenor Legacy (1993, Blue Note 20714), with then-upstart tenor-sax man Joshua Redman joining Lovano’s sextet; his brilliant orchestrated disc, Rash Hour (1994, Blue Note 29629), which earned Lovano his jazz stripes and solidified his status as a favorite of critics’ polls; his dynamic Quartets (1995, two CDs, Blue Note 29125), two different groups captured live at the Village Vanguard; his adventurous duet albums, Flying Colors (1997, Blue Note 56092), with pianist Gonzalo Rubalcaba; and Friendly Fire (1999, Blue Note 99125), a rousing joust with alto saxophonist Greg Osby.

“I’m not trying to play a different record every time out,” says Lovano, who, depending on the project, can bring to the forefront spiritual radiance, a sublime sense of balladry, smoky-toned intuition, a blustery hard-bop charge, a jolting/ramming assault, or an edgy/abstract meander. “But every time you play with different people, it should be a different experience; the music should be something new. That’s been my approach all my life in terms of improvising. I can play the same tune every day with different people and it’s always going to be new music.”

Mixing it up musically was Lovano’s daily bread for the 20 years that he lived in his Manhattan loft with his wife, vocalist-instrumentalist Judi Silvano, who has appeared on many of his outings. “People were always coming over and creating music. Sometimes we would have two or three different sessions a day,” says Lovano, who notes that the Flights of Fancy record-
ing sessions were scheduled in the studio in a similar round-the-clock manner. "We were playing for moments of time all the time back then."

That party-central loft burned down in 1998, the result of an electrical fire. Luckily, Lovano was on tour in Europe with Paul Motian's trio and Silvano was staying at their country getaway in the Hudson River Valley, an hour's drive north of the city. "We lost everything — our records, clothes, instruments — except my horns, which were protected in a large armoire. They were smoke-damaged, so they had to undergo extensive repairs."

While he and Judi keep an apartment in New York, they spend most of their time upstate these days. "I do miss the loft days, but I love our lifestyle now," Lovano says. "It's a beautiful scene in the woods. Because I'm involved in so many projects, it's good to be there. Everything slows down and I have a lot of time to focus on what I'm doing at the moment."

Lovano also has the luxury of deep listening. Recently he's been discovering the back catalog of saxophonist Jackie McLean — especially on albums recently reissued on CD for the first time in the Blue Note Connoisseur series — and picking up solo pointers from Pablo Casals' recording of Bach's Suites for Solo Cello. He also continues to delve into the material of his saxophone heroes, Trane, Rollins, and Ornette Coleman. "I'm hearing the inner music of these guys, not just what hits you first," he says. "It's like listening to new music studying these cats. But I'm listening all the time and love getting taken on an adventure. I don't live in a small world in my performance life, nor do I live in one as a listener."

Is Lovano an audiophile? He shakes his head. He wishes he had better equipment, but admits that he can get great pleasure listening to old cassettes in his car. And he's got a couple funky boomboxes in various places at his house. "I have music playing all over the place," he says. He has a Sony five-CD changer and a Philips two-CD changer, the latter used as an aid in sequencing the order of tunes on his own albums. He also has an old Technics turntable that he uses frequently.

"I prefer listening to LPs," he says. "They don't go on forever like a CD. You've got to flip 'em over. That makes you listen to the music better. If you have five CDs playing all day long, you don't listen the same. With an LP, the quality of listening is better. You listen more intensely."

That depth of listening — whether to recordings or on the bandstand — is what feeds Lovano. "There's a lot of magic in this music," he says. "When you dare to improvise and create music, the adventure carries you. The more you do it, the more you're involved, the more things crystallize. There's an approach to playing jazz that separates it from all other kinds of music. You're creating in the moment."

"It's a risky business. You can hit the wall" — he smacks his hands together — "really quick if you're uptight. Cats that do that are just playing what they practice or what they think they're supposed to play. Even some great horn players play the same solo on every tune, not freeing themselves up to be creative. You have to be loose in this music. I'm not just playing with my mind or my fingertips. I'm trying to feel the music in my whole body."
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Take the Quad ESL-57? Configured as a gnarly, stubby panel, it was often mistaken for an oversized space heater. Left on, it sucked up dust and grime as its panels filtered the air. Far worse, it arced — those flickering blue lights in the panel signaled diaphragm perforation and eventual destruction.

But the sound! When I sat in their tiny sweet spot, my ESL-57s had gobs of air, liquid transparency, neutrality, pinpoint imaging, lightning-fast transient response, wide and deep soundstaging, and low distortion, all with no listener fatigue. Their midrange — far more liquid and transparent than that of Quad's 1981 ESL-63, in my opinion — was the most natural I have heard from any loudspeaker, and justified the post-traumatic stress disorder my '57s caused me.

So I was both excited and uneasy when a review pair of MartinLogan's new hybrid Prodigies arrived in my listening room. I needn't have worried — Gayle Sanders, MartinLogan's president and chief designer, has spent his career making his electrostatic designs safe and reliable for audiophiles like me (see Wes Phillips' May 1997 interview with Gayle at www.stereophile.com/show/archives.cgi?1457).

The Prodigy is imposing; 5'7" tall, 16.5" wide, and more than 2' deep. Its two sections — the electrostatic panel and the chunky, back-busting bass module — couple to form a 133-lb unit. The Prodigy's technology — trickled down from the company's flagship, the $70,000/pair Statement Evolution2 — includes a proprietary electrostatic transducer and a woofers array, called "ForceForward" by MartinLogan, that is intended to reduce bass room interactions and resonances. MartinLogan uses a proprietary manufacturing technique to curve the Prodigy's perforated, metal-framed panels into a "curvilinear line source" (CLS) transducer. This frees the loudspeaker from the narrow dispersion pattern common to most electrostatics.

MartinLogan's CLS screens are arc-proof. Sanders and his engineers determined that panel arcing was due to local buildup of charge from uneven coatings on the 0.0005"-thick polyester diaphragm. While other manufacturers hand-paint diaphragms with a conductive material, MartinLogan vapor-deposits the conductor as a 1-ringstrom-thick (0.0000000001 n) layer onto the diaphragm's surface. This process produces an optically transparent conducting layer with uniform characteristics of surface resistivity that prevent charge buildup and migration, and arcing. According to Sanders, this layer has the electrical surface conductivity of human skin, allowing it to hold a static charge of from 1500V to 3000V.

The Prodigy's diaphragm is sandwiched between perforated steel plates, called stators, that carry the varying audio-signal voltage while providing insulation to protect the user. A nylon-based powder insulation is deposited at very high temperatures on the perforated steel stators to provide a safety tolerance of 12kV. Fourteen evenly spaced ClearSpars, or horizontal Lexan insulators/spacers, subdivide the panel and create a uniform gap between the stators and the diaphragms. When the amplifier's audio signals are stepped up to high voltages by a transformer and applied to the stators, an electrostatic field of opposing voltages produces forward and backward movement of the diaphragm, which in turn generates sound waves in air.

One problem with electrostatic speakers has been the tendency of the charged membrane to collect dust. However, the Prodigy's diaphragm accumulates dust only slowly because it automatically shuts down its electrical field when no music is being played. When dust has accumulated, the manual
MartinLogan Prodigy Loudspeaker

Larry Greenhill

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advises the owner to leave the speaker unplugged for 12 hours, then vacuum the panels.

The Prodigy's second-order crossover switches the signal from the bass module to the electrostatic panel at 250Hz. It uses point-to-point wiring and physically separated high- and low-pass crossover circuits to reduce magnetic interaction. The panel driver's dual transformers are said to result in lower distortion and increased power handling.

The bass module is a sealed dual-woofer design. The forward-facing 10" ScanSpeak aluminum-cone woofer carries the bass audio signal. An independently enclosed, 10" fiber-cone woofer faces to the rear and is driven by a circuit that processes level, phase, and frequency range to create a partial cancellation of the front woofer's output in the lower frequencies. This ForceForward technology specifically reduces the common 50Hz null and 100Hz peak found in many rooms. For those requiring more forward bass, the Prodigy has a rear-panel switch for increasing the below-50Hz response by 3dB.

The wing nuts on the Prodigy's speaker binding posts can be easily

---

**Measurements**

As is my current practice, the MartinLogan Prodigy was measured out of doors, in my enclosed backyard. I usually raise the speaker being measured on a high stand so it is well away from the ground. In the case of the Prodigy, though, its 133-lb weight and awkward bulk meant that I couldn't get it off the ground. (Apparently, it is impossible to acquire suitable skyhooks in my neck of the Brooklyn woods.) I indicate in the text where this practical difficulty impacted specific measurements.

The Prodigy's voltage sensitivity was a little below specification but still good for a panel speaker, at an estimated 88dB(B)/2.83V/m, and this will be aided in-room by the Prodigy's line-source behavior. The interaction of the tall source and the floor and ceiling results in an in-room sound that does not fall off with distance as quickly as with a conventional point source. However, the plot of the MartinLogan's impedance magnitude against frequency (fig.1, solid trace) indicates it to be, as specified, basically a 4 ohm load through much of the audioband. This will mean the speaker will actually draw 2W from the amplifier at that voltage level, not 1W.

As with other electrostats, the Prodigy's impedance drops to a very low value above the audioband: to 1 ohm at 25kHz, which I suspect is the series impedance of the internal and external wiring. Fortunately, even with wideband media like SACD and DVD-Audio, there is very little energy in this frequency region, so the partnering amplifier will not be required to drive much power into this low impedance. But look at what happens around 8kHz, a frequency where there is significant musical energy: an impedance of 3.55 ohms coincides with a capacitive phase angle of -58°, which results in a much lower effective impedance in this region. A powerful amplifier capable of handling 2 ohm loads will work best with the Prodigy.

The two traces in fig.2 show the individual responses of the Prodigy's panel and its dynamic woofer section. The former was taken on-axis halfway up the panel, on its centerline, at a distance of 50'; the latter is actually the complex sum of the front- and rear-woofer nearfield responses, taking into account the differences in distance between the two drive-units and a nominal farfield listening position. (The two woofers are wired out of phase; but because the front and rear woofers face in opposite directions, an electrical pulse results in both cones moving in the same direction.)

Looking first at the panel, a strong reflection of its output from the ground between it and the microphone leads to a narrow but deep suckout at 1.6kHz, and to a rather "furry"-looking trace at higher frequencies. Ignore those characteristics, which are specific to the measuring situation, and the response trend is basically smooth and flat up to 10kHz, above which the speaker's output shelves down by 3–4dB, due to the proximity effect you get with a physically large speaker like the Prodigy. (This effect was described in my measurements accompanying our May 1997 review of the MartinLogan SL3—see www.stereophile.com/showarchives.cgi?145:10—and in Gayle Sanders' "Manufacturer's Comment" on that review, also included in the website reprint.) Moving the microphone out to 100' gave a flatter top-octave balance (not shown).

Fig.2 indicates that the panel rolls off with an approximate 18dB/octave slope below 300Hz, the woofer section coming in smoothly below that.

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2 In his August 2000 review of the MartinLogan Prodigy in Hi-Fi News & Record Review, Martin Colloms pointed out, "If the two woofers were both equal and always out of phase you would get dipole upper bass while the low bass would cancel out." MartinLogan gives an example of what happens at 50Hz: "The acoustic difference between the drivers is about 2.3. At 50Hz, the phase shift caused by the traveling wave is about 37°. When added to the 127° phase shift of the passive crossover, the front waves meet with a relative phase-shift of 127° + 37°, which equals 164°. The back waves meet with a relative phase-shift of 127° + 37°, which equals 164°. The front waves meeting at 90°, causing an addition resulting in an amplitude gain of 3dB. The back waves meeting at 164° causes a subtraction, leading to an amplitude reduction of 11dB.

The total difference between the two waves is then 3dB + 11dB = 14dB."
tightened without pliers or a wrench. Four binding posts are supplied on each speaker, allowing for biwiring. The excellent owner's manual gives instructions for horizontal passive biamplification (use a tube amplifier for the electrostatic panels, solid-state for the bass modules) and vertical passive amplification (use two identical stereo amplifiers, one dedicated to each speaker). Spiked feet—called Energy Transfer Coupler (ETC) Spikes—are supplied with jam nuts to allow for easy leveling.

**Setup**

I placed the Prodigys where the Revel Salon loudspeakers had sounded best: 63” from the rear wall and 36” from the side walls, sitting out in the room on a circular area rug. The speakers faced the long axis of my narrow listening room, which is 26’ long, 13’ wide, and 12’ high, with a semi-cathedral ceiling. One long wall is covered with bookshelves, the other has a bay window. At the opposite end, the room opens into a 25’ by 15’ kitchen through an 8’ by 4’ doorway.

An electrostatic speaker needs to be plugged into an electrical outlet. When playing, the speaker displays a blue light—in the shape of the MartinLogan logo—through its electrostatic screen. Unlike the blue arcing in my old Quad, this light can be switched on and off from a pushbutton in the bass module.

Because the Prodigy’s rated voltage sensitivity of 91dB/2.83V/m is well above the average range of B-weighted speaker sensitivities reported in *Stereophile*, I found that I needed to set my Krell KBL preamplifier’s volume control significantly lower than usual.

**Measurements**

**Frequency.** The woofers peak at between 50 and 70Hz, with a typical sealed-box roll-out at 12dB/octave reaching -6dB in the low 30s—a little higher than I was expecting from the specification. However, checking my notes revealed that the bass control had not been switched to the “+3dB” position for this measurement. In addition, the close proximity of the woofers to a listening room’s floor will tend to boost the low bass. LG did note in his review that, judged with the ½-octave warble tones on *Stereophile*’s original Test CD, the Prodigy’s bass extended down to 31.5Hz in his room—what I would have expected.

The presence of the early ground reflection makes the MartinLogan’s lateral dispersion plot (fig.3) look a little hashy in the high frequencies. Nevertheless, the panel’s dipole behavior can be clearly discerned from this graph. Interestingly, the top two audio octaves feature wider dispersion than the region between 500Hz and 2kHz, presumably due to the panel’s curvilinear shape. In normal-sized listening rooms, this will tend to compensate for any top-octave depression resulting from the proximity effect. Though the vertical dispersion plot (fig.4) also looks rather hashy due to the unavoidable early reflection, the speaker’s response doesn’t change

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Stereophile, July 2001
I first drove the Prodigys with the high-powered Bryston 7B-ST monoblocks—tested at 954W into 4 ohms—because of the 7Bs' power reserves and easily visible front-panel clipping indicators. Configured in serial bridged mode, the Brystons' bass response was very tight, deep, and fast; their soundstage huge—the bass lines on Massive Attack's Unfinished Symphony (CircaW1RX2) were solid and full. However, I found the soundstage depth shallow and the transients harsh. I switched the 7B-ST into their parallel bridge mode—tested at 595W into 2 ohms—which enables the amplifier to drive low-impedance loads. Although the bass became less prominent, the soundstage assumed a more natural depth and width, and the edginess disappeared. Even so, I preferred the less powerful Mark Levinson No.334 to the Bryston for its sweeter, more transparent sound.

Final adjustments included comparative nearfield (8") and farfield (16") listening, low-frequency signal-generator sweeps, phase checks, pink noise, and fine-tuning of listening position for optimal soundstaging and imaging. The Prodigy's deep-bass output fell off smoothly between 41Hz and 35Hz in my listening room, with no doubling. Playing Stereophile's Test CD 3 for channel checks and phasing, I carefully positioned my chair in the Prodigy's nearfield until I could hear the in-phase pink-noise signal as a centrally focused sonic image. Soundstaging was optimized when speakers and chair described a 7' equilateral triangle (measured from the panels' approximate centers).

The Prodigy's electrostatic panel extends from 31.5" to 60" above the floor. This covers an area below my ear significantly over the height of the panel, meaning that it will be relatively insensitive to changes in listener ear height.

In fig.5, you can easily see the ground reflection in the Prodigy's impulse response after the 5ms mark. But the impulse response itself, just before the 4ms line, has a good, time-coherent shape marred only by some low-level high-frequency ringing. The ground reflection can also be seen in the step response (fig.6), but note what a perfect right-triangular shape the panel's initial step has. The setback of the bass cabinet results in the positive-going step of the summed woofer outputs coinciding in time with the panel step's recrossing of the time axis. This can be seen in fig.7, which shows the individual step responses (the panel is in red, the woofers in blue), and implies a seamless transition between the two sections in the frequency domain.

Finally, the presence of that early ground reflection interferes with the Prodigy's cumulative spectral-decay plot. (The presence of reflections in this kind of waterfall plot is indistinguishable from delayed energy due to resonances.) But windowing the impulse response just before the reflection gave the plot shown in fig.8. The dotted region in this graph indicates where the data are invalid, due to the necessary truncation of the impulse response. But the dropoff of the initial sound is fairly clean up to the 1.5ms mark, broken only by the presence of some delayed energy at 12.6kHz, this correlating with the frequency of the ringings seen in the impulse response (fig.5). This may well be too high in frequency and too low in level to have an effect on the sound, given that LG commented so favorably on the Prodigy's high frequencies.

As I have mentioned before, measuring large panel speakers is an exercise fraught with practical difficulties and, sometimes, frustration. Nevertheless, the Prodigy is the best-measuring electrostatic speaker I have examined. I am not surprised LG was impressed by its sound quality.

—John Atkinson
height (38") when I'm seated in my listening chair and extends above my car height when I'm standing. This explained why the speaker's tonal balance didn't change when I stood while playing pink noise.

I broke the Prodigys in by playing music from an FM tuner for 12 hours, followed by 12 hours of the “Special Burn-In Noise” from Stereophile's Test CD 3.

Sound

I first put on some warmup music—David Hudson's Didgeridoo Spirit (Indigenous Australia IA2003 D), Fleetwood Mac's The Dance (Reprise 46702-2), and David Bowie singing “Putting Out Fire,” from the Cat People soundtrack (MCA MCAD-1498). The Prodigys' transparency and deep, wide soundstage quickly involved me in the music. But at first, the bass response seemed understated, shy, and reticent.

After a month of listening, things had changed: The louder I played the Prodigy, the better it sounded. [Stereophile webmaster Jon Iverson also reports that the Prodigy requires a significant amount of break-in.—Ed.] Its bass blossomed when driven hard. At a level where my usually unfappable Mark Levinson No.334 began to show signs of compression, the Prodigys opened up. The bass became forceful and taut, and the instruments separated and became more distinct.

At these levels, the Prodigy's bass response sounded detailed and taut, and showed the advantages of the Force-Forward design. Solid, clean bass extended down to 31.5Hz in my room when playing a 1/2-octave warble tone at -20dB (Test CD, Stereophile STPH 002-2). The bass drum in Owen Reed's La Fiesta Mexicana was tuneful, solid, and powerful (Fiesta, Reference Recordings RR-38CD). The final organ chords of Part 1 of Elgar's The Dream of Gerontius (Test CD 2, Stereophile STPH 004-2) and the repetitive bass-drum beat in “Cosmos Old Friend,” from the Sneakers soundtrack (Columbia CK 53146), were clean, but I had to listen carefully because their reproduction via the Prodigys was subtle. Similarly, Michael Arinpol's plucked double bass on Patricia Barber's “Use Me,” from Companion (Premonition/Blue Note 5-22963-2), pulsed, throbbled, and burned with no sign of boil.

The Prodigy's bass had excellent pitch definition. The woofer's sonic characteristics meshed well with those of the electrostatic panels. It captured the pounding tom-toms on Richard Thompson's “I Misunderstood,” from Rumor and Sigh (Capitol CDP 7 95713 2); and the 32Hz bass notes from the beginning of Strauss's Also sprach Zarathustra, from “Ascent” on Time Warp (Telarc CD-80106), were clean and tight.

The Prodigy's midrange was transparent, timbrally accurate, and free of congestion and distortion.

Associated Equipment

**Analog sources:** Linn Sondek LP12 turntable with Lingko power supply, Itok tonearm, Spectral moving-coil cartridge.

**Digital sources:** Krell MD-1 CD transport, Adcom GDA-700 D/A processor, Sony SC-555ES SACD player.

**FM tuners:** Day-Sequerra FM Reference Classic, Rotel RH-10, Magnum Dynalab MD-102 and MD-205 Sleuth RF amplifier.

**Preamplification:** Krell KBL preamplifier, Mark Levinson ML-7A preamplifier with L-2 phono section, Margulis and Duntech MX-10 moving-coil preamplifiers.

**Power amplifiers:** Mark Levinson No.334, Bryston 7B-ST monoblocks.

**Loudspeakers:** Dynaudio Contour 3.0, Revel Salon, B&W 805 Nautlius, Quad ESL-63, Velodyne HGS-18 subwoofer.

**Cables:** Digital: Silver Starlight and Ultralink 75 ohm coax. Balanced Interconnects: Bryston, Krell Cogelo Yellow, PSC Pristine R30 silver-alloy, Single-Ended Interconnects: Randall Research, Mark Levinson HFC (with Camac connectors), Totem Acoustic Sinew, Coincident CST Interface, Ultralink Performance Audio. Speaker: Levinson HFC-10, PSC Pristine R-50 biwired double ribbons, Ultralink Excelsior 6N OFHC, Coincident Speaker Technology CST 1. — Larry Greenhill
sheen—as as Dvorák’s Carnival, from Nature’s Realm (Water Lily Acoustics WLA-WS-66-CD). The Japanese and Korean temple bells that back up Shane Carratt’s reading of Psalm 23 on Live Recordings at Red Rose Music were reproduced with stunning realism, transparency, and detail.

The Prodigy was able to maintain image stability at high volumes. On Going Home, the L.A. Four was precisely positioned on a wide soundstage, playing duets and solos on guitar, double bass, drums, flute, and saxophone. Images snapped into focus on the Prodigy’s wide, well-defined sweet spot, whether José Carreras’ holographic tenor singing the opening Kyrie of the Misa Criolla (Philips 420 955-2), or Richard Thompson’s guitar as heard just outside the right speaker in the instrumental close of “Why Must I Read,” from Rumor and Sigh.

The sharpest and most precise imaging was heard from Sacred Feast, Sony’s multichannel Super Audio CD recording of the choral group Gaudamus (Sony SACD-9). Using a new Sony SC1-C555ES carousel SACD player, I selected a multichannel playback mode that fed full-range signals to the two front loudspeakers with no center channel. The result was a pure, airy, well-defined chorus rich in natural timbres.

Of all the Prodigy’s sonic characteristics, the most impressive was its dynamic range. In my large listening room, it was one of the few loudspeakers that did not limit and crunch on the choral peaks of Elgar’s Dream of Gerontius. Playing Spyboy’s apocalyptic “Deeper Well” at top volume, I could still follow Emmylou Harris’s birdlike voice and hear her lyrics clearly, despite the throbbing, churning bass synthesizer and distorted electric guitar.

The Prodigy handled both ends of the dynamic range beautifully, but just to be sure, I decided to push it hard.3 I reconnetected the Bryston 7B-STs and cranked up the volume until the amp’s clipping lights flashed when playing snare-drum rinhots. In this configuration, the Prodigy bettered all loudspeakers heard in my living room. Not only did it reproduce the powerful wall of synthesizer and electric guitar and the explosive rinhots in the drum solo on “The Maker,” the showstopper from Emmylou Harris’s Spyboy, but it conveyed inner detail that most speakers miss. I heard a transparent, multi-layered aural portrait: a wall-to-wall tapestry of voices, synthesizer, drums, guitar, and crowd noise; the distorted but musical electric guitar solo; Harris’s delicate but strained voice; the layered effect of the male backup singers; and those explosive rinhots.

Another revelation came when I played my favorite jazz selection, "The Mooche" from the Jerome Harris Quintet’s Rendezvous (Stereophile STPH013-2). The Prodigy reproduced—better than I’d ever heard them—the honky timbre of the saxophone, the blattness of the trombone, and the luminous, shimmering, see-through clarity of Steve Nelson’s vibraphone.

Conclusions
The MartinLogan Prodigy reaffirmed my passion for electrostatic loudspeakers. Sure, I was swayed by the usual electrostatic attributes—low distortion, timbral accuracy, and deep, wide soundstaging that took my breath away—but there was more.

The epiphany came after I’d been living with the Prodigy for two months. I don’t know why it took that long—perhaps the woofers needed the time to fully break in and reveal their full dynamic range and power-handling capabilities—but music I’d always loved then came alive in a brand-new way. Instrumental timbres and colors became much more vivid, intense, and startlingly realistic. The speakers’ dynamic range expanded, allowing them to play louder, with greater depth, three-dimensionality, and detail.

For these reasons, I strongly recommend you audition a pair of well-built-in Prodigy with your favorite source material. Crank up the volume and listen. I promise you—the MartinLogan Prodigy will be a revelation, and the best cure for electrostatophobia.

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3 Other critics have crowed about the Prodigy’s dynamic range. See Myer Astor’s review in Ultimate Audio (Winter 2001, Vol.4 No.4, pp.60-64), in which he praised the Prodigy’s “ability to reproduce the speed and reduce the smearing of plucked instruments.” UA named the Prodigy its Audio Product of the Year. In the December 2000 Home Theater (pp.113-120), Jerry Kindel lauded the Prodigy for its “marriage of micro- and macrosounds.”
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Chord CPM 3300 integrated amplifier

With its high-end heart and home-theater brain, Chord's powerful CPM 3300 integrated amplifier ($9500 with the aluminum-cylinder Integra leg option, $8950 without) is a uniquely fascinating audio product well worth considering. High-tech innards and magazine-cover good looks don't hurt either, but what originally got me interested was the superlative sound Chord products have consistently delivered at trade and consumer shows when paired with Wilson-Benesch loudspeakers.

Those combos always seem to produce exciting and, to my ears, musically honest sound from familiar demo discs, including CD compilations I've made using the Rockport System III Sirius turntable. A journalist has to keep moving at such shows or the coverage will suffer, but when I hit the Chord/W-B room, I inevitably end up sitting through and reconnecting with some overfamiliar demo disc in its entirety.

Game Plan
While Chord's penetration of the American audiophile market has so far been modest, the company's consumer line is expansive: preamplifiers, two- and multichannel amplifiers, DACs, and phone sections. According to John Franks, Chord's chief designer, artists including Paul McCartney, Ray Charles, and the Wu Tang Clan use amplifiers from Chord's professional line in their studios. Well-known venues include Abbey Road studios and London's Royal Opera House, which use them for sound reinforcement.

I'd recently reviewed Musical Fidelity's M3 integrated amp (Stereophile, February 2001), so Chord's new variation on that theme seemed like a good model to choose from the company's long lineup. Like the M3, which combines much of the circuitry of Musical Fidelity's Nu-Vista preamp and 300 power amp in one chassis, the CPM 3300 is based on two extant and well-received Chord products: the C3200E preamplifier and 1200B amplifier.

While twice the M3's price, the CPM 3300 actually offers somewhat less RMS power (220W vs 275W) into an 8 ohm load. I was curious to see and hear how Chord felt it could justify the CPM 3300's seemingly steep price. Audiophiles comforted by the straightforward operating systems of most high-end audio products — turn on, select input, adjust volume — will be surprised and perhaps confused by this model's complexity. While the CPM 3300 is on the surface a simple, two-channel integrated amplifier, lurking beneath its smooth aluminum skin is a microprocessor-controlled environment somewhat like a home-theater receiver, complete with dual signal buses for independent tape monitoring.

Description: MOSFET-powered integrated amplifier. Power output: 220Wpc RMS into 8 ohms, 300Wpc RMS into 4 ohms. Frequency responses: preamplifier, 2.5Hz-200kHz, -3dB; power amplifier, 0.8Hz–46kHz, -1dB, into 8 ohms. THD (x1 gain): 10Hz, >91dB; 1kHz >93dB; 10kHz >90dB; 20kHz >87dB. Power amplifier gain: 30dB. Preamplifier S/N: -93dB, all inputs. Input impedance: 47k ohms unbalanced, 94k ohms balanced. Input sensitivity (for full output): not specified. Power consumption: not specified.

Dimensions: 16.4" (420mm) W by 5.9" (152mm) H by 13.8" (355mm) D. Weight: 8.6 lbs (19kg).

Serial number of unit reviewed: USD009.

Price: $8950; add $550 for Integra leg option (as reviewed). Approximate number of dealers: 6. Warranty: 5 years.

Manufacturer: Chord Electronics Ltd., The Pumphouse, Farleigh Bridge, Farleigh Lane, East Farleigh, Kent ME16 9NB, England, UK. Tel: (44) (0)1622-721444. Fax: (44) (0)1622-721555. Web: www.chordelectronics.co.uk. US distributor: The Sound Organisation, 11140 Petal Street, Suite 350, Dallas, TX 75238. Tel: (972) 234-0182. Fax: (972) 234-0249. Email: steve@soundorg.com Web: www.soundorg.com.
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source-controlled gain settings, and dual outputs. The last allows you to route the signal to the built-in amplifier or to a set of RCA jacks for external amplification — or to both, should you choose to biamp your speakers.

Complementing the home theater-like operating menu are the two usual rancid side dishes: inadequate and confusing instructions, a complete lack of labeling of the rear-panel input and output jacks (though a key is included with the handbook) and a remote control from hell (neat, unlit rows of same-sized, multi-function buttons). If you've ever read one of my reviews in Stereophile Guide to Home Theater, you know that I readily admit to possibly having a learning disability when it comes to operating remotes. There were times when I got no sound at all from the CPM 3300 and couldn't figure out why.

The instructions emphasize the CPM 3300's capabilities while neglecting to tell you clearly how to access them (especially regarding the remote control), or in what order. The how-to section is long on jargon-filled lists and short on user-friendly prose.

I'm told that the instructions are being revised and that a new remote, designed just for the CPM 3300, will replace the impressive-looking but unwieldy and button-crowded one supplied with the review sample, and which can control up to six Chord audio and video products, your lawn sprinkler, your garage door, and probably your home's thermostat.

**Design**

Despite its complexity and the impressive amount of power it can deliver, the CPM 3300 is surprisingly light and compact, thanks to the switching power supply at the core of Chord's approach to building amplifiers. Designer John

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**Measurements**

My usual practice before measuring an amplifier is to run it at one-third power into 8 ohms for one hour. This severely stresses a design with a class-B output stage, as it results in the maximum heat being dissipated in the output transistors. However, I cut short the preconditioning with the Chord CPM 3300 after 30 minutes. This was partly because the rear heatsinks were far too hot to touch, as was the black mesh grille on the top, but also because the measured distortion had risen slowly and steadily throughout that time, reaching 0.53% from a cold start of 0.3%. (I made sure the bottom vents weren't blocked during the testing.) This preconditioning is admittedly a very severe test for an amplifier, but the Chord's behavior suggests that it has inadequate heatsinking for sustained high-power use, such as at a party, particularly with low-impedance speakers. (This also implies that the Integra legs are hardly an option, if the amplifier is to be kept off the floor.)

The balance knob was loose on the shaft when I received the review sample for measurement. I equalized the channel outputs with the remote before performing any measurements. The Chord's architecture allows for four different gain settings to be applied universally across the inputs, or individually to allow for sources with different output levels.

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1 As a rule of thumb, the temperature at which something becomes too hot to keep your hand on it is 60°C (140°F).
Franks came out of the aerospace industry, where such lightweight, compact designs are a necessity. Switch-mode supplies have been used in audio with varying degrees for years, beginning, I believe, with Bob Carver’s much-vaunted The Cube amp, back in the early ’80s. [Sony released an integrated amplifier with a switch-mode supply in 1979, if I remember correctly. Many in Lin’s current range of amplifiers use such supplies, and they are now ubiquitous in PCs.—Ed.]

In conventional power-supply designs, a heavy transformer, rectifiers (silicon diodes or tubes), and large filter capacitors are used to drop wall voltages, convert alternating current to direct, and store energy needed by the amplifier to reproduce music. Unfortunately, according to Chord, the demands are so great that these supplies must be large and heavy, and in the best of them, efficiency in the audioband is relatively low.

In Chord’s view, these bulky, inefficient designs are sluggish, put distortion back on to the AC mains, and can add noise. Countering Chord’s view are all of the fabulous-sounding (if bulky) amplifiers that use just such old-fashioned power-supply designs. As with everything else in life, greatness is a matter of both design and implementation—a proposition with which Chord’s John Franks would probably not take issue. It took him 10 years to overcome such problems in the audio-band power supply as switching noise, poor reliability, and high costs before he felt his first amplifier design, the Chord SPM 900, was ready for the High End, in 1989.

Chord’s current power supply, the fifth generation, is common to all of the company’s amplifiers (in 600W, 2kW, and 4kW sizes, depending on application). This supply is a self-contained, self-monitoring module that Chord claims is extremely well-shielded and immune from interactions with the AC mains at one end and the amplifier circuitry at the other. Incoming AC is filtered and rectified to produce 300–350V DC, which is stored in high-voltage capacitors. High-voltage

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**Measurements**

![Fig.4 Chord CPM 3300, channel separation (10dB/vertical div, R-L dashed).](image)

![Fig.5 Chord CPM 3300, THD+noise (%) vs frequency at (from top to bottom at 5kHz): 9V into simulated loudspeaker load, 40W into 2 ohms, 20W into 4 ohms, 10W into 8 ohms.](image)

![Fig.6 Chord CPM 3300, 1kHz waveform at 282W into 4 ohms (top), distortion and noise waveform with fundamental notched out (bottom, not to scale).](image)

![Fig.7 Chord CPM 3300, spectrum of 50Hz sinewave, DC–1kHz, at 206W into 8 ohms (linear frequency scale).](image)

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Stereophile, July 2001
MOSFETs running at 80kHz "chop," the DC, which is then passed through an HF transformer. The higher the frequency, the smaller the transformer can be compared to the standard 50Hz or 60Hz design.

There's another rectification stage, a Dynamic Coupling system, and, finally, a bank of high-voltage storage capacitors. Dynamic Coupling keeps the supply's positive and negative rails tied together via a strong magnetic flux. When there is a demand for power on one rail, it is drawn from both, which keeps the system in balance so the zero crossing point doesn't get pulled one way or the other.

The CPM 3300's output stage runs in a "class-AB sliding bias design," which operates in class-A (always on) in most normal situations, and switches to class-B only in situations that demand high power. The output devices are custom-built, dual-chip 200V/300W MOSFETs; Chord claims that these ensure "perfect thermal matching," eliminating the need for temperature-balancing resistors for improved efficiency and stability.

Output protection is based on the Dynamic Coupling circuit. When the system senses flux-density differences between the two rails over time, an algorithm determines whether the cause is a need for power, or a fault such as a short circuit or a speaker-damaging 12V offset. If it's a fault, the CPM 3300 switches itself to standby mode.

The preamp section is fully balanced dual-differential with a combination of balanced and single-ended inputs that are converted to balanced, though other than its output stage, the power amplifier section is single-ended. The volume and balance controls are four-gang motorized ALPS potentiometers. Each preamp channel has its own independent power supply, as do the microcontroller and the 32 hermetically sealed relays.

Connection, Operating Features, and (Ab)use

Connecting inputs and outputs is straightforward: two Disc inputs offer single-ended and balanced operation, and there are four more single-ended inputs, two of which are tape loops associated with a pair of tape outs. There are also RCA-jack line-level and speaker-level outputs. All jacks are high-quality, gold-plated chassis mounts, and the speaker-level outs are high-quality WBTs. Vinyl playback requires an outboard phono section.

On the front panel are solid brass Volume and Balance pots, a power switch (Standby/On), three buttons marked S, B, and A, and a custom blue fluorescent display. The hard-to-see slots on the rotary Volume and Balance controls make it almost impossible to gauge starting positions until you move either one, in which case the screen display kicks in. Unfortunately, while moving the balance control one way or the other causes arrows to appear on the screen letting you know in which direction you're going, there's no indication of when you've reached equal output in both channels. This will create high anxiety for anal-retentive audiophiles.

When I switched the unit on (this can't be done via the remote) I was greeted by one of the coolest cosmetic displays ever seen in consumer electronics: the outlines of the amp's innards, visible from a circular top grate, began glowing black-light style, resembling (depending on your history): 1) a 1960s head shop, 2) a night landing in Dallas, or 3) Tom. The light show is courtesy 160 tiny blue LEDs plus a few red ones, each the size of a grain of sand.

Once you're mesmerized by the lights, the fun begins! From the remote or the front panel you can choose the A or B button to select which bus you want to listen to. Bus A is connected to Tape 1 Out, Bus B to Tape 2 Out. Tape 2 In can be selected only with Bus A

Stereophile, July 2001
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- Includes mini jack plug and 1/4 inch stereo jack plug adapter

**Specifications:**
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- **Impedance:** 90 ohms
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and Tape 1 In only with Bus B. The purpose of this ball of confusion is to allow you to record and monitor two different sources simultaneously. It's not that difficult once you understand it, and when listening to non-tape sources you can ignore it, but really — how many audiophiles need dual simultaneous analog-domain recording and monitoring? Or even single? Even digital phones like me are mostly recording to CD and MD these days, which makes standard tape monitoring (listening off the playback head) moot.

In any case, it's there if you need it. But if you're just using one tape deck, you might as well connect it to Tape 2 so you don't have to change to Bus B just to listen. I hooked up an open-reel deck to Tape 1 and couldn't get any sound from it because I was using Bus A. I know — when in doubt, read the instructions. My advice with the CPM 3300: Read the instructions even if you're not in doubt.

More generally useful features are the four gain settings (x1, x2, x5, x7) available for each input. This allows you to come close to matching levels and prevent unwanted sonic blasts when you scroll through your sources. The CPM 3300 will remember your settings, even if it's been switched off for years. You can also reset all inputs to the lowest setting (x1) when you follow a procedure in the instructions that you probably won't memorize, so keep 'em handy! And on power-up, the CPM 3300 reverts to your last input.

Remote Oddities
Say you're listening to a CD and the phone rings. What do you do? Hit Mute, of course, and the sound mutes. When you're finished with the phone call and you want to hear music, hit Mute again, right? Wrong. Nothing happens. You have to hit Volume Up to un-mute. Then you'll get music again, right? Wrong. For some reason, when switching from Mute, you have to select an output — not the bus, but the output. There are two outputs as well as two buses. Output 1 is the speaker output, Output 2 the line output. The procedure going from Mute is: Hit Volume Up or Down, then hit the Glus/ DVI1/Op1 button (remember, it's a multi-use remote).

Another oddity: Among the many source buttons are some repeated ones: two each of Disc 1, Disc 2, Video, and Radio input. Turns out one set is for Bus A, one for Bus B. Red brackets on the remote are intended to delineate the two sets of buttons, but not until John Franks explained it to me did I understand what was going on, thanks to my learning disability or the instructions (or lack thereof). The button layout plus the less-than-forthcoming remote created a great deal of confusion and frustration in the Fremer household. Hopefully, the new remote and instructions will make using the CPM 3300 as pleasant as listening to it was.

In short: Setting up and using the CPM 3300 is quirky, but once you've got the hang of it, it's pretty simple. Chord just has to do a better job of helping people get that hang.

Listening
Before switching from the Hovland HP-100/Musical Fidelity Nu-Vista 300 combo, I sat down and listened to my usual suspects. On LP: Davey Spillane's Atlantic Bridge, Janis Ian's Breaking Silence, Nat King Cole's Love is the Thing, Mel Tormé and Friends at Marty's, The Weavers' Reunion at Carnegie Hall, and various RCA Living Stereo recordings of Jascha Heifetz (original and Classic reissues). On CD: Olu Dara's In the World, various JVC XRCIDs, Mobile Fidelines, and DCC Compact Classics, etc. I also mixed in some open-reel tapes played back on a recently acquired Viking 88 tubed deck, including The Byrds' Sweetheart of the Rodeo, The Fantastic Expedition of Dillard and Clark, and Herbert von Karajan and the Berlin Philharmonic's early-60s reading of Beethoven's Symphony 7.

I spent the better part of a day and that evening locking that combo's sound into my brain, then switched to the Chord CPM 3300, which remained in the system for more than a month of intense listening. (I used the Audio Research Reference phono section for vinyl playback.) The LP I played right before and after the switch was DCC Compact Classic's stupendous-sounding reissue of Nat Cole's Love is the Thing. This 1956 three-track stereo recording puts a gigantic, hovering image of Cole in the center of the stage, surrounded by a dryly recorded, somewhat boxy-sounding string section augmented by a harp, double bass, and just a hint of brushwork.

The Hovland/Nu-Vista combo delivered Cole's overwhelming voice in a sweeter, richer, more laid-back fashion compared to the Chord, which presented him in greater three-dimensional relief, and so far forward that I thought he was going to land in my lap. I'm exaggerating, but when Cole first entered on the opening of "When I Fall in Love," it was so startling that my head snapped back reflexively. The Chord's presentation was bigger, more vivid, and more exhilarating by far. If the Hovland/Nu-Vista sounded liquid and warm, the Chord sounded positively gelatinous (not a criticism) but also somewhat sandier, while offering up more body and solidity to images and greater transient snap.

The Chord sounded definitely faster, with an intense rhythmic drive and a lean, taut bass presentation that added excitement to a very familiar recording. Some will prefer that sound, and not be bothered by the increase in sibilant grit and the greater emphasis on Cole's vocal cords at the expense of the mellowing effect of his chest cavity. It...
Grand Prix Audio Monaco Amplifier Isolation System

When I think of Shaker furniture, I usually think of simple, elegant wood designs originally made by religious fundamentalists. Grand Prix Audio designer Alvin Lloyd uses a very different kind of shaker table in the development and design of his carbon-fiber composite-based audio racks and amplifier stands. His shaker tables actually do shake. They’re laboratory instruments, not furniture, and with their help he has developed racks and amp stands which, his measurements indicate, isolate components from vibrations and resonances even better than air-suspension systems do.

Grand Prix Audio is more than just a dramatic-sounding company name. Lloyd has spent more than 20 years in professional auto racing, as a driver, mechanic, and crew chief. Most recently he served as VP of operations for racecar builders Swift Engineering. Most important for the purposes of this discussion, Lloyd is a longtime audiophile. Aided by two Swift Engineering co-workers (one of whom collaborated on the first American-made Indy car to win a race in 14 years), he’s designed these aerospace-quality racks and amplifier stands to provide seven stages of isolation.

The heart of the amp stand I auditioned is an ultra-lightweight, ultra-rigid A-frame of carbon-fiber composite supported by three large-diameter, heavy-walled support columns of aircraft-grade “304” stainless steel, which contact the floor via large-diameter 304 stainless-steel spikes. A coating reduces the transmission of vibrations. I’ll spare you the details of the thinking and technology that went into the column caps, the material interface between the caps and the columns, and a few other intricacies.

The columns are not attached directly to the A-frame. A layer of Sorbothane under pressure acts as a transmission barrier that, according to Lloyd, operates “in the 90th percentile from below 1Hz to 15kHz,” though not in a linear fashion, and with limited effect at 20Hz. There is still some transmission of ground- and airborne vibrations, Lloyd told me, but the key to the Sorbothane’s effectiveness is that it’s under pressure, when it begins to act as a liquid. Sorbothane not under pressure, he insisted, is nothing but a spring (which is why a Sorbothane record mat is a terrible idea). Sorbothane’s behavior is critically dependent on the amount of compression it’s subjected to, which is why the stands have to be assembled at the factory and individually calibrated.

The next step in the system is the interface of the acrylic stand and the A-frame. Again, Sorbothane is used, but the end user is supplied with a variety of thicknesses and diameters specifically matched to component weight. You determine the weight of your amplifier, choose the correct damper, apply it to recesses in the carbon-fiber frame adjacent to the supports, and then lower the shelf on to the dampers, being sure not to let it contact the columns. When the component is placed on the shelf, the pressure will be sufficient to “liquefy” the Sorbothane to the point where it will behave as desired.

As for the choice of acrylic for the shelves, Lloyd told me the material can have favorable damping properties, but only in specific ways. A “yield curve” depends on a component’s thickness and weight. For most amplifiers, 1/8” acrylic is ideal, but Grand Prix can supply 1/4” for lighter loads. Too thick and the acrylic will transmit more energy. Thicker is not better.

The amp stands cost $999 each and come with three sets of dampers; if the end user knows the weight of the specific amplifier to be used, Grand Prix will supply the correct dampers.

Why go to the trouble to damp vibrations from a piece of electronics? What difference can it make? If you’ve experimented with various tuning feet and cones, you don’t need an answer. Manufacturers like Naim have found out for themselves and isolate their electronics with elastomer suspensions. Capacitors, cables, circuit boards — and, obviously, vacuum tubes — do not like to be vibrated.

I used the Monaco amp stands with the two-piece Nu-Vista 300 power amplifier, the Chord CPM 3300 integrated amplifier, and (when I reviewed the Red Rose Music R3 speakers for the May issue) with a vintage Dynaco Stereo 70. I paid the greatest attention to sonic differences during the Chord review by auditioning the amp on the Grand Prix Audio stand, on a piece of wood on my carpeted floor, and on my usual amp stand—a hollow- and tubular-legged metal stand from Target, fitted with a Symposium Acoustics isolation stand resting on spikes in the Target stand. To keep from going crazy from too many variables, I omitted the usual Walker Audio Valid Points.

I didn’t have to pay much attention to hear the difference between the Stereo 70 on the Grand Prix Audio stand and the floor: it sounded much cleaner and more focused on the stand, especially the bass.

The difference between the sound of the Chord on the wood and the Chord on the Grand Prix Audio stand was absolutely easy to hear. The overall focus, image definition, clarity, and blackness between the notes were clearly better on the composite stand (located between the speakers and directly in front of the Audio Physics Rhea subwoofer), as was retrieval of low-level detail. The rhythmic organization of complex music seemed to improve, and there was a greater sensation of listener relaxation (though that could have been psychological — the Grand Prix stands are dramatically good-looking!).

There was less of a difference between the Grand Prix stands and the Symposium Acoustics isolation shelves set into the Target stands, and I wouldn’t bet the farm on a blind listening test — though I’d comfortably bet an acre or two on the differences between the wooden board and the Grand Prix!

Of course, with eyes open, there was no contest: the stainless-steel, composite, and acrylic Grand Prix Monaco stand has high-tech good looks that most of us would welcome seeing between our speakers.

—Michael Fremer
would be foolish to describe one presentation as “right” and the other as “wrong.” Clearly, this was a closely nipped recording, with Cole popping consonants all over the place — some so intensely that your walls will shake if you have a subwoofer — so why wouldn’t there be an emphasis on the vocal cords and gritty sibilants? (If you listen carefully, you can hear Cole changing s and t to f in an attempt to limit the recorded damage.)

The Musical Fidelity M3’s presentation of Love is the Thing couldn’t have been more different. Sibilants were smooth and pristine, and Cole’s voice was warm and rich, with more emphasis on the chest and less on the vocal cords. The string sound had more body and less bow-scrape, and the overall picture was more finely drawn: delicate, relaxed, and pure. But, as I noted in the review, the picture was somewhat lacking in body, solidity, and weight. The Hovland/Nu-Vista combo occupied the middle ground between the M3 and the Chord. “Right” and “wrong” didn’t enter into this comparison: each of the three presented a coherent, appealing aural picture. Your preference will depend on your musical taste and associated equipment.

The musical excitement I’d experienced in the Chord/Wilson-Benesch rooms at audio shows was brought home by pairing the CPM 3300 with the Sonus Faber Amati Homages. On such pristine live recordings as The Weavers’ Carnegie Hall Reunion, the sense of experiencing the live event was heightened by the Chord’s taut, upfront presentation. The extended, well-controlled bottom end decisively delivered the hall sound, as well as the onstage foot-tapping and the resulting sensation of the vibrations traveling along the floorboards. Voices and guitars had a deliberate yet natural focus, well-delineated from the rear boundary of the backstage wall, and cleanly recorded sibilants were delivered flawlessly.

Playing symphonic music and the Heifetz recordings, the Chord produced silky-smooth string sound while preserving the natural grit of the bow. Massed strings never glazed-over or hardened, though the emphasis was more on the strings than on the body.

Black backgrounds; fast, sparkling transients; taut, rhythmically adept bass; dynamic ease and superb resolution of low-level detail — the CPM 3300 reproduced it all without sounding mechanical, bright, harmonically bleached, or antiseptic. It produced organized musical excitement and a big, airy, dramatic sonic picture without phony spot lighting or musical etching. Did it deliver the warmth and harmonic fullness of a good tube amp? No. Do most tube amps deliver the Chord’s transient speed, dynamic drive, and taut, well-damped bass? No.

While I had the Chord in the system, there were times I felt as if I would prefer the greater warmth, liquidity, and suppleness of the Hovland/Nu-Vista combo. When the Chord was gone and I had the Hovland/Nu-Vista back in the system, with some LPs and CDs I wished I could reexperience the Chord’s tight, energetic grip on the music. Welcome to the spectacularly imperfect world of electrically reproduced music.

Conclusions
While the Chord CPM 3300’s operating system is complex and can be quirky to operate, once it’s set up and you’ve gotten a handle on its idiosyncrasies, it’s actually easy and convenient to use. It offers a great deal of flexibility and packs high power in a dramatic-looking, fairly compact, and surprisingly lightweight chassis. Build quality appears to be extremely high and very high-tech. Some of the features — such as dual independent taping and monitoring and line- and speaker-level outputs — will be of limited use to many audiophiles, but for some will be welcome options. As for the sound...

If you like your musical presentation big, dramatic, dynamic, fast, and exciting, the Chord will give it to you.

If you listen carefully, you can hear Cole changing s and t to f in an attempt to limit the recorded damage.

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If you like your musical presentation big, dramatic, dynamic, fast, and exciting, the Chord will give it to you.

If you like your musical presentation big, dramatic, dynamic, fast, and exciting, the Chord will give it to you. If you prefer relaxing into a warm, laid-back musical picture, the CPM 3300 is not for you. It’s reassuring to know not only that there’s room in this marketplace for 2W single-ended tube amps and high-tech engineering marvels like Chord’s CPM 3300, but also that open minds can find the musical truth in both.

If you like your musical presentation big, dramatic, dynamic, fast, and exciting, the Chord will give it to you.
It started when Tyll learned that the IRS gave deductions for business expenses even if your business decisions were stupid. He figured if his job was to show people that headphones were fun, he had the perfect excuse to spend a bunch of money playing with headphones.

So, he hired Danny and told him to go crazy designing headphone amps—which gave Danny the perfect excuse to buy a bunch of cool audio test equipment. And, gave Todd the perfect excuse to buy every headphone amp any customer ever told him about.

Which was fine with Tyll, because that gave him the additional excuse he needed to put together a giant "World of Headphones" display to take to trade shows and whatnot. Which gave Roger the perfect excuse to get in a BUNCH of overtime making custom straps for every headphone amp in the known universe; and Jeanne and Saundra got the perfect excuse to get away from the tight corners of HeadRoom bags for a while to cut about an acre of fabric and burn a couple of miles of thread in straight lines, fabricating display case drapery. Then the price of a U-Haul—and the gas it takes to feed it—gave Tyll a perfectly ridiculous excuse to buy a company vehicle to get all the stuff to the Home Entertainment Show in New York. (And, to use for other corporate promotional and expeditorious purposes—whatever that means.)

All that gave us the unavoidable excuse to learn to drive (and park) in New York City. New York is a strange and wonderful place. The transition from a place like Montana to "The City" takes a lot more than two hours in time zones. One wonders, "What excuse can New York possibly have for being here?" Ha! New York makes none. What can you say when you’re an Irish guy in a hack in front of Virgin Records on Time Square? What do you need to say?

New Yorkers are living proof that we humans are complete beings, able to live life both perfectly at odds, and harmoniously with each other, and still find the time to give a damn about each other and do beautiful things. Push back a little dirt, and look what’s selling on the sidewalk in Time Square: Japanese Ladies write your name beautifully in Kanji; sidewalk fruit stands are often adorned by large bunches of flowers soon to be bought and given to a loved one; street vendors stand in the steam of a grill sizzling with onions and steak ready to serve you up a hearty dinner-in-a-wrap that you can eat on the run; and boisterous batches of Boys in Blue ever present—and surprisingly friendly—stand ready to bring New York’s finest to bear on any situation, all this is evidence that New Yorkers (and all us humans vicariously through them) are capable of being creative, beautiful, and loving in committing the act of life—even en-mass.

We liked New York. It’s not so often you get to meet the entire spectrum of humanity collectively flaunting it’s sense of style face-to-face. It’s not often that you get exposed to so much diversity that you begin to see more clearly the things you share with everybody else.

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Few topics will get audiophiles into an argument more readily than a discussion of the relative merits of tubed and solid-state equipment. A recent poll on www.stereophile.com showed 53% of respondents choosing solid-state as their preferred amplifier design, while 38% indicated a preference for tubes — the remainder choosing "other," which presumably means digital amplifiers. (There has been no corresponding survey regarding preamplifier designs.) Opinions tend toward the dogmatic, with one respondent declaring "solid-state is more accurate," another stating unequivocally that "tubes sound closer to the real thing."

Although designers of audio equipment tend to be more even-handed than consumers in their evaluations of the tube vs solid-state debate, most of them design with tubes or solid-state, not both. One of the few designers with a foot in each camp is Victor Khomenko of Balanced Audio Technology (BAT). BAT's first products were the VK-5 preamplifier and the VK-60 power amplifier, both of which use tubes, but I remember Khomenko telling me, when I reviewed these products for the December 1995 Stereophile (Vol.18 No.12), that he was just as comfortable designing with solid-state as with tubes, and that his plans for BAT included some solid-state offerings. Since then, he's made good on his promise: the BAT line now includes four solid-state amplifiers (including one multichannel) and three solid-state preamplifiers. On hand this time around was the VK-40, BAT's top-of-the-line solid-state preamplifier.

Although the subject of the review proper is the VK-40, I also had a chance to check out BAT's VK-75 tube amplifier, which replaces the original VK-60; and the VK-75SE, a Special Edition upscale version of the VK-75 (see sidebar, "The BAT VK-75 and VK-75SE Power Amplifiers"). To match the preamp and power amps, BAT sent along a sample of the VK-D5SE, the Special Edition version of the CD player reviewed by Jonathan Scull in the May 1998 issue (Vol.21 No.5).

**Description, Design, Setup**
The appearance of the VK-40 strikes a nice... um... balance between functionality and style. Weighing in at 33 lbs, the VK-40 is obviously very substantially built, and its machined-alloy front panel — much thicker than the VK-5/5i's, as I remember — inspires confidence. The front panel is dominated by a large volume-control knob and a blue Vacuum Fluorescent Display (VFD). The VFD is large enough and bright enough that it can be easily seen from across the room, which is not always the case with displays of this sort. (It can also be turned off.) Small — but not too small — buttons provide input selection, mute, phase (polarity), and mono (L&R summed) output. There are five inputs: two single-ended RCA and three balanced XLR. Additional single-ended sources can be accommodated with the use of RCA/XLR adapters.

The Volume knob serves multiple functions, depending on the VK-40's mode of operation; eg, it provides balance adjustment when the unit is in its Balance mode. If, like the review sample, the VK-40 is equipped with the optional VK-P20 phono card, the Aux 2 input is automatically identified as PH1. The phono gain is factory-set at 58dB, which can be changed to 44dB with a switch on the phono board. (You have to remove the top cover to do this.) The standard phono load is factory-set at 47k ohms, but there are provisions for plug-in load resistors. If the phono board is installed, the unit comes equipped with RCA shorting plugs in the PH1 input, to minimize noise pickup if no phono cable is connected.

**Description: Solid-state preamplifier**

**with optional phono stage**

**Inputs:**
- 3 balanced (XLR), 2 unbalanced (RCA).

**Main outputs:**

**Minimum amplifier input impedance:**
- 10k ohms, 3k ohms with optional Six-Pak. S/N Ratio: 96dB unweighted. Distortion at 2V RMS output: 0.01%. Maximum output: 20V RMS. Optional VK-P20 phono module: Voltage gain: 58dB or 44dB, selectable.

**Dimensions:**
- 19" W by 5.75" H by 15.5" D. Weight: 53 lbs.

**Serial numbers of units reviewed:**
- 040800071, 040800072.

**Price:**
- $4000; optional remote control, $500; optional Six-Pak capacitors, $500; VK-P20 phono module, $500. Approximate number of dealers: 55.

**Manufacturer:** Balanced Audio Technology, 800 First State Blvd., Wilmington, DE 19804. Tel: (302) 999-8855. Fax: (302) 999-8818. Web: www.balanced.com.
The two main outputs are XLR only; driving single-ended amplifiers requires XLR/RCA adapters.

Although purist in approach, the VK-40 has a comprehensive array of controls that can be accessed through the optional remote control, and that provide for exceptional ergonomics. While $500 for the remote option seems pretty steep, I'm told this reflects expenses incurred in manufacturing a sophisticated remote-control system that does not compromise sound quality. The display indicates volume control in 140 steps of 0.5dB; although the steps are discrete, they're small enough that, in normal use, the control feels continuous. Channel balance, phase, mono/stereo, and maximum volume can be programmed separately for each source, and differences in source output levels can be compensated for. The alphanumeric display can be programmed to give inputs unique names of up to four characters—using the Latin, Cyrillic, and Greek alphabets!

According to Victor Khomenko, the VK-40's design is very similar to that of BAT's tube preamplifiers, including the top-of-the-line VK-50SE. Like all BAT preamplifiers, the VK-40 features a single gain stage, an electronic-shunt volume control, zero negative feedback, and no buffers, followers, or op-amps in the signal path. There are two custom 95VA toroidal power transformers.

**Measurements**

All measurements of the BAT VK-40 were performed on serial number 040800072—the sample that had given RD some problems with the mono switch—with some spot checks on sample '71. No appreciable differences were noted. All tests of the line stage were done in full balanced mode (balanced input to balanced output), with some tests repeated for the unbalanced line input. The phono-stage measurements, of course, were performed using an unbalanced drive signal.

Starting with the preliminaries, the balanced input impedance was a very high 244k ohms, while the unbalanced input impedance was a still high 112k ohms—source components will hardly be loaded by the VK-40. The phono-stage input impedance, however, was lower than specified, at 5.2k ohms at 1kHz. The maximum line-stage voltage gain was the same for both balanced and unbalanced sources, at 21.5dB. This was with the volume control set to its maximum position of "140" on the numeric display. The unity-gain setting appeared to be "100" (actually an insertion loss of -0.06dB), and the volume-control steps were a sensible 0.5dB, except at the extreme settings. As reviewed, the phono stage was set up for MC cartridges; its voltage gain was a very high 79.8dB including the line-stage gain. Despite that, its unweighted wideband S/N ratio was a still good 64.5dB, this improving only slightly to 68.6dB when A-weighted (both figures referred to an input level of 500µV at 1kHz and with the volume control set to "140").

The output impedance was a fairly low 404 ohms across most of the audioband, rising to 4.9k ohms at 20Hz due to the finite size of the output coupling capacitors. The caps used by BAT in its output-coupling "Six-Pak" are of very high quality but large in physical size, which limits the maximum capacitance, hence their impedance at low frequencies.) As a result, the response rolls off prematurely into a 600 ohm load (fig.1, lower traces below 1kHz). This is admittedly an unrealistically low load, but it emphasizes the fact that the VK-40 needs to be used with power amplifiers having an input impedance of at least 50k ohms if the lows are not to sound a little lean, even with the "Six-Pak."

To the right of fig.1 is shown the ultrasonic performance of the VK-40's line stage under three conditions. The most extended response, reaching -1dB at 80kHz, is with the volume control set to "100" (unity gain). Dropping the load to 600 ohms increases the ultrasonic rolloff to -1.5dB at 80kHz, which is a negligible change. But increasing the volume control to "140," its maximum setting, drastically curtails the HF response, the rolloff reaching -6dB at 20kHz. Fortunately, it is extremely unlikely that the preamplifier will be used above its unity-gain setting, so I don't think it's this behaviour that lies behind RD's finding the preamp to sound a little veiled. The line-stage response behavior was identical for unbalanced sources.

Fig.2 shows the overall frequency response taken via the phono stage with the volume control set to "100." Any error in the RIAA correction is superbly low, and the overall response is very flat. Surprisingly, the output drops like a stone above 90kHz. Channel separation via the line inputs (fig.3) was excellent, though the increase in crosstalk with increasing frequency is due to capaci-
transformers for the audio circuits; a third toroidal transformer, with its own rectifiers and filters, provides the power for the digital control and display circuits. The gain stage is completely balanced in operation, but is claimed to work "exceedingly well" with single-ended signals.

The amplification devices are MOSFETs, which many audiophiles think of as the solid-state equivalent of tubes. Khomenko considers this an oversimplification, but agrees that MOSFETs and tubes are similar in one important respect: both need to be driven by a source that has lots of current. He points out that there are many types of MOSFETs, just as there are many types of tubes. The MOSFETs used in the VK-40 were selected for their "soft" linear characteristics.

The VK-40's gain stage is biased at a very high 250mA, which, according to Khomenko, eliminates the need for a buffer and allows a super-short signal path. The gain stage uses high-quality Caddock resistors as its load, the signal passing through only a single paper-in-oil capacitor on its way to the output terminals. The size of the output capacitor can be tripled with the Six-Pak option (included in the review sample), which improves the unit's ability to drive a low-impedance load.

Setting up the VK-40 was a snap—the programmable control functions...
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The BAT VK-75 and VK-75SE Power Amplifiers

The original VK-60 was already an excellent power amplifier when it was introduced in 1995, and BAT has continued to improve it in a variety of ways technical and sonic (see my Follow-Up in the April 2000 issue). The VK-75 continues on this evolutionary path, with a re-engineering of the power supply, power-supply transformer, and circuit design. It's still a fully balanced, all-triode, bridged single-ended amplifier, now with power increased from 60Wpc to 75Wpc. And the price is up, from $4950 (unchanged since the VK-60's introduction) to $6000.

The VK-75SE's main claim to fame is its incorporation of the 6H30 Super-Tube, also used in the SE versions of the VK-50 preamplifier and VK-D5 CJ player. According to BAT's Victor Khomenko, the 6H30 provides the closest approximation to the "dream" amplification device, with technical specifications unsurpassed by any similar tube. Made in Russia, the 6H30 was until 1998 restricted to Russian military use, and export was banned. With the easing of East-West tensions, the 6H30 became available for export, and BAT obtained the entire stock.

The 6H30 is used in the first stage of the VK-75SE, which has a front-end circuit driven by a dedicated power supply. Both the VK-75 and the VK-75SE sport new, thicker black faceplates, the VK-75SE having a stylish machined top plate covering the front part of the chassis, with openings for the tubes. The VK-75SE costs $8500.

I'm a great believer in making equipment comparisons by starting with the familiar and changing one component at a time. Review logistics don't always allow this, but in evaluating the new BAT amplifiers I was fortunate in still having on hand the VK-60 sample that I'd evaluated for a Follow-Up review. My first comparison was between the VK-60 and the VK-75; I followed this by comparing the VK-75 to the VK-75SE. I first did this using the digital front-end (PS Audio Lambda II transport, Perpetual Technologies P-1A/P-3A) and preamplifier (Convergent Audio Technology SL-1 Ultimate) that I was very familiar with, and then, one by one, adding the BAT VK-40 and the VK-135SE to the mix, periodically switching back and forth between the familiar components for reference. The BAT amp has a robust, battleship-like construction that suggests immunity to the sonic effects of vibration; however, the VK-60, VK-75, and VK-75SE all benefited from being placed on Aurisio M18 component supports; when they were, the sound became more airy and open.

My initial impression of the VK-75 was that any differences between it and the VK-60 were subtle at best. But, of course, the VK-60 had been well broken-in, whereas the VK-75 was brand new. As I continued to listen, and as the VK-75 was breaking in over a period of a few weeks, some differences began to emerge, but nothing that I would describe as dramatic. The VK-75 seemed to have a little less midbass warmth, and was thus more neutral throughout this part of the range. It also had slightly lower levels of noise, both mechanical and electrical, the latter difference highlighted by my +100dB-sensitive Avantgarde Unos. In other respects, the amplifiers sounded very similar, both possessing that smooth, easy-on-the-ears quality that characterizes the best tube amplifiers.

The differences in the sounds of the VK-75 and the VK-75SE were more marked, the VK-75SE reaching a substantially greater level of neutrality and musicality. The midrange and mid-treble picked up additional smoothness and clarity, and there were improvements in dynamics and bass definition. Although the VK-75SE costs a non-trivial $2500 more than the VK-75, I encourage anyone considering the VK-75 to try to stretch their amplifier budget to the VK-75SE level. Later-series VK-60 amplifiers can be factory-modified to SE status ($2500), incorporating the 6H30 tube. (The VK-60 cannot be updated to the VK-75.)

Based on the differences I heard between the VK-75 and the VK-75SE, I would think this provides a very worthwhile upgrade path for VK-60 owners. The VK-75SE are also available as monoblocks with double the power, and designated the VK-150/150SE. With these new amps, BAT is clearly staying at the top of the tube amplifier game.

— Robert Deutsch

1 The 6H30 is now in production again, although, according to Khomenko, the current production tubes are similar, but not identical, to the old A0 audio Research is in the process of revamping their tube to incorporate the 6H30, and I've talked to at least one other well-known designer of tube amplifiers who is evaluating this tube.

2 My time with the VK-75/75SE was not entirely trouble-free. When I first installed the tubes, it was apparent that one of the big 6C33/C-8 output tubes had suffered some internal damage in shipping: there was a chip of glass rattling around inside, and, when I installed the tube in the VK-75, the LED had light corresponding to that tube did not come on. Fortunately, BAT had sent along a matched pair of spares, so I used these instead. Then, after I'd finished all my review-related listening to the amp, as I was just listening to music—I do that once in a while—there was a loud thump through the right speaker, followed by loud hum in the same channel, and one of the blue LEDs went out. (The amp was the VK-75SE) I switched tubes between left and right, but the same LED stayed dark, and the tube from the "bad" channel worked fine in the other channel, so it seemed that the problem was not with the tube.

I shipped the amplifier back to BAT; they checked it out and reported that the fuse for that output tube had blown (there are fuses for each tube, not just each channel), presumably due to a fault in the tube. As to why the tube worked fine afterwards, Victor Khomenko suggested that there may have been a weak spot in the tube's construction, which produced a spark that led to the fuse blowing, and that same spark "healed" the tube.

Balanced Audio Technology VK-75SE amplifier

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worked in a highly intuitive manner. The only idiosyncrasy I noted in my initial experience was that pressing Mute or any of the input selector buttons resulted in a distinct pop coming through the speakers. Plugging the preamp into the same or a different AC line as the amplifier and/or the source component had no effect on the pop, nor did bypassing the PS Audio P300 I'd been using. I was prepared to live with it. Then, after I'd used the VK-40 for a couple of weeks, the pop disappeared and did not return.

I discovered another quirky problem when I was well into my serious listening to the VK-40. In checking out its various features, I happened to press the Mono button while playing a recording, and the result was badly distorted sound. Pressing the button again, thus switching back to stereo, restored the sound's clarity. I turned the unit off and on again, but the distortion-producing effect of the Mono function persisted. Something was amiss.

I reported the problem to the BAT people, who were suitably aghast and dispatched a second sample, this one (because of the need for haste) lacking a phono stage. The Mono function of the new sample worked perfectly. In stereo, the two samples sounded quite similar. (The pop was never present with the second sample.)

Some time later, I changed over from the PS Audio Lambda II transport/Perpetual Technologies P-1A/P-3A digital source to the BAT VK-5DSE player, which has XLR outputs. I checked the new VK-40 sample's Mono function again, and it worked fine. I then switched back to the original VK-40 sample and connected the VK-5DSE. With this combination, pressing the Mono button did not result in distorted sound.

Finally, to confirm my earlier observations, I kept the same preamp but changed the source back to the PS/Perpetual combo, and the mono problem was still there. It seems that, whatever the cause of the problem—it was obviously a sample fault, not a problem with the design—it affected only single-ended, not balanced inputs.

**Sound**

Getting a handle on the VK-40's sound was fairly tricky. Several times, after I thought I had a good sense of the BAT's sound quality, I would change or tweak something in the system and the sound would correspondingly change. While this can be taken as an indication of the VK-40's ability to resolve sonic differences, it meant that I had to repeatedly revise my assessment of the preamp's contribution to the system's sound. Interconnects, speaker cables, component supports—each made a difference.

I played around with a variety of cables, and found the best combination to be Nordost Quattro Fil interconnect between the digital source and the VK-40, Nirvana S-X between the VK-40 and the VK-75/75SE, and Nordost Valhalla speaker cables. (The Valhalla is priced in the if-you-have-to-ask range; at a more sensible price, the Nirvana S-L is a good alternative that fails just short of the last bit of definition and detail, and may even be preferred in systems that can use a bit of extra warmth.) Although the VK-40 is built with resonance control in mind, it nonetheless benefited from the use of suitable component supports. I got good results with Aurios MIBs (see the May 2001 issue) and with Symposium Rollerblocks. Nordost Pulsar Points were not as effective, but they were superior to the standard rubbery feet.

The VK-40 worked well with the Perpetual Technologies P-1A/P-3A as the source, and sounded even better—more lively and better-defined bass—with the BAT VK-D5SE, in what then became a fully balanced system. (The Perpetual Technologies components are single-ended.) The VK-D5SE, which uses the same 6H30 tube as the VK-50SE and the VK-75SE, struck me as an altogether superb product, confirming its reputation as one of the best one-box CD players on the market.

When I look back at the totality of my experience with the VK-40, the word that for me captures its most salient sonic characteristic is "dynamic." In fact, I think of this characteristic as a major part of the BAT "sound": starting with the original VK-5/VK-60 and including the VK-5DSE, VK-75, and VK-75SE, all BAT products have this characteristic.

This tradition was upheld by the VK-40. With the Avantgarde Uno horn hybrids (whose own long suit is dynamics) at the end of the chain, the sound had power, tautness, and the type of quickness that makes listening to music a compelling experience. (I think it's indicative of BAT's sonic priorities that BAT director of marketing Steve Bednarski, director of sales Geoff Poor, and Victor Khomenko himself all own Avantgarde speakers.) Large-scale transients, like the opening chord of the Grieg Piano Concerto (Bolet/Chailly/Radio-Symphonie-Orchester Berlin, London 417 112-2), had startling impact and presence, and there was a strong sense of the music's rhythm and pace. My guess is that this dynamic quality is due to BAT's attention to the power supply, those extra Six-Pak capacitors undoubtedly playing a major role.

Allied with the dynamic quality was a high degree of resolution and transparency. This allowed me to hear not only the effects of system tweaks, but, more important, the subtle musical details that are an important part of the listening experience. I find that the best test of this characteristic is provided by highly familiar recordings, ones that, in most cases, I listen to only when I'm in "testing" mode. At 2:08 into track 3 of the first Chesky Jazz Sampler and Audiophile Test CD (JJD3) — which, if it were an LP, I would have completely worn out by now — there is a cymbal that starts up way in the back, and so faintly that it can be inaudible if the system resolution is lacking. With the VK-40 in the system, the cymbal was just there—not overly prominent, which would indicate some sort of treble emphasis, but present as a minor but significant feature of the sonic landscape.

Most of my listening these days is — sorry, Mikey — to CDs; I play LPs only when I don't have the CD version. However, there are still a lot of recordings that haven't been issued on compact disc, and many of the more obscure LPs that I listen to from time to time will probably never appear on CD (or SACD or DVD-Audio, assuming that either of those formats ever really gets going). I wouldn't think of converting to a CD-only system, but I also don't want to make further major investments in LP playback. I've passed
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"...
on the $73,750 Rockport Sirius III turntable, and I'm not considering purchase of the $15,000 Audio Note Kondo IO-J/silver cartridge.

I suspect that the VK-P120 phono card was designed for people like me — its $500 price is very reasonable, and it's a smooth, assured performer. The factory-set 58dB gain was just right for my AudioQuest AQ7000nss, and although the recommended load for this cartridge is 100 ohms, the AQ did not seem handicapped by the standard 47k ohms. I was particularly impressed by the fact that switching to the phono stage, with its additional gain, produced hardly any increase in noise level, even with the volume control turned up high. (At this level, the otherwise admirable CAT SL-1 Ultimate is much more noisy.) BAT makes a standalone tube-based phono stage, the VK-P10, but for $4000 it would have to be awfully good to be worth $3500 more than the VK-P120.

**BAT vs CAT**

Considered on its own, the VK-40 was a very fine-sounding preamplifier, but how did it compare sonically with competing products?

I would like to have had a chance to compare it with BAT's top-of-the-line tube offering, the VK-505E, but that was not possible. As an alternative, I put it up against my reference preamp, the Convergent Audio Technology (CAT) SL-1 Ultimate (see the August 1999 *Stereophile*). At $5995, the CAT costs about $500 more than the "loaded" VK-40, and lacks a remote control; if you omitted the VK-40's remote option, the difference in price would be $1000. The CAT is a single-ended design, so combining it with a BAT amp meant using the supplied RCA/XLR adapters.

This setup worked well, noise levels being just a bit higher than with the VK-40. To keep potentially confounding variables constant, I used the Perpetual Technologies combo as the source for both preamps, and Nordost Quattro Fil interconnect (single-ended RCA for the CAT, balanced XLR for the VK-40) to connect each preamp to the power amp (VK-755E). Each preamp was placed on Aurios MIB component supports and was given an hour's warmup. The lack of continuous level controls meant that levels could not be matched to within the ideal 0.1dB, so I used the "bracketing" method: listening to the VK-40 with the volume set slightly higher and lower than what I had set for the CAT.

Both preamps excelled at communicating the music's dynamics, and both had superb bass definition — not much to choose here. Tube equipment has a reputation for being noisy, and the higher noise level from the CAT/VK-755E seemed to confirm this; however, the difference in noise levels with the preamp muted vs unmuted was less for this combination than for the VK-40/VK-755E. (The higher overall noise level for the CAT/VK-755E combo could reflect greater RFI pickup by the single-ended than by the balanced cables, or a less-than-optimal match between the two components.)

If I told you that one of these preamps had a softer, more forgiving sound, you'd probably say, "That's tubes for you!" You'd be wrong. It was the VK-40 that had the softer sound, the CAT having what seemed like a brighter, more extended top. The CAT had greater top-end clarity; the VK-40 sounded very slightly veiled in comparison. Both preamps provided a soundstage that was wide and deep, but with the CAT, images within the soundstage were a bit cleaner, more precisely delineated.

Finally, to check whether the VK-40 was being handicapped by the use of a single-ended source, I changed its input over to the fully balanced VK-5DSE. This improved the precision of the soundstage imaging, and the sound acquired a greater sense of bass power, but there was still a bit of top-end veiling in comparison to the CAT.

**Conclusion**

Some audiophiles think of solid-state electronics as sounding bright, forward, clinical, harmonically threadbare, and lacking in warmth. Undoubtedly, there has been justification for this view in the past, but this description would be totally inaccurate if applied to the BAT VK-40. The VK-40 sounds a bit soft and laid-back, forgiving rather than hyper-detailed, harmonically rich, and has plenty of warmth. Featuring an excellent phono module, superb control flexibility, and a very user-friendly interface, the VK-40 combines a purist approach to audio design with a concern for convenience. Die-hard tube fans may not be fully persuaded — and the VK-40 was not successful in dethroning my tube-based CAT SL-1 Ultimate — but it could be just the right preamp for those drawn to "tube sound" but reluctant to enter the tweaky world of tubes.
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All considered, the Njoe Tjoeb represents a fantastic bargain — a clear 100 on our value for the money scale. —Dick Olsher, Senior Editor, www.enjoythemusic.com

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Stax SR-007 Omega II electrostatic headphones

"P"reaching to the converted," I sighed to myself as I read the manual for the Stax Omega II Earspeaker headphone system. I fondly recalled my headphone reference for all time—the Most Fabulous and Seductive Sennheiser Orpheus tubed electrostatics, which Thomas J. Norton reviewed for Stereophile in 1994. I recalled the Orpheus's heady, open, fast, and colorfully wideband sound, and clutched my palpitating heart.

Yes, I had those 'phones and their bespoke deco tube wonderbox for three wonderful months. When it was time to give them back, I inquired about the price. Sennheiser wanted nine grand for my beat-up ol' review unit—which, I assure you, had seen better days.

Never mind—the Orpheus is out of production anyway. But I'll never forget the musical thrills. Sennheiser's Ultimate Lust Beast sounded even better than it looked—and it started with

SR-007 Omega II Earspeakers:

SRM-717: Solid-state headphone amplifier and electrostatic power supply. Tube complement: four 6FQ7/6CG7. Inputs: 2 RCA (single-ended), 1 XLR (balanced). Frequency response: DC–70kHz, +0/-1.5dB (100V RMS output). Voltage gain: 60dB. Maximum output voltage: 340V RMS (1kHz). Total harmonic distortion: <0.01% (1kHz, 100V RMS output). Input impedance: Not noted. Output bias voltage: 230V for older Stax headphones, 580V for Stax Pro models. Power consumption: 55W. Dimensions: 7.6" (195mm) W by 4" (103mm) H by 16.4" (420mm) D, including knob (0.8"/20mm) and RCA jacks (0.4"/10mm). Weight: 10.3 lbs (4.7kg). Serial number of unit reviewed: 7t-1026. Price: $2945.

SRM-007: Vacuum-tube headphone amplifier and electrostatic power supply. Tube complement: four 6FQ7/6CG7. Inputs: 2 RCA (single-ended), 1 XLR (balanced). Frequency response: DC–70kHz, +0/-1.5dB (100V RMS output). Voltage gain: 60dB. Maximum output voltage: 450V RMS, 2–0.01kHz. Total harmonic distortion: <0.01%, 1kHz/300V RMS. Input impedance: 50k ohms (100k ohms balanced). Bias voltage: 580V. Power consumption: 45W. Dimensions: 7.6" (195mm) W by 4" (103mm) H by 16.4" (420mm) D. Weight: 11 lbs (5kg). Serial number of unit reviewed: www.stax.co.jp/index-E.html. Price: $2875.

System SRS-007: SR-007 headphones with SRM-007t tubed driver. Price: $6265.

Mark Levinson's new No.434 Monoblock Power Amplifier combines truly high-end performance with advanced installation and integration features. It's configured to accommodate shelf and rack-mount installations while retaining a visual connection with other Mark Levinson source components. Control and communications capabilities include trigger inputs and outputs for remote operation, PHAST and RS-232 communication ports. And the sound? You'll hear sonic attributes of the No.33 including high resolution, dynamics, and a wonderful sense of effortlessness. They are as well suited to a top quality two-channel music system as they are to a world-class multichannel music and theater system.
the turn of a key! After it went away, I foreswore headphones for three months and wore nothing but black. I was in mourning. Then, brightening (and wanting to drown out the movies K-10 watches while I write), I put together a system comprising a Cary CAD-300SEI integrated driven by a matched pair of Western Electric 300Bs and running Sennheiser HD580 headphones. You get the transformer output of the amp on the headphone jack. Later, I added a pair of Sennheiser's superior HD600s. I've been happy ever since.

Which is why JA felt I'd be an ideal candidate to review Stax's Omega II.

Tom Norton wrote about the original Omega in the March 1995 Sterophile. He was particularly impressed by the fact that the “somewhat etched, crisp quality” of the older Stax Lambda headphones had been replaced by “a more relaxed, more natural, yet more subtly detailed” presentation. Major Tom had performed his review with Stax's SRM-T1S tube amplifier; the Omega II is available with either (or both) of two new amplifiers/“energizers” — the SRM-007t tubed driver or the SRM-717 solid-state driver.

Plug a CD player or any other line-level source into one of the Stax amplifier's inputs, plug the Omega II headphones into one of the outputs, and you have a complete, high-performance system for private listening.

**SR-007 Omega II Earspeakers: $4030**

Stax Japan refers to its electrostatic headphone designs as “Earspeakers.” The electrostatic transducer in a Stax Earspeaker consists of two “parallel-arranged fixed electrodes,” between which is suspended a low-mass, high-polymer film that is less than 2µm thick. Simply put, it’s a push-pull driver system. When the fluctuating voltage of the audio signal is applied to the electrodes, as in a MartinLogan speaker, the diaphragm is pulled *and* pushed. Manual: “The continuous flow of alternating voltage in interpretation of audio signals causes the diaphragm to vibrate in faithful compliance with the amplifier output without time lag, ensuring undistorted soundwaves.”

It all makes technical sense.

**SRM-717: $2875**

The SRM-717 is deceptively heavy. And even though it's solid-state, it runs fairly hot. The front panel is simple: a four-element dual-gang volume control to the right, a positive-action power On/Off switch, and a pair of five-pin Earspeaker outputs below, carrying Pro Only polarizing voltages (580V DC). There are two pairs of RCA jacks and one pair of XLRs on the rear panel. (Pin 2 of the XLRs is negative, following the usual Japanese practice.) The inputs are paralleled; you can use single-ended or balanced connections, but not both. A Bypass mode on the 717 allows its volume to be controlled by an outside source, presumably a preamp, passive volume controller, or an integrated amp or receiver with “preamp out” facilities.

The SRM-717 is a newer design than the '007; dual FETs are used in the first gain stage, with “rugged emitter followers.” The 717 has also been designed, we are informed, “to produce a constantly stable output voltage of more than 400V in all frequencies up to 10kHz, ensuring compatibility with all new audio formats, including DVD-Audio and SACD.”

**SRM-007t: $2945**

The SRM-007t tubed headphone driver looks similar to the SRM-717, but with more venting on the top of its chassis. Just above the center point of where each of the four tubes are socketed in the chassis, exhaust holes on the top cover swirl around a punched-out bulge in the metalwork. Damn cute.

The SRM-007t’s front panel is *almost* the same as the 717’s. An additional push-switch on the 007t lights on impact, as it were, and two input switches select said input. There are three outputs — two Pro Only five-pin sockets with 580V polarizing voltage, the third a six-pin “Normal” type with a 230V voltage. And you’ve got that same superior dual-ganged, four-level volume pot.

The 007t's rear panel is a bit more populated than the 717’s. There are a pair of switch-selectable XLR and single-ended inputs, paralleled, marked Input 1. Next to that, Input 2 is arranged like a tape loop: L/R In and Out on RCA, with a sturdy ground terminal beneath. Once again, a graphic on the rear panel illustrates the pin-2-negative “standard”; both headphone amplifiers will invert polarity when driven by source components wired with pin 2 of their XLRs “hot.”

The SRM-007t is a direct-drive system with no transformers between the amplifier and the Earspeakers, for “stable and high-quality sound.” A simple two-stage design uses dual FETs in the initial stage, and, in the second stage, the 6FQ7 dual-triodes, which have a “high dielectric strength.” This achieves, in Stax’s opinion, “the best, clearest, and most natural sound.” Because it’s DC-coupled, the SRM-007t has no output caps, which are “unfavorable to sound quality,” says Stax.

The SRM-007t is designed for “ideal driving” of the Omega II Earspeakers, but even Stax admits that their solid-state and tubed units sound different: “Vacuum tubes in the output stage of the SRM-007t provide transparent and clear sound different from that of solid-state drivers.” The four dual-triode 6FQ7/6CG7 tubes are “highly reliable” and “registic against high pressure,” whatever that means, and are used in parallel in the output stage for low impedance and greater transparency in the high frequencies.

**Setup & tweaking**

The casual setup I used with the Cary CAD-300SEI/Sennheiser HD600 combo wasn’t going to cut it for critical listening with the high-resolution Stax devices.

The Cary sits on the top shelf of a good-looking BD1 Ventura three-glass-shelf stand located behind our Corian-topped desk. The only real “problem” are the glass shelves, which are rather thin at 5/64”. So the big’n’heavy transformed Cary, despite its own substantial rubber feet, was suspended on a trio of extra-large AudioPrism Iso-Bearings.

The only other tweaks being used with the Cary when the Stax system arrived were choices in power cord and interconnect. I’d found long-term happiness with the Cary with a Golden

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**Associated Equipment**

**Digital source:** Linn CD12 CD player.

**Integrated amplifier:** Cary CAD-300SEI, single-ended.

**Headphones:** Sennheiser HD600.

**Cables:** Interconnect: Synergistic Research Designer’s Reference .5 with Active & Discrete Shielding. AC: PS Audio Lab Cable, Synergistic Research Resolution Reference Mk.II, Golden Sound Navigator.

**Accessories:** PS Audio P300 Power Plant with MultiWave upgrade, AudioPrism Quiet Lines, large and small Iso-Bearing footers, Harmonix My-T TU-210 cone footers, Ensemble Power Point, Shakti Stones.

— Jonathan Scull

Stereophile, July 2001
Sound Navigator power cord with gold-plated silver wire and black mesh jacket. Interconnects changed over time, but I was never really happy with what I achieved in that department—nothing too thick and unwieldy, please! There’s only so much room…

Preparing for the review, I took out the Rotel 971 CD player I usually run on the middle shelf and replaced it with the Linn CD12, no footers. (All of Scotland looks at you aghast when you mention footers of any kind. “Our equipment is designed to sit on a flat shelf,” sniffed Linn’s Man in America, Brian Morris.) The CD12 was a good bet for this comparison—it has two sets of analog outputs! Switching between the Stax headphone amps simply required unplugging the SR-007 headphone from one amp, plugging it into the other, and matching the volume. Naturally, I spent some time with the Linn into my reference headphone setup to familiarize myself with that combo’s sound.

To power the two Stax amps, first I dragged the PS Audio Power Plant P300 (unit fan and MultiWave upgrade) out of our main system—I did the upgrades here with all ten of my own thumbs—and dropped it behind my writing chair near the headphone amp stand. Yeah, I got a writin’ chair too. Had it for quite some time, actually (he sniffed tool). It’s the now-popular Herman Miller Aeron Chair, viewable at www.hermanmiller.com/us/index.bbk/3430. I pop my keyboard on a Scooter, also by Herman Miller: www.hermanmiller.com/us/index.bbk/4460.

Both the Stax amps’ power cords dove into sockets on the rear of the P300 with Synergistic Research Resolution Mk.II Master Couplers with angled connectors at the IEC end, making hook up easier regarding space. A third socket on the P300 was taken up by the generic Belden-like cord Linn delivers with the CD12. (Linn claims that their space-age power supply is immune to power-cord type, and that it actually functions as a line-enhancer, as its switch-mode supply doesn’t pull down and notch the AC sine wave or dump garbage back into the line the way traditional big amps do.)

I’ve got a logarithmically growing supply of space-age, effort-saving devices scattered all over my desk and computer, most of which use switch-mode wall-watt power supplies that gorge themselves at the top and bottom of the (supposedly) symmetrical AC waveform, and all of which are on the circuit I use for headphone listening. The P300 made a big improvement in the Stax’s sound. (For the record, the Cary was not plugged into the P300, as there’s not enough juice to handle it as well as two Stax amps.)

The Lab Cable power cord from the P300 was plugged into an Ensemble Power Point extender, which is star-wired—the best wiring topology, as I have described in various “Fine Times” columns (available free online in the www.stereophile.com archives).

How should a headphone such as this fit the head? Like a comfortable fedora.

Of course, the Power Point had an AudioPrism Quiet Lines filter plugged in right next to the two wall-watt power supplies for the Synergistic Research Designer’s Reference .5’s active shielding (and the Cary amp). I tried the .5 both with warts unplugged (“passive” for Discrete Shielding) and warts plugged in (for Active Shielding). They wound up plugged-in and Active for best sound. And the easy-to-handle .5s sounded great on the Cary too, especially with Active Shielding.

All wires were dressed in proper “Fine Times” manner, power cords never getting anywhere near signal-carrying lines. Even the PS Audio P300 was up on some large German Acoustic footers—the compliant ones with the big red dot center inserts.

The tubed Stax SRM-007t was suspended on a trio of small AudioPrism Iso-Bearings on the lower shelf. The solid-state SRM-717 sat right next to it, running hot too—but no tubes, so it sat on a trio of Harmonix My-T TU-210 footers. Those are the cones that move around a little in their attached collar assemblies. A little damping, a little coupling, and everyone goes home happy. The chassis of both amps were somewhat resonant; I dropped a Shakti Stone on each amp’s rear cover, over the AC transformer.

The Ear Speakers
How should a headphone such as this fit the head? Like a comfortable fedora (or a porkpie hat with a press badge in the band). It should be a design that pleases the wearer no end.

The SR-007s were indeed such beasts, but I discovered a little trick for getting maximum comfort. They’re more adjustable than they appear: the leather earpad has a distinct D shape, so it’s easy to find a perfectly circumaural position. But not only the earpads are adjustable. The golden outer shell, which carries the heavily gussed-up input cable, also swivels for best placement of the flat-ribbon interconnect to the five-pin connectors.

Between the outer and inner swiveling assemblies, a beautifully made round center assembly carries the springy double headband loop that arches over the lower headband. The trick is to drop the inner band—confy on the head, with a light ultrasuede-type material on the underside—slightly forward on the head because of the ‘phones’ weight. Then rotate the inner earpads for optimum comfort—which, when attained, meant that they were sitting correctly on my head and over my ears. I could also rotate, if needed, the mesh-covered, cable-carrying gold outer ring to set the amplifier cord for best comfort.

I have found that headphones range from the mildly uncomfortable to the crazily torturous. The SR-007 was pretty good—for the money, it oughta be—and definitely more comfortable than the not-too-bad Sennheiser ‘600s. My grump was that I got a better seal without my glasses on.

The upper pair of metal bands provide tensile on the electrostatic cups and keep a reasonably tight fit, and are covered in a nice material as well, of course. The headphones come in a beautiful bespoke suitcase—very “lunchy,” as K-10 says.

Early impressions
Earlier Stax electrostatic headphones had a rep for hard sound. This must be better, I thought as I settled the Omega Hs on my pointy little head. They were, but I had to work to bring it out. Both amps and the SR-007 sounded great—very sensuous. Headphone listening is like that by nature. Perhaps that’s part of the appeal. Everyone wears personal earwear these days.

At first, the SRM-007t tube amp sounded more likable, with a slightly warmer sound—but not that much different from the solid-state SRM-717, I was surprised to note. “Tube bloom” was very slight, very Nagra-like. When I leaned way back in my chair and listened carefully, the acoustic differences between the tubed 007s and the solid-state 717 became better-focused.

The 007t was a bit more immediately colorful, with softer and rounder bass

Stereophile, July 2001
and not as extended a top or bottom—but it was sweeter and more engaging.

The solid-state 717 also displayed a full tonal palette: its bass was tighter, its highs more extended and, yes, less sweet. But it was quite good in the midband, which was something of a welcome surprise. In the end, it was quite likable in its own right.

Of course, you have to give in to that whole headphone thing to begin with, as all the sound's in your head—quite a different perspective from that delivered by a typical high-end system.

Also, part of the headphone experience is accepting a certain magnification of acoustic elements, both big and small, that present themselves in a manner fundamentally different from the ambience created by a typical two-channel setup. High-resolution devices such as these present a lot of detail—you have to become accustomed to dealing with that kind of headphone presentation. It's not hard, and happens quickly. And, if you like it—which I do, especially when I write—it can be very intimate. But such an experience is very different from normal two-channel high-end listening via a pair of speakers in a room.

**'Phonomodus, make thyself known!**

As I played a number of familiar discs, I began to notice certain subtle differences between the SRM-007t and SRM-717, aside from the obvious ones already mentioned.

The solid-state 717 amp always sounded a touch more obscuring in the midband, while remaining smooth and rather attractive nonetheless. That was accompanied by my tendency to crank the tubed unit louder. This was more than a question of matching volume levels; there was something about the tonal balance that “asked” for it.

There was a lot to appreciate. The Staxes were right there in the front of the “Ruthlessly Revealing” category. I'm sure that's why Todd Garfinkle of M•A•R Recordings has been using Stax gear forever. That... and living in Japan!

The 717 had somewhat more body and palpability than the tubed 007t, with an attendant loss of... elegance? I noticed that especially with The Modern Jazz Quartet (Japanese AMCY-1165). Flipping back to the tubes, Milt Jackson's vibes sounded phenomenal: more immediate and full of color. That's what cut it for me, big-time. Since you're that “close” to it all, it better sound its best, and it better be Technicolor if the 'phones cost as much as these do.

Steve Hoffman's edition of Bag's Meets West (Dunhill Compact Classics GZS-1093) was another stunner. I had to turn the 007t up again for the tonal balance and the dynamics, which seemed flatter unless pumped up a bit—unlike the 717, which sounded fast and athletic even at low volumes.

Another thing I noted with this recording: While I achieved loud, satisfying bass levels, they didn't have the The Omega II headphone system is an outstanding choice for those who want clean, clear, fast, revealing sound.

true weight, especially in the bass, that I hear through my JMLab Utopias. Again — a different kind of listening requiring some adjustment of expectations. Similarly, Mischa Maisky on Gellissino (DG 439 863-2) sounded gorgeous on the solid-state 717, and even prettier in tubeland 007t. With tubes, the sound became more resonant, more warm and, yes, damnation, required a change to the SSS MultiWave setting on the Power Plant P300, from the SS9 that sounded best with solid-state.

Bizet's Carmen Suite No.2, performed by Seiji Ozawa and the Orchestre National de France (EMI CDC 7 47064 2), came off as such a sweetie it made my limbs dance with pleasure, and more so through the tubed 007t. There was a necessary warmth in the midrange that gave it life with the tubes. I need life. I also found the tubed 007t had a more finger-snappin' sense of timing that didn't develop so fully with the 717, and that led to some emotional, emotive quality that's hard to quantify but nonetheless unmistakable.

**Back to the Cary/Sennheiser combo**

When I switched back to my reference setup, my first reaction was, Hey, that's no schlepper either! From one of my favorite recordings from Todd Garfinkle, Vlatko Stefanovski and Miroslav Tadić's Krusevo (M•A•M044A), I listened to “Ni prela gora ni tkala” and noticed that it sounded considerably more “wet” than with the Stax SR-007 Omega IIs and either amp. Less bloom, more control-room precision via the Stax, I'd say.

I didn't get that level of reverber and wetness with even the tubed SRM-007t. There was either a small layer of detail missing, or the detail was buried in the noise floor, although both Stax amps were very quiet: the tubed 007t a little noisier with tube rush than the solid-state SRM-717, but by very little.

Listening to Kiri Te Kanawa sing the enchanting "Laudate Dominum" from Mozart's Exultate Jubilate (Phillips 412873-2) was so intimate, expressive, round, reaching, lovely. Damn, that's the way I prefer my headphone sound. There's something about that sexy, hit-from-within, triode-like sound that sets me afire, and I get more of it with my Cary/Sennheiser setup than with either Stax amp.

**Summing Up**

The Omega II headphone system is an outstanding choice for those who want clean, clear, fast, revealing sound. If I have to go through life with only one of the Stax amps, give me the tubed SRM-007t. But I can see other connoisseurs and recording engineers—like our guy Todd at M•A—going for the SRM-717's solid-state amplification.

Soften it up slightly by going for the SRM-007t's tubes, or keep your extension and a lovely midrange with the solid-state SRM-717. A matter of taste, pure and simple.

---

**Stax SR-007 Omega II**

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Toshiba SD-9200 DVD-Audio player

Recently, an e-mailer told me that reviewing for Stereophile was more of a gift than a job. At the time, I didn’t disagree. Now, I do.

The $2000 Toshiba SD-9200 DVD-Audio player is the third in a series of players on whose multichannel performance I am writing Follow-Ups. This is becoming more of a job than evaluating such standard stereo gear as CD players, DACs, amps, and speakers.

The user interfaces (read: controls and menus) of multichannel components are complex and, um, idiosyncratic. I beat up on the Philips SACD1000 for this in the June 2001 issue, but the others are as guilty.

When I unpacked the SD-9200, I was impressed by its sleek lines and substantial heft. I connected the system via the Myryad MDP-500 preamplifier-processor that I reviewed in June in the same way I had the other players: six lines of analog output to the Myryad’s analog bypass inputs, coaxial or TosLink digital audio, and coaxial video. This part is getting familiar, but the dreaded setup procedure always demands multiple menus on the video screen.

As misfortune would have it, the Toshiba’s front-panel display was broken when it reached me—I needed the video screen even to find tracks on a CD! This wasn’t Toshiba’s fault: The shipping carton showed clear evidence of having been used as a projectile. On the other hand, opening the disc drawer requires the display panel to drop below the top edge of the chassis. The owner’s manual warns that an obstruction in this area might compromise the display mechanism. Be careful.

Having cut my teeth on the Technics DVD-A10 (April) and Philips SACD1000 (June), I figured that the Toshiba would be a piece of cake. It’s true that each of these brands uses different terms for the various setup parameters and distributes them on different menu panels. Still, I figured I had the basic concepts down and could plunge ahead.

No such luck — I hadn’t counted on an interaction between the remote-control codes of the Toshiba and the Myryad MDP-500 pre-pro. Almost every time I tried to navigate the Toshiba’s menus, the display disappeared because the Myryad switched inputs, usually to the DVD-A10! Because I needed access to the Toshiba menus while confirming the results with the Myryad display, I ended up rigging a cardboard panel between the two so I could restrict the action of each remote to its intended target. The Toshiba never responded to the Myryad remote, so I suspect it’s really Myryad’s problem.

Most of the setup was familiar: I went through the choices for number and size of speakers, subwoofer cutoff, and levels for the analog outputs. The defaults seemed to be okay for video.

However, while the DVD-A10 and SACD1000 required me to choose only between PCM or Bitstream for the digital output, depending on the Dolby Digital and DTS capabilities of the external decoder, the DVD-9200 offered four options: Bitstream (DTS, MPEG2, Dolby Digital, and PCM up to 24 bits/96kHz, downsampeld to 16/48); Analog 6ch (DTS and PCM up to 16/48 only); Analog 2ch (DTS, MPEG2, Dolby Digital, and PCM up to 24/48, downsamplied to 16/48); and PCM (DTS; PCM up to 24/96, downsamplied to 16/48, but with MPEG2 and Dolby Digital as 16/48 PCM signals). Note that PCM digital output is never more than 16/48; higher resolutions up to 24/96 are downsampled, and still higher ones are blocked. Two-channel (bitstream, analog 2 ch.; PCM) and six-channel analog outputs are always full bandwidth.

The biggest fly in this pot of ointment is that you can’t get six-channel analog along with high-bit-rate digital or Dolby Digital at any setting. The more capable digital output settings, Bitstream and PCM, divert the analog outputs to the two-channel jacks without mirroring them on the L/R outputs of the six-channel jacks. Thus, if you want to switch between the digital connection and the six-channel analog connection, you must switch the pre-pro and the SD-9200. Sure, Toshiba offers the facility of switching modes on the fly, but remember: In my setup, the remote codes conflict.

You can imagine the worst. I was never able to smoothly switch between...
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and compare internal and external decoders with Dolby Digital sources. There is probably some logical engineering reason the two- and six-channel high-bit-rate digital outputs can't be active simultaneously, but whatever it is, I don't like it.

The result: When I finally sat down to listen, I was annoyed and not too kindly disposed toward the DVD-9200. However, I was quickly won over to wishing that the operational difficulties would go away, because the Toshiba was the most enjoyable multichannel machine I've auditioned. With the right output configuration, it did a dandy job with Dolby Digital and DTS discs, both for music and movies. The internal AC-3 decoder was excellent, even though, for operational reasons, I preferred to use the decoder in the Myryad. Two-channel performance via the analog outputs was excellent with standard CDs, 24/96 DADs, and HDCDs, as Chip Stern made clear in his review in the June 2001 issue.

The SD-9200 was superb with multichannel DVD-Audio discs. I trotted out Zubin Mehta's recording of Mahler's Symphony 2 (Teldec 4509-94545-9), which on first hearing I'd liked more than I'd expected to, but which sounds more lax and limp as I get to know it better. But while the performance is becoming a stress test for me, the sound is so wide-ranging in harmonics and dynamics that it's also a stress test for the equipment. Played on the SD-9200, its few rear-channel anomalies were less disturbing than they had been on the Technics DVD-A player, and there was an increased sense of hush when appropriate. The contrast between the offstage band and the main orchestra was fascinating, the sibilants of the choir just right. I had noticed a bit of compression in the very loudest portions with the Technics DVD-A10 and with my computer system, but this was more apparent with the SD-9200 because the illusion of the performing space was otherwise so much more complete.

Bueno Vista Social Club (World Circuit/Nonesuch 79478-9), which I had relished on the DVD-A10 as my first decent and musically satisfying multichannel disc, was better through the SD-9200 because the Toshiba has a much smoother, less "hi-fi" sound via its analog outputs. Listening to the DVD-A's stereo track on the Toshiba was as satisfying as was the original CD on the CAL-20, but when I switched over to the Surround track (not a simple task, under the circumstances), I wanted never to go back. The bass lines opened up and lost the excessive bloom and clumping of the stereo versions. The vocals, too, had more presence, but seemed to sound less loud at the same measured levels.

The pièce de résistance, however, was Willie Nelson's Night and Day (Surrounded By Entertainment SBE 1001-9). This is a purely instrumental disc, and I was surprised that I missed Nelson's vocals not at all. I'll spare you the stereo/surround comparison; it's not a fair competition, despite Nelson's avowed fondness for this 16/44.1 stereo mix. Right from the first notes, the multichannel version sounds incredibly live, in much the way that the Fischer/Budapest demo SACD supplied with Philips' SACD1000 does: I sense the ambience instantly, and every sound is realistic and credible. Well, almost every sound. There's an occasional percussion accent too far to the rear, and, on the last two tracks, the piano seems to be sliding back as well—or is it that I've changed my seat? Nonetheless, Nelson's combo is a cross between Django Reinhardt's gypsy jazz and a Texas roadhouse dance band, and their renditions of swing classics are irresistible.

As portrayed by the SD-9200, Nelson's gut-stringed electric Martin and Mickey Raphael's harmonica were up front, piano to the left and violin wide right. The other instruments filled in the space between the front speakers and way back behind them. What made this wonderful was that the surround mix was so nearly transparent that I could savour the almost tactile characteristics of each individual instrument and never lose sight of the ensemble. We've been two-stepping to it over and over.

Perhaps because of its analog outputs, two-channel or six-channel were significantly smoother, I preferred the Toshiba SD-9200 to the Technics DVD-A10. Perhaps because I have more multichannel music discs on DVD-A than on SACD, I tended to play it in that mode more often than the Philips SACD1000. That it also did such nice jobs with movies, CDs, HDCDs, and everything else made the Toshiba SD-9200 an all-round winner. I just wish the display worked for me.

When I switched over to the Surround track, I wanted never to go back.

Stereophile, July 2001
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I'm very pleased and not a little proud to report that the music showcases at HE 2001 went very well, offering lots of musical variety in excellent sound. Not that this show was such a success — and we were able to work out a number of the to-be-expected kinks — I'm on a mission to make the music at HE 2002 even better. But first, a word about the performers who helped make the New York Show a success. (You'll have to wait until the August and September issues for our report on the hardware seen and heard at the Show.)

Hyperion Knight, be of the big smile, engaging manner, and prodigious talent — which includes reaching into a long, dark Steinway Grand to pluck out the melody of the Beatles' "Dear Prudence" on the bare wires as his rhythm hand stays busy on the keys — was just as big a hit as he was at the last show, in Chicago in 1999. (Rhapsody, Hyperion's excellently Gershwin recording, is on the Stereophile label.)

Another superb pianistic persona performed a sparkling Sunday-afternoon set — Robert Silverman. His latest recording, of all 32 of Beethoven's piano sonatas, was beautifully engineered by Stereophile editor John Atkinson for the Orpheum-Masters label. He wrapped up his concert with a powerful Appassionata sonata that had the audience leaping to their feet with "bravos."

Violinist Arturo Delmoni, who records for John Marks Records (the eponymous proprietor of which is now a Stereophile columnist), was also a standout, as were folk-rocker Nancy Bryan and bluesman-vaudevillean Jimmie Lee Robinson, both of whom record on the APO label for the man from Salina, Chad Kassem. Decked out in green snakeskin cowboy boots with spurs that he uses for percussion when he plays, Robinson played a set that included standards, blues, and lots of running commentary about everything from public politics to personal heartbreak. His latest record, All My Life, is an accurate and compelling portrait of his many talents.

The headliners for both nights — David Johansen and The Harry Smiths on Friday and Keb' Mo' on Saturday — showed why they're... well, headliners. Johansen, most famous as the snotty cross-dresser with the Jagger-like pout and cunibouchure who fronted the early-'70s glam-rock outfit The New York Dolls, is the quintessential musical survivor. No longer the barking, ponytailed hipster Buster Poindexter ("Hot, Hot, Hot.") Johansen has gone back to the blues as the leader of The Harry Smiths. Their latest, David Johansen & The Harry Smiths, is on Chesky Records, who sponsored the concert. Anyone interested in Johansen's career should seek out not only the Dolls' self-titled first album (1973), but also two records from 1978: his self-titled solo debut (reissued on Razor & Tie) and David Johansen Group Live (Epic, currently a cutout).

Speaking of blues and bluesmen, few of that ilk are as celluloide-ready as Keb' Mo', who is musically a cross between Taj Mahal and such Delta players as Robert Johnson (whom he once portrayed on film). On discs like his latest, The Door (Columbia), Mo' (born Kevin Moore) treads a very thin line between appealing to the same middle-aged white crowd that's made a star of singers like Bonnie Raitt, and staying true to his blues roots — a tough balancing act that has earned him loyal fans and impassioned detractors. Artistic debates aside, Keb' Mo's appearance on Saturday night in the Hilton's Grand Ballroom, sponsored by Sony Music, was one of the weekend's highlights.

My favorite HE 2001 music event was the Friday-afternoon set by saxophonist Joe Lovano (see the feature story beginning on p.55). Booking a favorite artist is often a trap. Wonderful musicians are not always wonderful human beings. But Lovano's brilliant playing was matched by his warm, friendly personality. The guy's a peach, and his jazz chops are monstrous. During my embarrassingly nervous stage introduction, I choked on the title of his latest album, Flights of Fancy: The Fascination, Edition Two. But that record and the one before it, 1999 Grammy winner 52nd Street Themes (both on Blue Note, who sponsored the concert), are essential sets of modern jazz with enough style and substantive playing to reassure anyone who fears that jazz as a serious artform (no jam bands, please) is on the way out.

Finally, there was the Atkinson/Perkins/Reina Trio, with special guest Zan Stewart on tenor sax. Given the fact that these four friends of mine have stretched out their musical throats and handed me the knife, the temptation to write something horribly embarrassing and/or hilarious about them is damned near irresistible. But in the names of diplomacy and a regular paycheck — and, most importantly, the whole truth and nothing but — these guys, with minimal rehearsal, put on a fine show, nailing jazz standards like "Oleo" and "So What" while having a good time along the way. Well done, John, Allen, Bob, and Zan.

I thank all the musicians who participated in HE 2001 for their time and talent — we literally could not have done it without you. Kudos also goes out to Craig Leerman and John Hardy of Harbor Sound Ltd. of Baltimore, who trekked north to ably handle the very crucial sonic end of the performances.

Two days before Home Entertainment 2001, before I turned my brain up to 11 to sample the rarified pleasures of the world's finest two-channel and home-theater gear, I descended into the depraved, bestial depths of rock'n'roll by going to Madison Square Garden to see AC/DC. Yes, my attendance at this event does hint at some degree of arrested development. And I do on some level agree with JA, who, at the mention of these rock icons (usually me whining something like "But John, it's AC/DC!!!") snarks and quotes Mojo: "Three chords and they play all of them."

But then, AC/DC isn't for the head, is it? It's for the knees, toes, and any other bodily zone susceptible to primal rhythmic stimulation. That, and making the "Mmmttttaaaa!!" sign (a fist with index and pinkie finger extended upward) at the end of your pumping arm. The band can also be reviewed completely in one sentence: "They haven't changed a thing in 20 years, so they're still champs."

Proof of AC/DC's pervasive influence came to light recently in the form of A Hillbilly Tribute to AC/DC (Dualtone/ Western Beat), by Hayseed Dixie (say it aloud). Yes, it's a serious bluegrass tribute to the band, thunk up and laid down by a group quartet of unknowns from east Tennessee. One listen to "Highway to Hell" on fiddles, dobro, and banjo and you'll be convinced that parallel dimensions do exist and that you're in one.
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Stereophile, July 2001
Record of the Month

**Tony Bennett/Bill Evans: The Tony Bennett/Bill Evans Album**


Helen Keane, prod.; Don Cody, eng.; Akira Taguchi, XRCD2 prod.; Alan Yoshida, XRCD2 mastering eng.; AAT

TT: 35:09

**Performance ****

**Sonics *****

Everybody's favorite saloon singer, Frank Sinatra, often cited Tony Bennett as his favorite vocalist, and Bennett's returns of that favor have been quoted at length. A case can be made for Sinatra's spiritual relationship to Billie Holiday, while Bennett acknowledges Louis Armstrong as a vital influence.

What Sinatra and Bennett lacked in sheer chops they more than made up for in theatrical timing and dramatic depth, animated by innate understandings of jazz phrasing quite unlike that of any other singer with a sizable pop audience (save perhaps for Bing Crosby and an unreconstructed jazzbo like Nat "King" Cole). I'm not talking about jazz phrasing in terms of the blues or the kind of rhythmic/harmonic bravura that defined the work of Ella Fitzgerald, but a relaxed relationship to the beat, a coy sense of give and take with tune and tempo, a supple ability to use space in the ensemble playing and a keen harmonic sensibility. Even when Sinatra's or Bennett's pitch wavered, the way each singer sidled back into tune was indicative of their swinging artifice.

Given their genuine aptitudes for swing, Bennett and Sinatra were widely admired by jazz musicians, and I count their sessions with Count Basie among my most treasured vocal recordings. But nothing in either singer's catalog leaves him quite as naked and exposed as the famous 1975 encounter of Bennett and jazz piano innovator Bill Evans. The introspective Evans had by then perfected a nuanced harmonic language and a modern style of collective improvisation, lyrical and elliptical by turns, that remain immensely influential among instrumentalists. He was not by any stretch of the imagination a typical accompanist, and part of what makes The Tony Bennett/Bill Evans Album so darkly alluring is the dangerously beautiful nature of their interaction — these are duets in the truest sense of the term, so far out on the limb does Bennett go in this game of role reversal.

Bennett is exposed because of the way Evans arranges these songs. It wasn't enough for him to merely sing the form, here he had to react in an interdependent manner, answering the pianist's contrapuntal ripostes and harmonic inversions on the fly, following as much as leading. Which is quite a trick, because Tony Bennett is a singer for whom the words truly matter, but he has a gift for breaking up his more operatic cadences with an easygoing, conversational delivery. Dig the way he emerges from the verse of "My Foolish Heart" and into the tune's familiar main strains, emulating Evans' melodic flexibility and harmonic ambiguity in a manner both elegant and earnest, formal yet swinging, and inspiring some exceptionally cultivated stride from Evans — ever so lightly blued, through and through. Even on Evans' "Waltz for Debby," whose lyrics don't quite rise to the heights of the other standards here, Bennett's tender shadings and dramatic inflections help convey the gentle, unconditional affections of a grown man for an adored female child that are intrinsic to Evans' classic theme.

The sense of resignation and longing in Bennett and Evans' performance of the Betty Comden—Adolph Green—Leonard Bernstein standard "Some Other Time" is so moving that I almost don't notice the slight dropout in Evans' opening chords. "Where has the time all gone to," Bennett sings, elongating and extending his phrasing of "haven't done half the things we want to" in a triplet-like manner before alighting on "Ohhhhhhh, well..." with a chilly descending trill, then completing the phrase with "...we'll catch up some other time," the catch in his voice suggesting a stilled cry. Evans' bell-like upper-register filigrees against drooping left-hand chords only add to the yearning sense of things left unsaid and undone. Magnificent.

The most swinging performance here is of "When in Rome." Evans matches Bennett's expressive swagger with big two-handed flourishes that carry the rhythmic thrust forward in a kinda bluesy manner that offers a rare glimpse of Evans' jazz antecedents (Ilud Powell, Teddy Wilson, etc.), and adds an almost whimsical touch to this fairly ruminative recital.

The sound of this JVC XRCD reinforces the ambiance of the performance: close-miked and forward, yet not so analytical as to diffuse the music's magical, mysterious qualities. The piano is richly rendered if not highly resolved, but Bennett's voice is warmly detailed and wonderfully articulated, and offers a revealing glimpse into this master vocalist's superb mike technique. Overall, this fine audiophile remastering reinforces the warmth of the sound and the rich intimacy of two innovators, seemingly overheard in the process of pure creation.

— Chip Stern
By turns smug, insightful, and frustrating, Laurie Anderson continues to defy easy categorization.

classical

Laurie Anderson

Performance *****
Sonic *****

Laurie Anderson’s first album in seven years has a key element in common with more conventional composers who take too long between symphonies: There’s a great sense of damned-up ideas, and an urgency to choose the best of them at the expense of making a cohesive statement. Maybe that’s why the only possible title for the disc was Laurie Anderson.

The album was originally conceived as a sound document of Songs and Stories from Moby Dick, which came together in 1999 and was perhaps her most mature statement as a composer, storyteller, and all-around multimedia artist. As odd as the pairing of Anderson and Herman Melville might seem, she turned his novel into a meditation on the unquenchability of human longing and searching, as well as on just about every other elemental issue you can think of.

As great as it was, however, Moby Dick was so much of a piece that perhaps too little of it stood on its own without the enthralling visuals. Several of its songs, however, appear on this disc, and they’re some of the best material here. The Moby Dick material has a special flavor of its own—a lost, lonely quality conveyed by spareness of instrumentation, the atmosphere accentuated by Anderson’s plaintive treatment of the electric violin.

Then there are the lyrics: In “Pieces and Parts,” one of several incidences in which Anderson successfully intersperses song form with her penchant for spoken anecdotes, she tells a story of slaves on an Alabama plantation finding the bones of a whale and assuming it’s the remains of a fallen angel. And then comes the clincher, which embodies Leviathan dignity and soul: “Hit an elephant with a dart and he just reaches around and pulls it out with his trunk. But hit a whale in the heart and the whole ocean turns red.” The song embodies what set Moby Dick apart from so much of Anderson’s previous work: a dramatic purpose and poetic resonance that transcend the novelty of the observation. Her detached delivery, which can sound so arch, becomes neutral with a light edge of compassion, while also functioning to give the text conversational inflections. That Anderson refuses to manage the listener’s reactions with her ambiguous warmth is one reason this track wears so well on repeated hearings.

Elsewhere, as Anderson plays her usual role of cool, detached observer, she cuts to the heart of things with extraordinary elegance, as in the opening track, “Statue of Liberty.” Casually, she contemplates the impossibility of the American way: “Freedom is a scary thing. Not many people really want it.” Anderson has never had a problem conveying atmosphere, but she surpasses herself in the scene-setting lyrics of “Washington Street”: “It’s midnight downtown. It’s been raining for days. Rain beats down. It covers the streets with its sparkling skin.” What unfolds in the song (if you can call it that) is a cross-section of 21st-century New York City, in which every other block is an occasion for confusion and disassociation because, wherever you go, someone is usually shooting a movie. Anderson’s imagery carries the insightful precision one associates with the great American painter Edward Hopper.

While these peaks make the disc easily worth its price, there are steep lapses in quality, such as a short, inconsequential instrumental (“Here With You”), and, oddest of all, “Dark Angel,” which has Anderson singing with a smugness we thought she’d left behind years ago. Her intentions in this song are garbled all the more by an atonal string arrangement by Van Dyke Parks. Ever imagined lounge music by Arnold Schoenberg? Parks, apparently, has.

But even “Dark Angel” has to be applauded philosophically: Anderson has augmented and transformed song form, made it accommodate all sorts of things only she could imagine, and thus is likely to periodically miss the mark on a scale known only to great artists.

—David Patrick Stearns

BIRGIT NILSSON

First Studio Recordings

BIRGIT NILSSON: Opera Arias
Arias by Beethoven, Mozart, Verdi, Wagner, Weber
Birgit Nilsson, soprano; Leopold Ludwig, Heinz Wallberg, Philharmonia Orchestra
Performance ***
Sonic *** 1/2

BIRGIT NILSSON/HANS HOTTER: Wagner: Opera Arias & Duets
Birgit Nilsson, soprano; Hans Hotter, baritone; Leopold Ludwig, Philharmonia Orchestra
Performance ****
Sonic ****

These recordings—never before available on CD and some never available in stereo in any medium—document Birgit Nilsson’s first visits to a recording studio, in 1957 through 1959. They are almost as fascinating for their missteps as for...
their triumphs.

Although Nilsson had registered on the operatic radar since the early 1950s, singing at Glyndebourne, Bayreuth, Vienna, Munich, and elsewhere, she was only just becoming a superstar when the first of these recordings were made. The laser of her voice had yet to cut that wide swath through the opera houses of the world in the 1960s and early 70s; in 1957, she was still determining what would become her core repertoire of Wagner and Strauss.

From the vantage of our own hyper-critical time, it’s easy to nitpick her singing on the first disc. Her “Or sai chi l’onore,” from Mozart’s Don Giovanni, is all forte, with poor articulation, and she sounds uncomfortable singing Italian. In Beethoven’s “Ah, perfido,” Op.65, she’s all over the place stylistically and vocally, from shaky softer passages to electrifying fortissimi. In “Abscheulicher, wo eilt du hin?” from Fidelio, she evinces no legato, and many moments are simply unmusical, though none are less than exciting, if only as bravura vocal gymnastics.

The four Verdi arias are evenly divided between the good and the bad. In “Qui Radames verrà” (Aida) and “Pace, pace mio dio” (La Forza del Destino) Nilsson is alternately tired and painful to listen to, with some quite bad high notes; she struggles stylistically, plagued with erratic legato and vowel placements in the middle voice, unidiomatic Italian style, and poor pianissimi, though the color in the bottom is gorgeous. But “Ecco l’orrido campo” (Un ballo in maschera) has terrific dramatic and rhythmic pulse, with all of the problems just mentioned nowhere to be heard. And “Ritorina vincitor!” (Aida) is wonderful—even that last, almost impossible sotto voce high note.

It’s a great relief when Nilsson turns to German repertoire. She’s much more at home with such dramatic texts auf Deutsch as Weber’s “Ozean, du Ungeliebte” (Oberon)—her delivery is entirely idiomatic, with nary a false step. “Wie nahet mir der Schlummer,” from Der Freischütz, doesn’t work nearly as well. Unsurprisingly, it’s on the sole Wagner selection on this first disc, Nilsson’s first recording of the “Liebestod” from Tristan und Isolde, that everything finally comes together: though she would later sing and record this role better, the musical and verbal languages are clearly natural to her, her dynamics and phrasing are ideal, and the vocal colorings much more subtle and dramatically unforced, all of it comprising a real development of complex characterization through sound.

In general throughout Opera Arias, the top of Nilsson’s voice is gorgeous, opening out where most other singers choke, clench, tightpen. The middle voice is husky and often not placed properly, and so sounds out of tune even when it isn’t. And stylistically, Nilsson’s Mozart is not Mozart’s, her Beethoven not Beethoven’s. Listening to the bulk of this disc is like watching Michael Jordan play baseball: Though much of what Nilsson sings here is simply not her game, it’s still amazing to hear such a natural talent and exquisitely trained instrument at work. For every uncertain note or wobbly pitch or botched legato there is a moment of electrifying vocalism—it’s not always music, but it’s always thrilling.

But it’s all just a warmup for Wagner: Opera Arias & Duets, which is a triumph from start to finish. “Dich, teure Halle” (Tannhäuser) is “brilliant” in all senses of the word, Elisabeth’s character fairly gleaming through the adamantine crystal of Nilsson’s voice—if sheer sound can be called “heroic,” then this is. “Elka’s Dream” (Lohengrin) builds beautifully, with secure, floating pianissimi.
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In “Senta’s Ballad” (Der Fliegende Holländer) Nilsson chooses a harder, darker, less brilliant tone. The softer passages are not quite as secure, but her forte re-entrance after the pp chorus is ear-pinningly dramatic.

“Wie aus der Ferne,” from later in the same act, with Hans Hotter as the Dutchman, is simply terrific. Hotter, the finest Dutchman ever, is finally matched in this role by the greatest dramatic soprano of all time. There are a passion and a heroism one seldom hears in these roles, with Hotter’s unparalleled gravitas and emotional vulnerability brought to bear first on the Dutchman’s despair, then on his unbelieving joy. And the weight and accuracy of Nilsson’s voice, her palpable intelligence, make Senta sound more a mature heroine than, as is more often the case, a young, romantic girl caught up in fantasy and projection. This is the definitive recording of this scene.

As is the recording of Act III.i of Die Walküre, the 40 minutes of which conclude the disc. Nilsson and Hotter together taped this scene later, in 1965, in the final installment of Georg Solti’s justly celebrated Ring recordings, but by then Hotter was considerably past his prime. This is eight years earlier; Hotter is at his best, with no hint of his later wobble, and Nilsson is still in all her youthful radiance and glory. The singing throughout is technically impeccably, with none of the problems I’ve detailed so unpleasantly above. But it’s the interpretations that count even more, and these are intelligent, passionate, and at all times dramatically and emotionally convincing. Brünnhilde’s pleas for mercy are both heartbreaking and noble, and Wotan’s crumbling resistance to them is by turns bitter, despairing, anguished, and, ultimately, openheartedly loving, with an almost unbearably bittersweet poignance. These roles have never had better exponents, and no other recording by either tops this one.

Leopold Ludwig and Heinz Wallberg lead the Philharmonia with unerring taste, balance, and strength, and these very early stereo recordings sound quite good — they were clearly minimally miked, and the soundstaging is utterly convincing, with excellent center-fill and very authentic “hall” sounds (Kingsway Hall and Abbey Road’s Studio 1) that fairly ring when stroked or struck by these remarkable voices. One could complain that the singers are mixed a bit too forward, but considering it’s these singers, one won’t.

I highly recommended both discs: the first as a revealing document of some fascinating early moments in the career of our greatest dramatic soprano, the second as the best performances of these particular “bleeding chunks” of Wagner that we will probably ever hear.

— Richard Lehnert

rock/pop

TIM BUCKLEY

Morning Glory: The Tim Buckley Anthology


Sonic ***

The parallels between the lives and works of singer-songwriter Tim Buckley and his singer-songwriter son, Jeff, are well established. They shared physical characteristics: a handsome visage with a delicate, sorrowful look, and vocal cords that stretched comfortably over five octaves. Their music, made separately and decades apart — the two barely knew each other, and Jeff was only eight when his father died — incorporated strains of folk music, rock, and jazz. Both flirted with fame, though all nine of Tim’s albums released during his lifetime were commercial disappointments. Similarly, Jeff’s commercial fortunes never quite caught up with all the critical acclaim. And both died unexpectedly: Tim after snorting heroin that he thought was cocaine, and Jeff by drowning in a channel of the Mississippi River. It’s some pretty heavy irony that the death of the son has led us back to the work of the father, but irony and commerce often work hand in hand in the music business, and sometimes even result in something worthwhile. Such is the case with Morning Glory: The Tim Buckley Anthology.

You don’t come to Buckley’s recordings for great lyrics. Most of his songs are about relationships or some idealized form of love, and the ones he wrote with high school friend Larry Beckett have a formal, somewhat stilted feel. The music ranges pretty widely, from the same folk-rock of his earliest recordings to tentative, then more confident forays into loose, jazzy structures, and finally to an attempt at commercial-oriented R&B, a move Morning Glory mostly ignores.

What sets Buckley’s music apart is his voice — an incredibly elastic instrument capable of great strength as well as subtlety. His range is evident on early tracks like “Aren’t You the Girl” and “Pleasant Street,” while elsewhere, his sweet croon sounds like that of a traditional Irish tenor. Freed by his musical adventurousness, Buckley’s voice soared on later efforts such as “Monterey” and “Make It Right” (the latter shows a surprising enthusiasm for S&M — “Beat me, whip me, spank me, make it right again,” he sings). But where son Jeff’s high-ranging vocal excursions sound like ecstatic exultation, Tim’s sound more like torment.

That was due to a life and a career that was unraveling fast, and Morning Glory mostly traces the downward arc that was Buckley Sr.’s too-abbreviated and unheralded life in music. His best work, such as the elegant “Once I Was,” memorialized in the final scenes of the film Coming Home, and the elegant “Song to the Siren” (preserved here in two versions, including one from the Monkees’ TV show), will endure, however. His voice now haunts us—quite literally — more than ever before.

— Daniel Durchholz
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What makes a great pop-rock tune? There are as many different definitions as there are aficionados, but in my case, it's a sweet melody, preferably with an ascending chorus. Think John and Paul or the cotton-candy sweep of Brian Wilson's many "teenage symphonies to God."

The problem is that that kind of genius is damned rare. So imagine my smile when I heard "Night Shift Guru," track 7 on The Cash Brothers' How Was Tomorrow. With laundry-list lyrics that focus on the mind-numbingness of working in a 7/11 convenience store, the tune turns on a lush, four-repeat chorus that carries the whiff of a Wilson outtake.

The rest of Tomorrow doesn't live up to the promise of that one transcendent tune, but there are enough second-level melodic gems to make this album by Andrew and Peter Cash, a pair of heretofore unknown Canadian siblings, one of the most pleasant surprises of 2001.

No relation to Roseanne, June Carter, or The Man In Black himself, these Cashes have listened to more than a few records by Bob Dylan, the Beach Boys, and Neil Young, as well as a whole lot of country-rock bands. As Andrew Cash told me recently, "The first time we heard the Flying Burrito Brothers albums, it was a big deal. No one else in school thought so, but we did."

The result of that passion, plus the fine-tuned instincts gained from spending a decade in the music business, is a collection of infectious guitar-pop numbers. How Was Tomorrow is very reminiscent of the work of another great duo of singer-songwriter brothers, The Everly Brothers.

The fact that How Was Tomorrow is such a seamless pop explosion is all the more unlikely when you consider that eight of its 11 tracks were originally released on Racing, a 1999 full-length album released only in Canada. But reshuffled, with the addition of three new songs for zing, and 16 sidemen to flesh out the sound, Tomorrow has a handful of bona fide sparklers—all of which, despite shifts in tempo and lyrical content, are very identifiable from the same pair of pens.

After the low-key, folkly opening number, "Raceway," the pace steps up with the Tom Petty–tinged "Take a Little Time" before launching into "Nebraska," a tune about driving around heartbroken while listening to Springsteen's acoustic masterwork. The track's soft-loud-soft dynamics are firmly in the Neil-Young-through-Son-Volt school of rowing, raw-edged guitarwork. That style returns in louder, more scorching form in the Byrdsian heel-tapper "Nerve," whose verses and choruses are so unrelated they could be from two different songs, but which somehow, after several listens, mesh into a surprisingly winning whole.

After the barbed melodies that glisten in several spots here, this disc's strength is its attention to detail. Several of the printed lyrics differ from what's sung—a sure sign of last-minute tweaking. In "Nerve," the two-repeat chorus, "Yoooooouuuuuuuuu vvveee cee got a lot of nerve coming around here" effortlessly transmogrifies in the last verse into "got a lot of nerve standing at my door" and "got a lot of nerve, askin' for more." A high-harmony version of the chorus line sung just before the beat in each second repeat is also a class touch.

One of the cherished myths of music is that there's a blood-on-blood, unexplainably transcendent quality that comes when siblings sing together. The slow, quirky-turning "Show Me the Reason," with its breezy, pleading choruses, is a high point for the Cashes brother-on-brother vocal magic. But that quality is in nearly every song here, if sometimes only for a line or two.

The sound is okay for a rock record, if at times cluttered and buzzy—not surprising, considering the horde of engineers who worked on it. How Was Tomorrow is a minor classic from an unexpected source, and proof again that all the songs haven't yet been written, and that rock ain't quite dead yet.

Robert Baird
KNOXVILLE GIRLS

In a Paper Suit

Performance ★★★★★
Sonic ★★

Neither from Knoxville nor of the female persuasion, these downtown New York City blues/garage-rockers nevertheless reveal in their chosen moniker a broad clue to their musical disposition. Sharp minds, of course, will recall that non sequitur of a legend stamped on the inner sleeve of the Rolling Stones’ Let It Bleed: “Hard knock and dutty sox.”

Clearly, the Girls owe much to the Stones’ classic 1969–71 period. There’s a country/Blues/gospel sensibility at play on tracks like “By the Lonesome River” and “Neath a Cold Gray Tomb of Stone” (significantly, a Hank Williams tune), whose rural vibes and acoustic/slide guitar flourishes locate the group in the vicinity of Bleed’s title track and that album’s cover of Robert Johnson’s “Love in Vain.” And it doesn’t hurt to have a flamboyant, high-onesome moshmouth at the vocal mike (Jerry Teel), or a pair of guitarists (Kid Congo Powers, Jack Martin) who let rip the dirtiest leads and slide riffs.

A wealth of other influences keeps the Girls varied and unique. The group’s collective résumé includes such alt/noise-rock icons as Sonic Youth, Pussy Galore, Cramps, Honeymoon Killers, the Gun Club, and Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds. The general ambiance is intentionally murky in a drugged-out, Exile on Main Street style, but not in the indie-rock, portastudio lo-fi sense—veteran studio maven Gene Holder (late of pop kings The dB’s) fully captures the Girls’ raw, modern-primitive live sound.

While the Knoxville Girls’ self-titled 1999 debut was a strong album, In a Paper Suit is vital from start to finish. There’s a jazz-noir, private-dick theme of an opening instrumental (“Any Reason to Celebrate”); a kitschy, R&B dance-craze number (“Sophisticated Boom Boom”); a funky, fuzztone-drenched shuffle (“My New River”); some mutant rockabilly (the honky-tonkish “Baby Wedding Bell Blues” and the Cramps-styled “One Last Thing”)—even a spaghetti-western-cum-surf-psychadelic instrumental (“50 Feet High, 50 Feet Down”), for all you Morricone and Dick Dale fans out there.

Granted, the Knoxville Girls invoke sonic memories of the Stones. But a lot more is going on than just another group aping the Glitter Twins’ heyday. The material smokes, and the band burns.

—Fred Mills

RUFUS WAINWRIGHT

Poses

Performance ★★★★★
Sonic ★★★★

Rufus Wainwright makes pop music that sounds as if it’s of, by, and for another era—as if his competition weren’t Britney Spears, the Backstreet Boys, and Destiny’s Child, but Cole Porter, Irving Berlin, and George and Ira Gershwin. And perhaps it is. When you’re as talented as Wainwright, there’s no harm in setting your sights preternaturally high.

Wainwright’s abilities are the happy outcome of nature and nurture working in accordance. The son of folk singers Loudon Wainwright III and Kate McGarrigle, Rufus was raised by his mother in Montreal and at boarding schools, environ-
As with his debut, an air of melancholy and romantic longing hangs over Pox, especially on tracks like “Rebel Prince” and the elaborate, orchestral “Evil Angel.” No one but Wainwright is making such brave and uncompromising music these days, which is why he’s really only in competition with himself. And he’s winning. —Daniel Durechloz

Happily, fears in some quarters that Mosaic, the great mail-order reissue label, has begun to run out of sources are, as Mark Twain said of rumors of his death, greatly exaggerated. While it may be true that Mosaic has come close to exhausting the deep well of the Blue Note vaults, it has discovered another astonishing stash: Vee Jay, a Chicago-based label that began with commercial African-American music, then entered the jazz field at the end of the 1950s.

This Paul Chambers—Wynton Kelly collection is the second Mosaic set compiled from Vee Jay material. (The first was last year’s The Complete Vee Jay Lee Morgan—Wayne Shorter Sessions.) Today, pianist Wynton Kelly is remembered primarily for his participation in some of the most important and most popular jazz ensembles of all time: the quintets and sextets led by Miles Davis from 1959 to 1963. Bassist Paul Chambers played with Davis longer, from 1955 to 1963, but his reputation transcends his association with Davis. Bob Blumenthal’s liner-note essay (typical of Mosaic sets in its erudition and comprehensiveness) postulates that, during Chambers’ prime, he was the most recorded musician in
The prime years of Chambers and Kelly were tragically brief. Chambers died in 1969 at 33, and Kelly in 1971 at 39. Each suffered from health problems related to alcohol abuse, in Chambers’ case exacerbated by drug use, in Kelly’s by epilepsy. (In this set’s liner photos, Chambers’ sad, distant expression suggests that some part of him knew his time was short.) While they played together, from 1959 to 1965, in combination with the unjustly neglected drummer Jimmy Cobb, they were one of the great rhythm sections in history. Kelly’s touch on the keyboard was miraculous—his piano notes, at every tempo, popped like champagne bubbles. The foundation of Kelly’s life-affirming effervescence was Chambers’ volcanic pulse. Countless bassists have walked, but none like Chambers, who walked like a spring-loaded cheetah. He also played intriguing lines with unexpected note choices, and was one of the first virtuoso bass soloists, both pizzicato and arco.

Here, these two quintessential sidemen are featured as leaders. The set contains material (including many alternate and incomplete takes, some previously unissued) from 11 recording sessions that produced six LPs. There are two albums under Chambers’ name (Go and 1st Bassman), a quintet date led by Kelly (Kelly Great), two Kelly trio albums (Kelly at Midnight and Winton Kelly), and one ringer, an album led by an excellent but mostly forgotten alto player (Fantastic Frank Strozier).

Their roles as leaders here mean that Chambers and Kelly solo earlier and more frequently than otherwise. But it was always their mission to make others sound good, and here they support a series of world-class horn players. Anyone who hasn’t gone back to Cannonball Adderley in a while will be floored by his inexhaustible flow of ideas and his leaps of pure energy. (To choose one example, check out “Just Friends,” from Go.) You expect great things from players like Lee Morgan and Freddie Hubbard and Wayne Shorter, and they deliver, although Shorter is not yet his oblique, ultra-hip self in his very first studio date on Kelly Great. But it is revelatory to discover Frank Strozier and Tommy Turrentine again. And Booker Little, in just his 21st year on the Strozier date, stops you cold—not only with his fluency and harmonic originality, but with the emotional ambiguity of his bright, suggestive tone. He died exactly two years after this session, at 23.

When he played as a sideman, which was almost always, Kelly’s solos had to be savored in small doses. On his two trio dates here, there are riches of Kelly piano, with its exhilarating agility and, of course, that sublime touch. He was not an innovator, but almost everything he ever played sounded fresh and right, and the incomplete takes included here contain as many fine moments as the masters. It’s fascinating to hear Kelly completely re-imagine “Someday My Prince Will Come” four times, and double-time “Autumn Leaves” at four distinct velocities. All are examples of what Blumenthal calls the Kelly-Chambers “locked-in groove zone,” by which he means a swing so gigantic it can roll over and flatten you.

This project does not possess the jewel-like quality of the typical Mosaic box. The variations in sound quality from session to session are distracting: 12 of the 74 tracks are in mono, and 18 were transferred not from original tapes, but from Japanese CDs. The Vee Jay archives provide rougher diamonds than typical Mosaic sources like Blue Note or Columbia, but they are diamonds still. Without Mosaic, they might have been lost to the world.

—Thomas Conrad
that enlivened Haden’s youth.

In the lush quietude of Haunted Heart, the avant-garde bass innovator began to mine a decidedly intimate vein of expression that had frequently surfaced during his collaborations with the likes of Ornette Coleman, Keith Jarrett, and Pat Metheny. However, in light of Haden’s ongoing struggles with tinnitus (a constant ringing in his ears), the powerhouse rhythmic/percussive stylings of his formative work and go-for-broke encounters with jazz’s most forceful drummers were no longer a viable option. Thus the more dynamically subdued style of expression Haden perfected on his acclaimed 1970s A&M Horizon duets, Closeness and The Golden Number, and his penultimate collaboration with Pat Metheny (Beyond the Missouri Sky), became the template for lyric explorations — like his most recent release, Nuittte, easily one of the bassist’s best recordings.

Sereneely understated, lyrical, and deeply sensual, with a lightly inflected rhythmic pulse, Nuittte is a nod to Haden’s longstanding love affair with Spanish-inflected musical

stylings. Two Haden originals beautifully illustrate his devotion: “Moonlight,” a light, formal dance with a sublimely understated Joe Lovano on tenor (tenor man David Sanchez mines a similar vein of gold on “Tres Palabras”); and “Nightfall,” a luminous ballad with elegant interplay between pianist Gonzalo Rubalcaba, drummer Ignacio Berroa, and Haden, whose tolling solo suggests ancient Iberian passions rendered in the measured cadences of an operatic bass-baritone. On the opening “En La Orilla Del Mundo” and “Yo sin Ti,” longtime collaborator Rubalcaba plays with a deep romantic ardor perfectly complemented by Federico Britos Ruiz’s earthy violin melodies, which help draw the listener deeper into this simple, expressive melody — much as Pat Metheny’s dulcet nylon-stringed acoustic does on “Noche de Ronda.”

Haden produced this fine-sounding session (with Rubalcaba), so one can conclude that this, in his heart of hearts, is how he idealizes his own bass sound. In any event, what evolved in part as a physical necessity has now become an aesthetic stance, and a most involving one.

— Chip Stern
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McCOY TYNER QUARTET: New York Reunion
McCoy Tyner, piano; Joe Henderson, tenor sax; Ron Carter, bass; Al Foster, drums

Recorded at RCA Studio A in April 1991, New York Reunion is a powerful portrait of piano innovator McCoy Tyner at the top of his game, and in the company of some true jazz heavyweights. Unlike the more recent Telarc DS1 recording of Tyner, Al Foster, and Stanley Clarke, which I reviewed in the spring 2001 “Quarter Notes,” Reunion is far less vivid and analytical in its depiction of individual instruments. However, in employing simpler miking techniques (an all-tube Manley Reference microphone gets star billing), producer David Chesky and engineer Bob Katz achieve a more expressive room sound and believable blend of instruments.

To compare the CD and SACD layers of this hybrid disc, I focused on Monk’s “Ask Me Now,” with its riveting, unaccompanied intro by Joe Henderson. While the levels of soundstaging and dynamics are pretty close, the SACD layer’s depiction of low-level information helps focus the tenor sax’s image on the soundstage while revealing subtle nuances of Henderson’s breathing, key-

action noise, and manipulation of the reed, all of which contribute to the sense of realism and liviness. Most tellingly, when the piano enters on the CD layer, it seems relatively closed-in and compressed compared to the tenor—as if recorded in another acoustic space—while it’s still a tad boxy on the SACD layer; both instruments seem to be breathing the same acoustic air.

New York Reunion was mastered in a conservative audiophile manner: while the output levels aren’t too hot, the level of performance sure is. Recordings of Ron Carter’s bass tend toward the ripe and bloomy, but on the opening “Recorda Ma,” it sounds muscular and focused. In the graceful waltz “Miss Beu,” Tyner displays a poise and ease of execution that hark back to his earliest days in Philadelphia. Still, for seekers after mystery and power à la Coltrane, a truly authoritative vamp-and-release reading of “What Is This Thing Called Love” showcases Tyner’s ever-deepening mastery of rhythmic and harmonic elements, as Foster and Henderson turn up the heat.

DEUTSCHE GRAMMOPHON

BRUCKNER: Symphony 8
Pierre Boulez, Vienna Philharmonic

In spring 2000, Bill Low of AudioQuest took me to Carnegie Hall, where we heard Pierre Boulez lead the London Symphony Orchestra in a masterful performance of Stravinsky’s Firebird. The music reverberated through my psyche for weeks, and it was a watershed audiophile experience as well. Thanks to our roughly 10th-

row-center scats, I was finally afforded the opportunity to experience a truly flawless acoustical event at the optimum sweet spot for hearing the lateral sweep, true tonality, and authentic dynamic range of an orchestral performance—and to experience the immense soundstaging depth and reflective majesty of a great hall. I was positively immersed in sound.

Since then, I have been luxuriating in Boulez’s mastery of form, dynamics, and the rhythmic architecture of modern music at every available opportunity. In the process I have discovered a wealth of wonderful performances recorded for Deutsche Grammophon, among them a definitive Firebird done with the Chicago Symphony in December 1992 (437 8550-2).

So it was with considerable interest that I approached Boulez’s most recent DG release, Bruckner’s Symphony 8, recorded live in 1996 (the centenary of the composer’s death) at the Abbey Church of St. Florian, near Linz, Austria, where Bruckner had been a student, then a teacher, and finally the organist.

Bruckner remains a problematic figure for many listeners. Discursive, tangential, grandiloquent, and long-winded, he oftentimes has great difficulty getting to the point—his symphonic music demands enormous patience on the part of the listener. It also requires a

Stereophile, July 2001
When it comes time for that great librarian in the sky to cross-reference Ralph Towner, just where, exactly, in the cosmic card catalog will this acoustic guitar virtuoso be filed? Jazz? Classical? Folk? Third World? Third Stream? Whichever angel is assigned the task will just have to bite the bullet and conclude that Towner is a genre unto himself: a gifted improviser with a compelling sense of form who is capable of crafting music of enormous complexity, sublime simplicity, and grace—who, while evincing roots in many styles, is truly beholden to none but his own muse.

And so, some 25-plus years down the road, Towner's creative partnership with ECM producer Manfred Eicher and master engineer Jan Erik Kongshaug continues to bear fruit. *Anthem* is perhaps the best-sounding, most fulsome expression of this solo guitarist's art—and that's saying a mouthful, considering how evocative and involving was Towner's last solo recording, *Asta* (ECM 1611), not to mention such fine recitals as *Diary* (ECM 1032) and *Solo Concert* (ECM 1775).

It's fascinating to hear how this creative trio has continued to refine the art of digital recording at their favored Rainbow Studios in Oslo, Norway. *Anthem* has a warmth and holographic representation of space that belie our often limited expectations of the medium; it ranks with the best audiophile-class analog recordings. While the intoxicatingly deep ambient cues on *Anthem* are of a pace with previous works, the recorded perspective is not quite as distant—there's a greater sense of the guitar's scale, scope, and dynamic immediacy. In terms of sheer sound and depth of expression, you'd be hard-pressed to find a more compelling presentation of a solitary guitar.

*Anthem's* shape and story line reveal themselves gradually over repeated listenings; the Indian-flavored "Solitary Woman" and the kinda blue-ish cover of Mingus's "Goodbye Pork-Pie Hat" act as 12-string prologue and epilogue to Ralph's extended performances on classical guitar. Two suites of miniatures, "Four Comets" and "Three Comments," function as textural interludes—the latter are examples of his percussive and textural command of the 12-string, the former are single-string evocations of something as ancient and mysterious as medieval tone rows. The chanting, folkish cadences of the heraldic title tune and the jazzy, postmodern propulsion of "Raffish" inaugurate Towner's two sets of extended pieces, which are distinguished by his remarkable rhythmic fluidity, crystalline intonation, expressive articulation, and indomitable lyric focus.

Towner's stature among jazz improvisers is such that I can think of no other finger-style acoustic guitarist who could take "Gloria's Step," Scott LaFaro's masterpiece from the repertoire of the classic Bill Evans Trio, and simultaneously sustain the song's melodic and harmonic components—all the while creating new variations—without

**Reference System**

**Analog source:** Rega Planar 3 turntable with RB300 tonearm, Grado Reference Master cartridge.

**Digital source:** California Audio Labs CL-20 DVD/CD player, Sony SCD-777ES SACD/CD player, Philips SACD-1000 SACD/DVD-V player.

**Preamplification:** Musical Fidelity Nu-Vista preamplifier, Blue Circle BC23 phono preamplifier.

**Power amplifier:** Musical Fidelity Nu-Vista 300.

**Integrated amplifier:** Linn Classik.

**Loudspeaker:** Joseph Audio RM33si Signature.

**Cables:** Interconnects: Synergistic Research Resolution Reference Mk.II and Designer's Reference (with Active Shielding and Master Control Center). Speaker: Synergistic Research Designer's Reference, JPS Superconductor 2. AC: Synergistic Research Designer's Reference2 Master Couplers, JPS Labs Kaptovator.

**Accessories:** Signal Guard 11 Isolation Stand (turntable), Shakti Stones, PolyCrystal Cones, Argent Room Lens, EchoBusters Bass Busters, EchoBusters Absorptive and Diffusive Panels.

**ECM**

**RALPH TOWNER: Anthem**

Ralph Towner, classical & 12-string guitars

conductor capable of making out the forest for the trees, and Boulez is very much the man for the job. He's able to flesh out the music's underlying rhythmic structure, to delineate and clarify the interdependent harmonic tendrils of Bruckner's dense constructions so that the music doesn't come across as so many ponderous slabs of sound.

The first movement is a majestic series of fanfares and pensive textural filigrees, large-scale choral themes and chamber-like interludes full of mystic portent. The second movement features an insistent, dancelike melodic motif and maintains what, for Bruckner, is a fairly sunny, celebratory mood. The third movement strikes an angelic note early on with its byplay of harps and strings, and Boulez elicits a decidedly spectral, almost impressionistic texture from the orchestra; one can almost hear Bruckner's dreamy harmonies as a bridge to Debussy. The mood is stately and celestial, all peace and surrender, and one of the most beautiful expressions of faith I've ever heard.

Boulez depicts the majestic final movement with enormous clarity, and for a composer given to multiple false climaxes (such as the one that occurs at 18:28), Bruckner rises to the challenge with a stunning, conclusive denouement that suggests the immense scale and physical impact of a huge pipe organ—the fusillade of drums and brass will just about lift your speakers off the floor.

The recording quality rises to the level of the performance. For all our current fascination with SACD and DVD-Audio and the like, it's interesting to consider just how good the art of digital recording has gotten in the past 20 years, and how satisfying a regular "Red Book" 16-bit/44.1kHz CD can still be. Boulez never lets this capacious acoustic space dictate his tempos, nor does he permit the large-scale sections to get away from him and muddy the canvas by allowing massive dynamic events to wash over subtle instrumental distinctions. DG's engineers capture the hall's warm, deep acoustic so that lines and timbres are creamy and mellow yet tactfully rendered. The soundstaging is deep and convincing—nor are there any edgy digital artifacts to fatigue the listener, even after 76 minutes of music.

All in all, a most involving aural and spiritual interpretation that should please devotees and those recalcitrant souls who never imagined they'd make it through an entire Bruckner symphony at one sitting.

--- Chip Stern

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Ralph Towner, classical & 12-string guitars

When it comes time for that great librarian in the sky to cross-reference Ralph Towner, just where, exactly, in the cosmic card catalog will this acoustic guitar virtuoso be filed? Jazz? Classical? Folk? Third World? Third Stream? Whichever angel is assigned the task will just have to bite the bullet and conclude that Towner is a genre unto himself: a gifted improviser with a compelling sense of form who is capable of crafting music of enormous complexity, sublime simplicity, and grace—who, while evincing roots in many styles, is truly beholden to none but his own muse.

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--- Chip Stern

Stereophile, July 2001
compromising articulation or losing the rhythmic thrust. In his command of LaFaro’s orchestral conception, Towner’s playing suggests Evans’ entire trio.

Ralph Towner’s music isn’t merely beautiful, but spiritually transporting in a manner that allows for countless immersions without exhausting its vast range of nuance and mystery.

GROOVE NOTE

Jay McShann, what a wonderful world

Born in Muskogee, Oklahoma on January 12, 1916, pianist Jay “Hootie” McShann was a founding father of the Kansas City sound—a 4/4 celebration of swing, a fundamental building block of modern jazz and R&B, and deeply rooted in the blues and propulsive rhythmic riffs of the American Southwest. Along with Claude “Fiddler” Williams, McShann is the last of the Blue Devils, veterans of the territorial bands that rocked Boss Pendergast’s wide-open town as Depression-era musicians flourished amid this celebration of the night life.

A key mentor and early employer of the legendary Charlie Parker (whose solo on “Hootie Blues” heralded the coming of something new and exciting in jazz phrasing), McShann led one of the most swinging and popular big bands this side of Count Basie. What a Wonderful World is a soulful evocation of McShann’s unique mixture of blues, boogie-woogie, jazz, swing, and R&B—a hard-grooving synthesis of roots musics that, in the years following World War II, set the stage for the popular forms that came to be known as rock’n’roll, soul, and funk. But McShann, never accorded much credit for or given the opportunities to enjoy the fruits of his creations, left the road and returned to KC in the later part of the ’50s, even as such veterans of his great blues bands as Jimmy Witherspoon carried the torch forward.

Wonderful World was taped live to two-track analog on a Studer A-80 at 30ips, and there’s a funky immediacy to the recording that suits the music’s bluesy scope and feel. When McShann and company stray from this formula, as on the title tune and “Until the Real Thing Comes Along,” they lose some steam; for all his soul and earnest musicality, McShann is not a terribly effective singer of ballads.

But as a jazz pianist and blues vocalist, McShann has forgotten more than most of us will ever know. On chestnuts like “Pinney Brown Blues” and “Cherry Red,” his lilting, airborne stride chording sets an after-hours mood that doesn’t quit, aided by focused, idiomatic solos by tenorist Alaadeen and guitarist Sonny Kenner. With his simple eloquence, Kenner suggests that the electric jazz guitar vocabulary is just as beholden to T-Bone Walker as to Charlie Christian. McShann’s extended solo on “Just for You” illustrates his light, sparkling touch and laid-back melodic fluency, while “Hot Biscuits” is lean and mean—the real KC jump blues. Yet on the swaympy, crawfish-flavored groove of “Crazy Legs and Friday Strut,” McShann’s buoyant two-handed rhythms, churchy hosannas, and graceful harmonic variations bespeak his connec-

This recording was mastered using the Sony Direct Stream Digital (DSD) system, and has excellent resolution and dimensionality. A slight brassiness in the upper midrange favors the piano, which is vividly rendered—a touch bright, though not in the zizzy, hyper-fatiguing digital sense. The CD has superb air, transparency, and harmonic detail, while on the LP the impact of the bass and drums is more forward, more physically immediate. And while the soundstaging is more holographic on the LP, that of the DSD master is not nearly as shallow as in past analog/digital shoot-outs. (The LP package features three selections on a second, 45rpm disc, two of which appear on the LP and one of which, “Until the Real Thing Comes Along,” is a bonus track).

RED ROSE MUSIC

VARIOUS ARTISTS: Live Recordings at Red Rose Music
Chico Freeman, tenor sax; George Cables, piano; Kenny Rankin, vocals, acoustic guitar; Bill Sims, vocals, acoustic guitar; Adele V. Anthony, violin; Simon Mulligan, Keith Ingham, Peter Muir, piano; Mark Levinson, bass, temple bells; Shane Cattrall, Kim Cattrall, spoken word

Mark Levinson’s name is synonymous with high-end audio, so when he casts his lot with an emerging technology, audiophiles take notice. Past examples of Levinson’s sojourns into the realm...
of high-tech audiophile recording have drawn considerable attention—such as a pair of sessions he did for Blue Note some years back. While I can't lay my hands on the actual discs amid my studio's carnage, I recall that they were minimally miked affairs employing variations on PCM digital technology—which Levinson now seeks to distance himself from. One of those discs, a terrific Jon Faddis big-band recording, was quite vivid and realistic, if rather dry in its re-creation of an acoustic event; the other, of a Jacky Terrasson piano trio, was pretty cold—the lack of chemistry between the musicians seemed to be exacerbated by the style of recording, and resulted in a parched, analytical sound that could best be characterized as "medicinal."

But Mark Levinson's new baby is a laboratory prototype of Sony's DSD recording system. As it allows no editing, Levinson uses a pair of Brüel & Kjaer mikes and his own Red Rose Model 3 Silver signature preamplifier to provide a direct feed into the DSD. Then he asks friends to drop by.

*Live Recordings at Red Rose Music* documents a series of audio home movies captured at Levinson's Red Rose Music Store (in Manhattan's Whitney Museum); it is meant to show off the capabilities of this system, and the operative word is Live—it puts them right in your room. As an audiophile reference disc, *Live Recordings* has a certain fascination, because the instrumental images are incredibly vivid and *there*—such as violinist Adele Anthony's rendition of a Fritz Kreisler solo piece, and Jerry Willard's classical guitar performance of a Bach *Allemande*. And on Chico Freeman and George Cables' rendition of "In a Sentimental Mood," performance and recording technology come together beautifully to reproduce a lovely piano sound and uncolored tenor-sax articulations.

Elsewhere...well, there's nowhere to hide with DSD, and Kenny Rankin must be a very serene, secure individual to allow this version of "Blackbird" to see the light of day. Other tracks range from off-the-cuff to mundane to welcome-to-my-world—though nothing will induce the slack-jawed disbelief that sonic pilgrims experience when they first hear the famous "Summertime" from Stereophile's first Test CD.

Nevertheless, while the degrees of sonic realism and resolution more than justify Levinson's enthusiasm, to my ears the *acoustic* on every track is a disconcertingly uniform portrait of a very small, dry room. Ambience, anyone? Sonic accuracy is meant to be a means, not an end in itself. It is not always synonymous with musicality or a truly involving aural experience.

Of the virtuoso showpieces, I returned most often to the variations of O'Connor's "Vistas," in which a simple theme is passed around the trio in the manner of a round. Meyer's puckish "Indecision" ranges ambivalently from hornpipe to hoedown to intimations of jazz à la Django. Meyer's enormous attack on the plucked bass is a particular joy, as are his immense bowed passages in his Duet for Cello and Bass.

Not everything works as well. The fulsome technical flourishishes of *Caprice for Three* feel more like a series of academic bowing effects than a fully fleshed-out composition. And while Ma's playing is always resolute and never less than engaging, he sometimes sounds, for all his grace and good taste, as if he's just along for the ride.

Still, it's quite a ride, and this expressive recital benefits from being recorded live to DSD—it's crystal-clear and minutely detailed. But the sound really comes alive on the SACD master. Using "Slumber My Darling" as my reference, the first thing I noticed in switching from the CD layer to the SACD was the absence of compression: each instrumental image occupied a more palatable, distinct place on the soundstage, outlined against an inkly, open blackness. The SACD seemed to possess more realistic overtones, and a wealth of low-level details made for an especially vivid, authentic vocal presence. I could feel each inhalation and exhalation in Krauss's delivery, the dynamics were more immediate, and the soundstaging seemed deeper
and more dimensional due to the enhanced level of transparency—deeper, darker, quieter backgrounds. To paraphrase Gertrude Stein and Sam Tellig, there was just more there there. And while the presentation was a little on the bright side in the digital sense, there was an analog quality to the resolution in terms of front-to-back depth and distinctions among individual images.

Kavi Alexander’s pure two-channel analog recordings are made with vacuum-tube electronics custom-built by E.A.R. He uses the classic Blumenla ink configuration in recording musicians at his favored Christ The King Chapel in Santa Barbara, an acoustically stimulating environment in which Alexander tapes compelling, trance-like depictions of music originating in the religious cultures of the Indian subcontinent. Many of Alexander’s creative variations on the East–West theme have proven irresistible to western listeners who cut their teeth on the crosscultural achievements of Ravi Shankar, the Beatles, Shakti, and Oregon.

Hollow Bamboo is a particularly satisfying recital based on the gloriously rich tone and soulful lyricism of bansuri virtuoso Ronu Majumdar. The bansuri, a large wooden flute, has a vivid presence that gives it a creamy vocal quality more akin to the upper midrange of a male tenor voice than the piping highs of a female soprano. From the opening notes of “Vaisnava Bhajan,” Alexander balances that quality superbly against the stunning acoustics of the chapel, placing Majumdar forward and center on a voluptuous soundstage against an unchanging drone, the tablas gathering and dispersing around him.

This effect is even more beautiful on “Krsna Kantha Kadam,” when Majumdar is set against a heavily tremolo’d tableau of gently purring electric guitars. On “African Queen,” I was engaged by the subtle yet insistent low-end moan of a hand drum as By Cooder switches from guitar to oud to engage Majumdar in a musical dialogue—it’s as if all the humidity suddenly drops out of the room.

But moisture returns on the languorous, tranquil breeze of “A Day for Trade Winds”. By Cooder and Rick Cox create a distant, dreamy perspective with a shimmering curtain of guitar chords as Majumdar and Jon Hassell engage in deep, narcotic recollections of imaginary parts of call. Save for Hassell’s and Majumdar’s positions at opposite ends of the soundstage, it’s often difficult to discern flute from trumpet, so closely are they able to approximate each other’s timbre.

My favorite is the hypnotic “Bay of Bengal,” a very original performance and recording experience in which Majumdar makes the metaphorical leap from east to west, joining Cooder and Cox in a dreamy Tex–Mex, south-of-the-border ballad. This is probably as sublime a balance of acoustic and electric tonalities as you’re likely to hear on any recording, with a warm, supple low end and rich, endless vistas of midrange depth and tubed-triode detail.
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Stereophile, July 2001
B&W CDM9 NT
Editor:
All of us at B&W wish to thank Stereophile and Sam Tellig for his piece on the new CDM9 NT. Clearly, Sam is “dialed in” to what we try to achieve at B&W; namely, the sweet midrange that only Kevlar can provide, top-to-bottom integration, furniture-quality construction, and value.

One technical clarification concerning Kevlar should be noted, however. Sam says Kevlar is “stiff stuff.” Actually, it is not. B&W makes it stiff by applying resins and curing it. By the way, this curing process is patented by B&W. Because of our success, there are innumerable knockoffs of our Kevlar that are, instead, laminates of Kevlar and some other material like polypropylene. Thus, none of them perform as ours do.

So, Sam, you can buy those Kevlar hunting pants at L.L. Bean and, as long as you don’t apply your own resins to them, I’m sure they’ll be comfy. The same would also be true for bulletproof vests, also made from Kevlar, should you need one of those!

Chris Browder
Executive VP, B&W Loudspeakers

PS Audio Lab Cable
Editor:
Thank you for Michael Fremer’s warm endorsement of the PS Audio Lab Cable in “ Analog Corner.” We appreciate his dedication to bringing clarity to one of the more esoteric aspects of the audio experience. However, while his listening tests prove the Lab Cable’s value, Mr. Fremer seems unsure why cables should have so powerful an effect on sound quality.

Realizing that many exotic claims made by cable manufacturers are not always technically defensible, we feel it’s important to explain why the Lab Cable achieved such excellent results. Simply stated, its benefits flow from fundamental research, tempered by common sense, that we conducted into the relationship between power and performance. We originally designed the Lab Cable as a reference-quality power-delivery system to test our unique Power Plant line of AC power regenerators. Only later did we realize that nothing like the Lab Cable existed in the marketplace.

The Cable’s construction, which focuses on shielding and copper surface area, is unique. Shielding is critical in any power-delivery system, particularly in in-wall situations where wire lengths exceed 10’. To achieve PS Audio’s goal of a minimum RF and EMI rejection figure of -70dB, two shields were woven over each of the cable’s two power conductors.

Both shielded power conductors were further protected with a woven copper braid over the entire cable assembly. This triaxial shielding lowers induced noise by a minimum of -70dB, where -24dB is considered excellent. The shielding, combined with proper termination, results in measurable improvements in both audio and video systems.

The Lab Cable also provides a large conductor surface area, which is critical for unrestricted electron flow and low DC resistance. Each of the two power-handling conductors in the Cable is composed of 6-gauge, 99.9%-pure copper arranged as 1057 strands of 36-gauge wire. Using thousands of strands of very-fine-gauge wire in a heavy conductor allows the Cable to be flexible, and also capable of handling more than 50 amps. The Lab Cable can deliver full power to any A/V system while maintaining nearly -70dB of low-noise AC power delivery.

While not inexpensive, the Lab Cable delivers because it is based on sound technical reasoning and the contributions of proper shielding, termination, and wire selection.

Finally, to answer Mr. Fremer’s initial question: It’s important to shield the last 6’ of a power-delivery system, even though the entire home’s wiring network is not shielded, because the last 6’ is where most noise is generated — and generated by a home owner’s own A/V equipment. Moreover, A/V components are also sensitive to radiation from power cords. This is why the last 6’, from the wall to the equipment, is a critical area, and one that needs a shielded cable.

We thank you again for your appreciation of the Lab Cable’s performance. A detailed account of the dramatic manufacturing process, with images, can be viewed online at www.psaudio.com.

Paul McGowan
CEO, PS Audio

Balanced Audio Technology VK-40
Editor:
Our thanks to Stereophile and to Robert Deutsch for his thorough review of our VK-40 balanced preamplifier. We are glad that Robert found the quality of his experience with the VK-40 to be captured by its dynamic case. We are also pleased that Robert found the VK-40 to be the antithesis of the “bright, forward, clinical, harmonically threadbare, and lacking in warmth” characteristics that many music-lovers associate with solid-state design. Indeed, the harmonically rich sound of the VK-40, combined with its superlative dynamics, are also noted as the hallmarks of BAT design. Rather than add to Robert’s detailed examination of the performance of the VK-40, we would like to comment more specifically on two areas of the review:

- Measurements: We are gratified to see that Robert Deutsch’s impressions of the quietness of the VK-40 and its outstanding dynamic capability were confirmed by John Atkinson’s measurements. For example, John notes that “Perhaps partly because of its enormous dynamic range, the VK-40 featured extremely low levels of intermodulation distortion.” Indeed, as John later summarizes, “its measurements reveal the BAT VK-40 to offer very low noise and a distortion signature that is both low in level and subjectively benign, coupled with enormous dynamic range.”

Here, the measurements and listening observations are in complete agreement.

Regarding the issue of the required minimum power-amplifier impedance, a quick engineering analysis might be in order. The low-frequency interaction between the preamplifier output and the input of a power amplifier is usually governed by the value of the preamplifier output capacitor. In the case of the VK-40 with Six-Pak, that value is 3µF. As a result, the -3dB point in the low-frequency response area will be just 5Hz in the case of a power amplifier with a 10k input impedance. The response into a 50k-ohm load would actually reach down to just 1Hz — hardly a minimum acceptable criterion.

Control flexibility: Finally, we are also pleased that Robert found the VK-40 to offer an attractive phono module, superb control flexibility, and a very user-frien-
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ly interface." With this powerful yet intuitive interface, the user can also set a "fixed" volume to seamlessly integrate the VK-40 into a combined two-channel music and multichannel home theater system. This is an increasingly popular feature that many of our customers appreciate in integrating their love of music and movies into one environment. Steve Bednarski, Victor Klonenisky, Geoff Poor

Balanced Audio Technology VK-75 and VK-75SE

Editor:
Our thanks to Stereophile and Robert Deutsch for his finely written review of our VK-75 and VK-75SE power amplifiers. We are pleased that Robert found that the VK-75SE reaches "a substantially greater level of neutrality and musicality" than the standard VK-75. We also feel that the difference between the VK-75 and VK-60 would have been more apparent with a more difficult speaker load. Indeed, the +100dB sensitivity of the Advantgarde tends to minimize the greater power handling of the VK-75 vs our previous-generation VK-60. We are gratified that Robert noted the lower noise performance and greater neutrality of the VK-75 vs the VK-60 in this case.

We are also pleased that Robert noted the upgrade path for the VK-60 to Special Edition status. Balanced Audio Technology proudly offers such upgrades to maintain the loyalty of our customers.

Finally, I spoke with Robert Deutsch after receiving the VK-75SE back at the factory with a blown fuse for one of the output tubes. It is a tribute to the design excellence of the VK-60, VK-75, and VK-75SE that Robert has used these amplifiers frequently since 1995 and was not aware that there was fuse protection for the tubes. Steve Bednarski

Balanced Audio Technology

Grand Prix Audio Monaco

Editor:
We would like to thank Stereophile and Michael Fremer for a thoughtful product review. Michael astutely identified a critical aspect of the design background of our product in his mention of our use of a shaker table to develop our designs.

As with the use of a wind tunnel in the design and development of a modern racing car, a similar analysis tool is required to correctly design an audio isolation device. The ability to accurately measure and repeat tests over months and through numerous changes is of critical importance. With the aid of this device, the performance of a design can be carefully scrutinized at length.

We feel a key element of the performance of our products is predictability. Because our products have been designed and developed using real science and engineering, they perform predictably, whereas response-tuning designs will not have the same effect on reproduction from one application to the next. Our designs (via the attenuation of vibration) will provide a predictable improvement on reproduction in all applications.

Michel's comments regarding the improvements our products provide mirror the responses of every Grand Prix Audio owner: "The overall focus, image definition, clarity, and blackness between the notes were clearly better...as was retrieval of low-level detail. The rhythmic organization of complex music seemed to improve, and there was a greater sensation of listener relaxation..." Michel hit the nail on the head!

As good as our designs are, we have not stopped our research and development program. We have found that, as in all designs, there remain areas that can be improved on. This research and development have led us to develop our F1 Shelf and a component damper. When added to our existing designs, this carbon-Kevlar shelf will eclipse existing combinations of products. We look forward to your scrutiny of this new upgrade. This technology will also be made available for use in applications other than our products.

In closing, we want to state how invaluable we believe Stereophile's review processes are to the audio community. By virtue of the crucible your critical review and scrutiny provide, the consumer is assisted in determining what to expect from a product purchase. Thank you again for the opportunity you are providing for your subscribers to learn about high-quality products. Alvin Lloyd

President, Grand Prix Audio

Stax SR-007 Omega II

Editor:
We wish to take this opportunity to thank Stereophile and Jonathan Scull for the positive review of the Stax SR-007 Omega II EarSpeaker. His comparative and impartial observations clearly indicate the different characteristics of the tube-driven SRM-007t and those of the solid-state SRM-717 driver amplifier. We are confident that this review will satisfy many readers who have sought the answer to the question, "Which is better?"

Although not mentioned in the review, the Omega II SRS-007 and SRS-717 systems are flagship products of the New Generation System II series, which has

Stereophile, July 2001
been resurrected by Stax Ltd., Japan. In addition to the Omegas, the renowned Lambda Signature, Classic, and Basic, along with the "mini" SR-001 Mk.2 battery-operated "In-The-Earspeaker," are now available in revised System II forms. Vast improvements have been made to these new products through the use of new super-thin diaphragm materials, which in most cases are 40% thinner than in previous products — this, and "energizer" design changes made by Stax Ltd. engineers. By doing so, resolution, transparency, and the overall listening experience have been improved.

In closing, we wish to thank you again for your opus, and to extend our thanks to all music enthusiasts who seek peerless sonic excellence. We're proud to distribute such superlative audio equipment as Stax's electrostatic audio products.

Collin T. Imai
General Manager, Yama's Enterprises

Wavelength Gemini

Editor:
I would like to thank Bob Deutsch and John Atkinson for taking so much of their time with this product [May 2001, p.125]. I designed the Gemini so that it would work with any new or NOS (new old stock) 2A3 and 45 tube. I used over 60 different 45s and 50 different 2A3s in the design process of this amplifier. The possibilities are endless. I am so glad that they were able to get the same results that I have. I would also like to thank Neil Muncy for his help.

Bob received one of the very first Gemini's that I had made. I and the other customers were using them on Avant-garde speakers, so I assumed Bob would not have a problem. After Neil and I spoke I went over Neil's paper in the Journal of the AES and made up a pair of Gemini's with the changes he suggested. These changes did not affect the sound or the noise in my system, so these changes were incorporated into the product.

The tube is actually much healthier than is stated in the review. I had sent Bob the Majestic 245s (the 245, 345, and 445 are globe editions of the 45 tube). These were probably made in the 1930s. Not the best idea I had, though they are a sight to look at. The Silvertone tubes I rushed out after the failure of the one Majestic had not been tested since 1992. I made sure the Sylvanias were tested fully before they were sent up north. They can last as long as five years in standard use.

Again, I would like to thank Bob, John, and Neil for all of their help. I would also like to thank Stereophile for offering me this review in their magazine. I am very happy that all involved heard this product as it was intended to be heard.

J. Gordon Rankin
Chief Scientist and Owner
Wavelength Audio

Myryad MDP500

Editor:
Kudos to Kal Rubinson for taking the time to review our award-winning MDP500 71 preamp-processor as an audio-only preamp [June 2001, p.103]. Too many people have shied away from using the latest digital A/V products as audiophile stereo preamps, choosing instead to have a separate dedicated stereo system for fear of sacrificing sound quality. The trend of the custom installers to integrate stereo into multichannel A/V systems has taken time to catch on with the consumer who is contemplating a combination stereo/surround A/V system. I hope this review has proved to audiophiles, as well as to the public at large, how good a properly designed digital product can be when used for music reproduction, either stereo or multichannel.

Myryad's stated goal from the beginning was to provide audiophile-quality sound reproduction in its stereo products, something it has achieved with great success. With the design and introduction of its latest A/V offerings, this goal was still considered number one, Myryad having come from audiophile roots. There is no reason anyone should have to compromise on sound quality in an A/V processor, even if it is used in a stereo-only or music-only system. It is unfortunate that so many mainstream manufacturers have forgotten that excellent sound reproduction, not just video reproduction, is so important in building a decent A/V system.

I have a few comments to make. First, I disagree with Kal that a video monitor is necessary to understand, configure, and control what the MDP500 is capable of. We specifically included the blue vacuum fluorescent display (VFD) on the front panel so that all functions that display on a video monitor could also be displayed without one. Sure, you get more options displayed at one time and in larger format on a monitor, but it is not necessary. In fact, many of our custom-installer dealers do the complete A/V parameter setup using the VFD, before ever connecting the MDP500 to the customer's monitor or speakers.

Once it's set up, you have the choice of glancing at the VFD display as you would the front panel of any standard stereo preamp (while changing CDs or DVDs or cueing up a record), with the added advantage of being able to see the display on your TV from the listening position across the room. Remember, not too many years ago there were no remote controls, especially on audiophile products — you had to walk up to the equipment to change volume and inputs. Are we getting spoiled?

Regarding the trend to reduce the number of buttons and knobs on front panels, we too have to have simplified front panels. The MDP500 has a total of nine inputs. Instead of providing a confusing array of nine pushbuttons, we provide only three: a pair for up/down source select, including the 71 analog pass-through, and a third to instantly toggle between the currently selected input and the 71 analog input. It is very simple and easy to use. I agree, it will take a couple of seconds more to peck the up/down button to get to a specific input (except for the instant access to the 71 analog input), but the handheld remote will also give you instant access to all the inputs individually.

As Kal mentioned, the LCD learning remote provided was designed to do a lot more than the buttons on the front panel. It gives instant access to the multitude of modes and features and will operate all other brands of A/V equipment. This is to be expected from an A/V preamp as versatile as the MDP500, which can also be used as the center of a sophisticated multiroom A/V setup. One other neat feature I should mention is that all inputs can be renamed. Aux 1, for example, can be called Phono if you hook up a turntable. The new name is then displayed on the VFD as well as on a TV monitor.

In reference to lack of bass management on the 71 analog inputs, Kal explains that the only multichannel high-resolution outputs from SACD and DVD-Audio are analog. The bass management in the MDP500 is quite sophisticated and requires a combination of digital and analog processing to achieve the best results with the maximum flexibility, without impairing dynamic range (noise or headroom). It is therefore impossible to apply this to the pure-analog 71 inputs.

When the MDP500 was being designed, there were no SACD players and only samples of DVD-A. It was assumed, quite reasonably, that anyone producing audiophile products like these would attend to the well-understood requirements for bass management within the players (owing to the lack of multichannel digital outputs). Hopefully, equipment reviewers such as Kal will put pressure on disc-player manufacturers to clean up their act in this respect. If they don't, the only other alternative would be to add simplified analog bass management to the otherwise "clean" 71 signal paths, which would degrade the audio somewhat. That would be a real pity.

With the MDP500 having received the 2001 Editors' Choice Gold Award for both its audio and video performance from Stereophile's sister publication, Stereophile...
Stereophile, July 2001

Guide to Home Theater, we are again thrilled to receive such a positive review, especially in view of the audiophile context of Kal's tests. Thank you.  

Dave Lang  
President, Artich Electronics

MartinLogan Prodigy
Editor:
Greetings and thanks for the comprehensive review.

In the late '70s, when Ron Logan and I started electrostatic transducer research, it seemed impossible to resolve the myriad problems associated with this fascinating technology. Since that day, innovation after innovation has been required to accomplish the dream and create a reliable state-of-the-art electrostatic system. Today, our entire team is very proud of the Prodigy, and we thank Mr. Greenhill for telling it like it is—in an ultimate design, electrostats not only are superior in how they reveal information and render detail, but also are capable of explosive uncompressed dynamics.

As we focused on dynamic driver design to interface with our electrostat, the challenge was to design a high-resolution dynamic transducer that exhibited the same linearity and low distortion as our electrostatic panel (less than 0.07% THD). To solve this issue, significant attention was paid to reducing distortion-inducing components created by the voice-coil's inductive field, as well as pushing the linear travel to the maximum. Although expensive, the results were substantial. Looking at fig.1, you can see that the typical THD distortion component of the Prodigy's electrodynamic driver at 200Hz at 94dB is less than 0.07%, which is close to that of our electrostatic panel. Looking at a typical electrodynamic driver (fig.2) at those same levels, you can see that the THD is typically in the 0.5–1% range—seven to 14 times the distortion of the Prodigy woofer.

Another interesting side note develops from our unique dispersion characteristics. The enclosed waterfall plot (in which we have opened the time window to 20 milliseconds) shows what happens to the acoustic information once the transducer generates energy into a room. The energy field from a typical-quality point source is demonstrated in fig.3. Notice the "chatter" that invariably results from the speaker/room interaction. Notice in fig.4 that the Prodigy's wave-launch room interaction causes significantly less resonance. It has been our experience that the reduction of "chatter" or nearfield reflections results in a greater ability to achieve image, focus, and ambient retrieval in a variety of rooms, helping the Prodigy to achieve high levels of performance in multiple-room configurations.

Our engineering team developed ForceForward bass alignment to give the Prodigy more uniform bass performance in a myriad of room configurations. The positive consumer response has let us know that we have taken a giant step forward toward resolving room/speaker interface problems. By the way, yes, the Prodigy does require a lengthy break-in period in order for the system to blossom fully.

Thanks also to John Atkinson for modifying his testing formats to reveal more fully the acoustic parameters of our unique technology, and thanks again to Stereophile for your commitment to music and high-performance listening.

Gayle Martin Sanders  
President, MartinLogan

Musical Fidelity A3 CD player
As I was preparing this issue's contents, reader Michael R. Semple asked in an e-mail why the Musical Fidelity A3 CD player had been dropped from the April "Recommended Components" without any explanation despite its being provisionally included in last October's listing. My heart sank: no explanation had been given because I had no intention of deleting it!

The April "Recommended Components" was the first we had prepared from a master database. Somewhere between importing all the original text files for the listing into the database and exporting the appropriate fields to Quark XPress, the Musical Fidelity entry vanished into thin air. It shall appear in the October 2001 "Recommended Components." My apologies to Musical Fidelity and to the company's US distributor, Audio Advisor.
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Stereophile, July 2001

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Stereophile, July 2001 137
I have to remember how seriously audiophiles follow Stereophile, Reader David Zappardon's (davida@geyclone.com) e-mail to me began with “Hello, my friend.” But I have to admit to feeling some guilt when he yowled that he'd wasted two fruitless hours of his time looking for the silver-bearing conductive grease I'd mentioned in the October 2000 “Fine Tunes.”

Persistent fellow that he is, David came up with the proper link, which is, in its entirety: www.hmcelectronics.com/cgi-bin/scripts/display.cgi?cat_id=1530-0141&product_id=15300141&product_description=CW7100:%20Circuit%20Works%20Conductive%20Silver%20Grease&cat_price=14.95&onl_price=14.20

Thank you, David! The problem is partly that HMC Electronics is a bit snarky. When you hit their homepage (www.hmcelectronics.com), they redirect your browser and check which it is. That's not necessarily a bad thing, but previously they welcomed only those surfers using Internet Explorer. HMC is more browser-friendly now. So you can, with whatever software you wish, search for Circuit Works Conductive Silver Grease (product number 1530-0141 CW7100). David suggested that it's easier to bring up the site and then search for the stuff rather than plugging in the full URL cited above.

The manufacturer of Circuit Works Conductive Silver Grease is Hub Material Company, Inc. (33 Springfield Avenue, P.O. Box 526, Canton, MA 02021-0526, tel. (800) 482-4440 or (781) 821-1870). There is a www.hubmaterial.com website, but it automatically redirects your browser to hmcelectronics.com. When you first search on CW7100 there, the software returns the entry without a price. Clicking on Add to Basket returns $14.95 retail. As I write this in April, there's a deal going on for free shipping.

(It was tax time—take your breaks where you can find 'em!)

Here's the description of the material itself: “Syringe dispenser precisely applies grease to provide superior electrical and thermal conductivity, lubrication, and protection for metal, rubber, and plastic. Protects against moisture and corrosion. Thermally stable over a wide temperature range.”

David: “I'm getting some today, but you might check to make sure they have it before ordering.” I'd take his advice. The grease should be helpful with both RCA and speaker-terminal connections — and XLR balanced connections, for that matter. Perhaps David will let us know the effects of greasing up his system. Seems a better tweak for you-all than for someone (such as yrs trly) who's always changing cables and interconnects.

From the realm of science to that of [cue Twilight Zone theme] a not terribly strange message from E. Atmadja (erwinatm@dinet.net.id), audiophile and citizen of far-off Indonesia:

"Dear John," he began — I get a lot of those — "I'm a fan of your articles. I would like to share a tweak which I find improves the sound of CD players and transports." Atmadja took an old 5¼" diskette, ripped the data storage floppy from its shell, and cut it to the size of a CD. He placed it on the label side of the recording, as you'd do with such commercial aftermarket CD mats as the light-sensitive, glows-green-in-the-dark AudioPrism Blacklight. Atmadja reported that his home-brew mat improved the sound: "You will have bigger soundstage and deeper bass. The explanation is perhaps that the [magnetic-coated] plastic reduces and absorbs the magnetic induction from the spinning polycarbonate CD. Try it and you will hear the amazing improvements! Keep on tweaking, man!"

The well-reviewed, relatively inexpensive ($39.95) AudioPrism Blacklight is described as a precision-cut, “high-modulus,” medium-density composite “that presents an effective vibrational short circuit, that adds rotational mass and “dynamic stability” said to increase bass definition. Conductive carbon traces “lower the electrostatic potential” of the disc, “resulting in less read interference with the laser subsystem, improving imaging and soundstage.”

Not content with remaking the world, AudioPrism adds, “A proprietary, frequency-specific, highly emissive phosphorescent surface layer optically saturates the compact disc as well as the disc compartment, thus reducing jitter and resulting in a more open and smooth presentation.” Further, they explain, Blacklight “unifies damping, electrostatic reduction, and stray-light cancellation into one passive device that requires only a light source (either natural or artificial) to activate.” The instructions suggest that Blacklight works with most drawer- and top-loaders, but isn't recommended for car or multis 1 bit home players.

The damn thing works. I also spray Auric Illuminator on "Red Book" CDs, although it's not to be used on SACD pressings, Auric says.

One CD mat taxed John Atkinson's credulity to the max but still makes me mirthful. The ever-urbané Yves-Bernard André demonstrated a YBA CD mat two CE Ses back. As I recall, the "floppy" mat was some kind of electrically conductive material that "funneled," if you will, the built-up static charge to the bonded-metal CD clamp, which in turn grounded the static to the spindle, on which sat the whole kit'n'caboodle. The blue laser (its own tempest in a teapot) sounded wonderful, but I noticed that JA was swallowing hard, looking as determinedly noncommitted as I've ever seen him!
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