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As We See It

John Atkinson

This magazine's "Recording of the Month" feature has been running without a break since it first appeared in our January 1994 issue. The idea of its progenitor, then-music editor Richard Lehniert (who still copies-edits every word you see in Stereophile), was that every month we would recognize a recording that defied "Holt's First Law" by offering superb sound and wonderful music. I think we've succeeded at that goal. Despite the letter that Robert Baird mentions in his "Aural Robert" column this month (p.113), whose writer objected to the February issue's pick (Shelby Lynne's Love; Shelby, Island ISLF 15426-2), if an audiophile's music collection consisted entirely of Stereophile Recordings of the Month, there wouldn't be a dog in the whole eclectic bunch.

Increasingly of late, however, the catchment area for outstanding music releases seems to be shrinking. We dip our nets daily, but much of the time they come up empty. Yes, there's no doubt that January's selection of Mortinr (ECM 1765) was superbly worthy of recommendation, as was March's Swing Live (Cheeky JJ218/SACI222) and April's Words of the Angel (ECM 1753). But it starts to get a bit sweaty in the editorial office when we're fast approaching the date the magazine needs to be shipped to the printer (I still say "shipped," but the process is actually an FTP transfer) and music editor Baird has not yet come up with any contenders for me to audition.

Fortunately this month, RB rushed into my office at the eleventh hour waving Are You Biscornate?, the new Neil Young album (Reprise 48111-2), "Who've thought the old geezer still had it in him?" I mused as the '60s soul-groove arrangements, superbly captured on CD, rolled out of the speakers, surged across the floor, and set my toes tapping.

The current dearth of good recorded music takes me back a few months to when I was filling in my ballot for the 44th Grammy Awards. Yes, ECM's Manfred Eicher was a strong contender for Classical Producer of the Year for, among other recordings, Mortinr, though he was up against Harmonia Mundii's Robina Young, with her excellent track record, and veteran James Mallinson (who was the eventual classical album Grammy winner, with the Colin Davis/LSO La Damnation de Faust on the LSO Live label). Keith Johnson's Minnesota Respighi album on Reference Recordings was a well-deserved nominee in the classical engineering field. Yes, our November 2001 "Recording of the Month," Bob Dylan's "Love and Theft," was one of the Album of the Year nominees. And who could object to the eventual winner, the wonderful O Brother, Where Art Thou? soundtrack?

But so many of the nominees, to me at least, were veterans marking time, new artists elevated above their station, or choices that didn't seem to be selected on musical merit? Supporting this notion was the fact that viewership of this year's Grammys was a six-year low (http://biz.yahoo.com/rt/020228/n28120991.html). I mean, who bothers to watch musicians you don't care about win awards for recordings that haven't stirred your soul?

So when NARAS's Michael Greene came down heavily at the Grammys on the MP3 phenomenon as being to blame for the current shrinkage in the record industry's fortunes (see Barry Willis's report on p.19), I couldn't help but wonder if he had even considered that a more fundamental problem was the poor quality of the music, let alone compromised technical quality (which I wrote about in this space in January and February).

Print magazines can ponder but the Web can offer answers. Jon Iverson, www.stereophile.com's webmaster, ran a poll on our site on March 3 asking readers what they attributed the slump in CD sales to. The results were, er, interesting. Yes, 37% of the respondents agreed with me that "bad music" was to blame. Just 2% named "piracy," and 4% "download." But a whopping 41% felt that "high CD prices" was the root cause.

Of course, it could be argued that if someone says that a CD is too expensive, what they're really saying is that the music is not worth the asking price; if, these are also votes for "bad music." But I suspect that that is not the case; that these respondents really do feel that the list prices of CDs are too high.

I have a problem with this. As the producer of recordings released on a small independent record label—the Stereophile CDs—my experience has been that, at the typical sales level for one of our titles, a retail price of $15.95 leaves very little room for profit when the CD is sold over the counter. Yes, the cost of the disc itself is now less than $1 at even quite small production volumes. But when you factor in copyright fees, artist royalties, amortization of the project's upfront cost over the expected sales volume, and marketing and promotion costs, the manufacturing cost of the disc is basically insignificant.

Some respondents to our website poll did acknowledge the existence of some hidden costs. "They should cut CD prices to $4.99 and manage production and marketing costs so that they can break even at sales of 300,000," wrote Mark B. James. R. Whitney commented that "If the record industry reduced the average retail price to $10 or less, [CDs] would fly off the shelves," and that "Piracy would come to a screeching halt."

Yes, the economic picture changes significantly when the sales of a CD exceed 300,000 or so, because at that point the upfront costs and the marketing costs can be spread over so many disks that the per-disc cost drops to very little and the profit per disc rises in proportion, meaning that the most popular titles could be sold for very much less than 16 bucks. The problem is that very few of the tens of thousands of CDs released every year sell as many as 300,000. Most classical CDs sell less than 3000.

So if the retail price of CDs dropped precipitously, the big five media companies would no longer make obscene profits on Brimley Spears and the Back Street Boys. But the Law of Unintended Consequences would kick in big time, and the industries who provide so much of the "deep catalog" that enriches our musical lives would go down for the count.

1 Holt's Laws, as defined by Stereophile's founder J. Gordon Holt in the 1970s, are: 1) "The better the recording, the worse the performance, and vice versa." 2) "The shoddiest the advertisement, the worse the product." 3) "Every component is imperfect, and every imperfection is audible.

2 You can find the archived reviews by clicking on the "Archives" button on our home page, or by going straight to www.stereophile.com/recordings/year/month/changecategory=month.

3 A full list of the nominees and the winners in each category can be found at http://grammy.naa.com/awards/grammys.

4 IWV reports Mr. Greene meeting our three typical college students who, he claimed, in two days had downloaded approximately 6000 music files "from easily accessible websites." It turns out that the villagers weren't all college students; they had actually taken three days, and the majority of the downloads were not downloads but peer-to-peer transfers of MP3s that could well have been legitimately ripped from a CD that had been purchased. (See Neil Strain's "Downloading Files and Storms" in the March 7 New York Times, http://www.nytimes.com/2002/03/07/arts/sound/17mp3.html?ei=106650053&en=40ce7e6e022955cb)

Stereophile, May 2002
We're not suggesting that the all-new Lexus ES 300 should hang in the Louvre. Or in any museum. But as an outstanding example of the automaker's craft, it's almost certainly worthy of attention.

Artful design is apparent in the ES 300's sleek new body, which has been thoroughly restyled with aerodynamics as well as aesthetics in mind.

Inside, you will discover a whole new world of luxury. The cabin itself is trimmed in fine leather,* of a quality normally reserved for automobiles costing thousands more. Run your hand along the sculpted contours of the driver's seat — the seams almost feel hand stitched. Rich, burled walnut wood accents adorn the dashboard, console and door panels.

Sophisticated new sound absorption technology makes this the quietest ES 300 cabin ever. Although, with an available Mark Levinson® Premium Sound System at hand, quiet moments may be all too rare.

In our effort to engage every one of your senses, Lexus has not overlooked the most important one: your sense of safety. A new three-stage driver's airbag and new full-length side-curtain airbags help to provide protection in the unforeseen event of a severe frontal or side-impact collision.

Admittedly, the new ES 300 isn't the kind of art you want to sit and admire. This car calls out to be driven. And with a 210-horsepower V6 engine teamed with its new, five-speed automatic transmission, it easily qualifies as performance art.

Perhaps the question we posed earlier is best answered with another question.

Where better to mull over what passes for art these days than behind the wheel of a car that has the power to move you?


*designated to inflate in a severe frontal collision. The side-impact and side-curtain airbags are designed to inflate in a severe side-impact collision. In all other accidents, the airbags will not inflate. Do not use rearward-facing child seats in any front passenger seat. The force of a deploying airbag SRS may cause serious injury. Please see your Owner's Manual for further instructions. For more information, call 800-USA-LEXUS (800-872-5398).
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High-end news, including dealer-promoted seminars, plus: Nakamichi Corporation Japan files for “civil rehabilitation” (Chapter 11); Michael Greene on downloading at the Grammys; two new small, but serious, labels; EBU to limit noise levels throughout Europe; Paul Messenger reports from Bristol Sound & Vision (the UK’s premier hi-fi show); the prototype of Nissian system (“theater-in-a-box”); Marantz merges with Denon; and Nupster wins a round in a “dirty” fight.

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After almost 40 years, Sam Tellig finally gets his McIntosh tube gear… it was worth the wait for the Sidney Gorderman/Roger Stockholm-designed C2200 preamplifier.

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Michael Fremer makes some recording/listening tests, is wowed by Analogue Productions’ new test pressings, and gives what one might argue is the definitive how-to on cartridge setup with Wally Tools.

47 The Fifth Element
John Marks fantasizes about six hi-fi systems fit for a supermodel (the flesh and blood type)—only a true audiophile would do that— if his suggestions are good enough for her they gotta be okay for the rest of us.

113 Aural Robert
Recreational drugs and Giant Sound? Robert Baird may really have lost his mind this time?

115 Record Reviews
May’s Recording of the Month is Neil Young’s Are You Passionate?, it seems he still is. In classical we have Ricardo Chailly’s new take on Bartók and Mahler, guitarist John Williams, and a short take on Donizetti’s Gli elisabeta in Siberia. In rock we have new efforts by Gen, Kevin Kinney, Glenn Tilbrook, Zero 7, and short takes with The Bottle Rockets and Jools Holland. In Jazz we have Bruce Barth and Lavern Butler, as well as Norah Jones. And in etc. George Winston’s Autumn: 20th Anniversary Edition and Nigeria 70: The Definitive Story of 1970’s Funky Lagos, featuring various artists, get a listen.

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Stereophile, May 2002
“... a serious high-end contender, and a formidable one ...”

- Robert Deutsch, Stereophile on the Studio/100
Letters

Cheatimg?
Editor:
Is nearfield listening cheating? It makes speakers, both inexpensive and expensive, sound so good.

Name withheld
Jodemi511@so.com

Very useful!
Editor:
Great website! Have read a lot of the reviews, and “Links 2 Die 4” is very useful for checking manufacturers’ sites.

Rinze Douma
rinzedouma@kxnet.com

On target
Editor:
In February’s “As We See It,” you mentioned the March 1977 review of the BBC LS3/5a speaker (www.stereophile.com/showarchives.cgi?361). Thanks so much for putting up past articles like this on the Web! And I don’t think making Stereophiles content available on your website prevents Web surfers from subscribing. The print edition is so much easier to read.

I believe your efforts are on target in complementing the print magazine without replacing it. Thanks.

William Foote
Beaterton, OR
wfoote@emailjust.com

Deep-six the SPARS?
Editor:
It’s time to deep-six the SPARS-code designations (DDD, AAD, etc.) in your CD reviews. We can assume nearly all classical is DDD, largely because of the convenience of digital editing and the reduced costs. (Hard-disk space is far cheaper than 2” analog tape.) But I’d guess somewhere between a third and a half of all major-label recordings are now digital. Most of the rest are hybrid projects. Here are some examples I’ve researched myself.

Mark Knopfler’s Sailing to Philadelphia is the most complex, but is certainly not atypical. Bass and drum tracks were recorded in Nashville to 16-track (not 24!) analog for low noise with maximum depth and impact. A submix of these tracks was transferred to 48-track digital tape for overdubs, and then some of these tracks were flown into a ProTools hard-disk system for more overdubs and editing before going back to the digital tape. Then, at AIR in London, the digital tape was synchronized to the original 16-track analog drum/bass tape (kept in storage during overdubs) for the final mix, done through an analog console to an Ampex ATR 1” stereo analog mastering recorder. So what’s the code for that? A/DDDA?

I also researched Dr. John’s superb Greale Moon. This one was recorded 100% analog in Louisiana and mixed, at New York’s Hit Factory, through an analog console to both 24-bit DAT and a 1/2” Studer analog machine. The final verdict is mastering titled to the DAT, though mixer Ray Bardani says it could have gone the other way if he’d had an Ampex ATR instead of the Studer. No digital editing allowed here.

“I didn’t let ProTools within 10,000 miles of this project,” Bardani told me.

Why? Well, listen to Paul Simon’s You’re the One. This is an example of a DDD project, recorded entirely on a Pro Tools hard-disk system and mixed on a Sony Oxford digital console. Ably mastered by Bob Ludwig, it is clean and clear but perhaps a bit on the closed-in, artificially intimate side.

Now, does it make a difference whether it’s analog or digital? Yes, it most certainly does, but the tradeoffs between analog and digital can be subtle, and there is certainly no widespread agreement on what is best where — aside from a view among many recording pros that the lower-resolution hard-disk editors (16-bit/48kHz) do introduce noticeable degradations.

Letters to the Editor should be sent as faxes or e-mails only (until further notice). Fax: (212) 886-2809. E-mail: Letters@Stereophile.com. Unless marked otherwise, all letters are assumed to be for possible publication. In the spirit of vigorous debate implied by the First Amendment, and unless we are requested not to, we publish correspondents’ e-mail addresses. Please note: We are unable to answer requests for information on specific products or systems. If you have problems with your subscription, call toll-free (800) 666-3746, or write to Stereophile, P.O. Box 53117, Boulder, CO 80322-3117.

In a nutshell, analog tape is migrating from a recording medium to a signal-processing method in production, but is still regarded by many as the highest resolution for vault masters. At least for now. It’s getting complicated, folks; too complicated for a simple three-letter code. Ditch it. But do include any specific recording information in the text — if you know it and it’s relevant.

Bruce J. Bogerson
wanworth@charter.net

Memo to audio stores
Editor:
In reference to John Marks’ “As We See It” in March, high-end audio companies need to take a good look in the mirror. Their products are grossly overpriced, which is why consumers such as myself will go to great lengths to find the best deal. Yes, the Internet has certainly made it possible to buy great name-brand gear for less than retail prices. Sorry, guys, but that is what competition is all about.

Memo to high-end stereo store owners: The next time I am in your store, please treat me with some respect — even though I haven’t pulled up in a BMW. There has to be a middle ground: I know I’m not going to get a product at the store’s cost, but I am not going to pay the suggested retail price either. Don’t look at me with disgust when I try to negotiate a better price. I am not a millionaire, and I do have a budget. Earn my business. I might not buy something now, but if you’re respectful, informative, and flexible, I will probably be back.

Finally, everyone should turn to p.126 of the March Stereophile, where a dealer is advertising huge savings on Krell and NHT. The advertisement also mentions five-year warranties, the products are factory-sealed, shippable anywhere (meaning you don’t have to pay sales tax), and the advertiser is also an authorized Krell dealer. How could my local Krell dealer compete with this? I guess the real question is, if you stand behind John Marks’ “As We See It,” why would you allow this advertisement to run in your magazine? The answer is the almighty dollar.

John McCarthy
krellhq@stereos.net

Times have changed
Editor:
The March issue’s “As We See It” presented me with an irresistible opportunity to get on my soapbox. Over the years, Stereophile has been on both sides of this
Good marketing?
Editor:
The March Stereophile was another good issue. More important, it finally forced an e-mail comment out of me. It all began with Barry Willis’ report, on p.29, that record sales are down and the industry is once again putting blame on Internet piracy. Unfortunately, this appears to be correct. But is it the major and/or only reason? Why, the answer to this question can be found on p.15 of the very same issue! In “Letters,” reader Darrin Fangman notes that there isn’t much quality new music on the radio.

Good new music is seldom heard, and when it is, no one bothers to tell you what you’ve just heard. If I hear something I like, I can’t buy it because I have no idea what it was I just listened to! Many times over more than two years, on a number of the adult contemporary stations in the Buffalo, New York area, I’ve heard an excellent ballad by an excellent female singer. I still don’t know the name of the song or the name of the singer.

Record industry: Great marketing! And you wonder why you can’t sell anything new?!

Jim Romanello
Grand Island, NY
jroman@instl.com

Listening pleasure
Editor:
In regard to Darrin Fangman’s letter in March (p.15), I understand his frustration with the current music industry, but his letter could just as easily have been written by a concerned music lover 40 years ago.

That Mr. Fangman cannot find new artists to his liking is not a surprise. The world of pop music generally caters to 12-25-year-olds, and people’s pop-music tastes tend to “freeze”. They remain true to the songs and artists they listened to as teenagers. But times change, and the music with it, so as we age we find less relevance in the new music. We may like selected artists, but we still want to say, “Hey, the music they played when I was a teen was the best!”

What generation has ever grown up without its parents calling the music they love “awful noise”? I wouldn’t be the least bit surprised if, in the year 2027, Stereophile publishes a letter that quotes Mr. Fangman’s letter almost word for word.

As for Mr. Fangman, I would like to suggest he log on to www.xpn.org. It’s the website for WXPN radio in Philadelphia, a nonprofit station that plays amazing artists like John Mayer and Dar Williams. Check out their Top 50 albums from 2001. I think you’ll find many hours of listening pleasure waiting to be had!

Jim Baun
King of Prussia, PA
jabunkh1@aol.com

A valid question
Editor:
Mr. Baun asks a very valid question above when he suggests my musical tastes have frozen. I have asked myself the same question many times. I recognize that I am aging and that most musical tastes are formed early in life. However, I believe there is more going on here than a simple case of changing times.

It all started when MTV became popular— which, by the way, happened when I was in high school. The video media created a new paradigm in which looks and marketing became more important than music. It created a new art form in which music is secondary to the performance. I cannot presume to state what art form is better than the other. My personal preference is for music, but I welcome debate on the subject.

I appreciate Mr. Baun’s suggestion for finding new music and I plan to try it.

Darrin Fangman
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Corrupt recordings?
Editor:
I just read Robert Baird’s “Aural Robert” column in February 2002 (p.117), in which Mr. Baird quotes engineer Jim Magens as saying “I want you surrounded by musicians.” I suppose this is hardly a surprising statement from the founder of a company called Surrounded by Entertainment. But it’s precisely the reason I am not a proponent of multichannel music reproduction. Maybe if you’re a musician and your reference is sitting between the sax player and the drums it might be a familiar and pleasing musical experience. For the rest of us, it’s more likely to be a distraction.

My reference for a talented recording engineer is one who captures the musical experience as faithfully as possible. Mr. Magens confirms my suspicion that many in the profession will not be able to resist the temptation to corrupt recordings with
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Harry Pearson
The Absolute Sound Issue 127.

Quote used with permission of The Absolute Sound.

“It was as though we had opened the flood gates of a dam, but instead of water, we realized music-unhindered and more of it.”

The Inner Ear Report
JAPAN
Barry Willis

One of the most revered names in the audio industry is seeking legal protection from its creditors. On November 19, 2001, Nakamichi Corporation Japan "applied to the court of Japan for a civil rehabilitation," in the words of a company press release on the development issued the next day. Following the announcement, Nakamichi stock closed at a share price of just 22 yen (approximately 17 cents); the Tokyo Stock Exchange announced that the company would be de-listed effective May 20.

"Nakamichi Corporation Japan has been affected by the deterioration in the business environment in Japan, exacerbated by the slowdown of the global economy and the continued deflationary trend," the announcement stated. The legal procedure is the Japanese equivalent of a Chapter 11 bankruptcy filing in the US—basically, debt relief while the company reorganizes," said John Paul Lizars, director of marketing for Nakamichi America Corporation, in a telephone conversation February 21. The bankruptcy will have "no effect" on the operation of the US company, Lizars emphasized.

Founded by Etsuro Nakamichi in 1948, the 54-year-old company made historic advances in the audio industry in the 1970s, including many refinements to the cassette tape technology—especially to tape heads and transport mechanisms—that elevated the format to true high-fidelity performance. Nakamichi also contributed to progress in CD technology in the 1980s and early 1990s, with innovative designs in changer mechanisms. The Nakamichi name has long been synonymous with superb engineering, excellent value, and reliable performance.

Chinese conglomerate
Grande Holdings will shepherd Nakamichi Japan through its reorganization.

Nakamichi Japan was primarily owned by the Nakamichi family until January 1997, when it was acquired by Grande Holdings, a Chinese conglomerate. Grande Holdings will shepherd Nakamichi Japan through its reorganization, according to spokeswoman Charlene Tan, and will continue to support the company's ongoing research and development efforts. The bankruptcy filing will help the company "erase mistakes made by previous managers," said a person close to the situation who asked not to be identified.

The reorganization is not expected to cause any glitches in production. "The manufacturing and distribution of Nakamichi products will not be affected by Nakamichi Corporation Japan's application for rehabilitation, and operations will carry on as usual worldwide," was the official spin. John Paul Lizars believes that, overall, the move will be a "positive one" that will brighten Nakamichi's future. The company introduced 16 new products in the past two years, he stated, and is now concentrating on expanding its dealer network.

US: LOS ANGELES
Barry Willis

The most entertaining part of the 44th Annual Grammy Awards on February 27 wasn't the "Lady Marmalade" production number that opened the show, or Alicia Keys' awkward tango later. It was Recording Academy president Michael Greene's rant about the criminal enterprise of electronic music swapping, a phenomenon that, he warned, threatens the music industry's very existence.

After cursory praise for this year's winner of Lifetime Achievement Awards, Greene segued into a riff so off the wall that it provoked hoots from the audience. Like George H.W. Bush demonstrating the nation's drug problem with a bag of crack found across the street from the White House, Greene trotted out three typical college students who, he claimed, had downloaded approximately 6000 songs in two days. "That's three kids, folks," he said. "Now multiply that

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 July 2002 issue is May 1. 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.

Please note that it is not appropriate for retailers to promote new product lines in "Calendar" unless this is associated with a seminar or similar event.

C A L I F O R N I A

- Wednesday–Thursday, April 24–25, the Hyatt Regency (Monterey): The Carmel Group will host its Seventh Annual Satellite Conference to examine the key elements of the rapidly growing DBS and newly developing Digital Satellite Radio markets—content, programming, partnerships, growth, financing, legal/regulatory, marketing, and tomorrow's pictures, sounds, and data. There will be keynote presentations from FCC commissioner Kevin Martin, former TCI chairman Leo Hindery, and David Moss, president and CEO of Canal+. Other featured speakers include Joe Clayton of Sirius and Hugh Panero of XM. For info, call (831) 643-2222 or e-mail info@carmelgroup.com.

G E O R G I A

- Sunday, May 19, 2002, 2–5pm: the Atlanta Audio Society is hosting a seminar featuring Edge Electronics. Co-designer Steven Norber will demonstrate and discuss the features of the battery operated...

Stereophile, May 2002
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It would have been the perfect moment for R.E.M. to have come onstage to sing “It’s the End of the World As We Know It.” As Greene pointed out, approximately 3.6 billion songs are downloaded by music fans worldwide each month. While there is no hard evidence that anyone who does so would have been willing to pay for the tunes they got for free, there is plenty of evidence that the music industry is in fairly serious trouble. Sales are falling for the second year in a row, and are down by 5–10% this year, depending on which source is quoted. Last year, for the first time, unit sales of blank recordable CDs reportedly outsold prerecorded music CDs. That trend will likely continue.

Greene’s heartfelt concern for the songwriters and musicians he and his fellow executives depend on may have sounded a bit disingenuous to the songwriters and musicians in the audience. The night before the awards gala, the Recording Artists Coalition had sponsored four benefit concerts to raise money to fight a 1987 amendment to California labor law that specifically exempts musicians from a general seven-year limit on labor contracts. The amendment had been strongly supported by the industry’s upper management.

Last year, only one of the industry’s Big Five labels, Universal Music, managed to report a profit. This year isn’t shaping up any better. “It’s grim, the most grim it’s been since I’ve been around the business,” Geffen Records founder and DreamWorks SKG partner David Geffen told Geoff Boucher of the Los Angeles Times. “It’s a reality few in the business are willing to acknowledge publicly.

During a news conference the day before the Grammys, the California Music Coalition—a industry organization believed by many to be a mouthpiece for the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA)—held a press conference to voice its opposition to the recording artists’ push for more equitable contracts. Miles Copeland, chairman of record label Ark 21, emphasized that the price for re-signing established acts would be paid by aspiring artists. “If the megastars succeed with this effort, I feel strongly that it would be at the expense of those artists who have not made it yet,” Copeland said.

Recordable CDs and downloadable tunes are only partly to blame for the industry’s malaise, however. A large part of the problem is top-heavy marketing and promotional departments with overblown expectations for marginal acts. In addition, the culture at big record labels has changed. Executives now expect instant results from performers who, in an earlier era, would be just beginning to mature as artists. Companies have little patience for nurturing artists, said Capitol Records president Andy Slater, who mentioned that the industry used to expect great things not from an artist’s first album, but from the third. “Can you remember the last artist we were patient enough to even have get to a third record?” Slater asked. “It becomes a one-act show.”

Slater’s comments are particularly ironic in light of a front-page story that appeared in the Wall Street Journal the day before the Grammys. In “Pop Singer Fails to Strike a Chord Despite the Millions Spent by MCA,” Jennifer Ordonez detailed how Universal Vivendi spent millions grooming a teenaged Irish singer for a career as a pop star. The label provided 18-year-old Carly Hennessey and her father with a car and a nice apartment in Marina Del Rey, plus a generous stipend for living expenses. MCA also piled on the vocal coaches, image consultants, songwriters, arrangers, producers, and promotional experts. Total investment, prior to the release of Ultimate High, Ms. Hennessey’s debut album: more than $2.2 million. Total sales of the CD, as of February 25, 2002: 378, or total retail sales worth about $4900.

The Hennessey debacle is perhaps more typical than most music executives want to admit. An industry rule of thumb has it that a typical big-label album must sell at least 500,000 copies to break even. Ordonez quotes SoundScan figures showing that, of the 6455 new albums distributed by major labels in the US last year, only 112 sold that many. In the music industry, perhaps more than in any other, the winners pay for the losers. That’s the real reason Greene and his colleagues want to keep their cash cows in the barn.

Nowhere in the discussions of the music industry’s malaise has there been any mention of the fault lying with management, as in the case of Carly Hennessey. Nor has there been any suggestion that executive compensation was a factor.

An industry rule of thumb has it that a typical big-label album must sell at least 500,000 copies to break even.

Signature preamplifier and NL-10 Laser power amplifier. Guests are welcome. The program will be held at the Community Clubhouse, located at 4522 Kingsgate Dr, Dunwoody. For more info visit wwwaind spring.com/~chucksasudio/index.htm, or contact Chuck Bruce at (770) 493-7105.

MICHIGAN
• Superior Sight & Sound (West Bloomfield) is pleased to announce that it has been appointed the Michigan dealer for Audio Aero products. Superior will be conducting a seminar to discuss the Audio Aero and Tetra loudspeaker lines in mid-June. Please call for details. All auditions are by appointment only. Call (248) 626-2780 or e-mail soundsuperior@hotmail.com.

NEW YORK
• The Audio Syndrome is proud to announce the election of our new president, Charles P. Rollo. Established in 1979, we meet 10 months out of the year on the last Friday of the month. We offer field trips, equipment demos, and, most of all, getting together to listen to the music. We are now providing a quarterly newsletter. Articles wanted. For more info, contact Charles at (718) 352-2178.

NORTH CAROLINA
• Hi Notes announces its grand reopening. Located in the Raleigh-Durham area, we are proud to represent Morrison Audio, Spectron, Speaker Art, Rega, Supra, Paul Barry, Wolcott, and other fine lines. For more info, visit www.hinotes.net or call (336) 322-4999.

Stereophile, May 2002
**Industry Update**

might be part of the problem. The music industry is one whose top tier is particularly heavy with big titles and big packages. "A decade ago, people thought if you paid CEOs $5 million or $10 million, you could get them to work hard and smart, but now it has to be hundreds of millions of dollars," Harvard Business School professor Joseph Badaracco recently told *Wall Street Journal* editor Carol Hymowitz. "It's a very rare company where pay falls at the top when performance falls."

**US: Your Nearest LP Store**

Jon Iverson

It's a brave group of souls who run today's audiophile music labels. Some business minds would likely deem it foolhardy to start a new specialty label these days, but sometimes one's passion for music overrides more rational decisions to try something a bit more secure (like perhaps an Internet company?).

Such is the case with startup Pure Audiophile, which released its first LPs in February. The two-disc set is called *Ballads: Remembering John Coltrane*, and features vocalist Karrin Allyson with James Williams on piano, John Patitucci on acoustic bass, Lewis Nash on drums, and Bob Berg, James Carter, and Steve Wilson taking turns on saxophone. Retail price is $49.95, plus $5 shipping if you order direct from the company (e-mail pure@kc.rr.com).

Pure Audiophile founder Dennis Cassidy notes that the original CD release of *Ballads* in May 2001, on the Concord Jazz label, earned two nominations for the Grammy Awards: Best Jazz Vocal Album and Best Engineered Album, Non-Classical. The discs are high-quality, 180gm blue vinyl, plated and pressed by RTI (Record Technology Inc.). The lathe used to cut the lacquers at half-speed was built by Stan Ricker (who also cut the masters) and Prof. Keith Johnson of Reference Recordings fame.

Cassidy says, "Karrin Allyson makes the world a better place to live. I know it sounds corny—and I think I owe Pepsi or Coke a penny for plagiarizing a stupid '70s commercial—but it's true. Karrin uses her voice as an instrument, not a weapon. It doesn't try to beat you into submission, it slowly seduces you. We considered including a corkscrew with the packaging."

Cassidy won't comment on Pure Audiophile's next release, except to say, "We have very diverse tastes and grew up in the late '60s and early '70s. The common thread will be performance quality, and there will be some very pleasant surprises. We ask our customers to be patient—expect a new release about every six months. Also expect it to be worth the wait. And please feel free to send suggestions and opinions, for we, like *Stereophile* readers, are trying to be good listeners."

**US: Massachusetts**

Barry Willis

Brannon Marsalis is unhappy with the music industry. Unlike many of his colleagues, he intends to do something about it.

The proposed 83dB noise-level limitation would make it impossible to legally play most classical warhorse compositions.

In mid-February, the jazz saxophonist and music educator announced his participation in the launch of a new independent record label, Marsalis Music. Based in Cambridge, Massachusetts, the new label is a joint venture with his father, pianist Ellis Marsalis. The label's focus will be on creating music of substance and lasting value rather than forgettable pop hits, the younger Marsalis stated. "The consolidation of the record industry into major conglomerates has turned the business into a mega-hit pop music machine with a very short-term focus," he explained. "Artists who want to be musicians, not marketing creations, have very few places to record anymore. We formed Marsalis Music to provide a real alternative."

The label will also leverage Marsalis' teaching experience (he has taught music at the University of New Orleans, Michigan State University, and San Francisco State University) with a "Marsalis Jam" program that will bring musicians and music lovers together on college campuses. The label's educational program will be directed by *Boston Globe* jazz critic Bob Blumenthal, who resigned his position with the newspaper on March 1. "We recognize the need to extend these efforts to the community level, where people first learn to play music and develop their musical tastes, and to the broader arena of the arts," Blumenthal stated.

The Marsalis family hopes to nurture creative talent at all levels. "We guarantee that we will give artists the freedom to make great music," Branford asserted. One of the first releases on the new label will be *Footsteps of Our Fathers*, his tribute to legendary artists John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, Sonny Rollins, and the Modern Jazz Quartet. It should appear late this summer, and, like other Marsalis Music releases, will be distributed by Boston-based Rounder Records.

**United Kingdom**

Barry Willis

Should performing arts be limited by health or environmental concerns? The Association of British Orchestras (ABO) thinks not, according to a *BBC News* item in February.

Members of the association are fighting to exempt orchestral music from a European Union directive that would institute strict limits on noise in the workplace. The EU hopes to impose an 83dB noise-level limitation throughout Europe—even if the workplace is a concert hall. A noise level that low would make it impossible to legally play most classical warhorse compositions, ABO director Libby MacNamara told *BBC News Online*: "It will stop us playing any loud music whatsoever, affecting almost all of the pieces played by orchestras." Following the letter of the law would have a "devastating impact" on the live music industry, she stated.

The ABO and similar organizations throughout Europe have petitioned the EU to make commissioners aware of the logical outcome of the directive. "We have to be aware that there are dangers and we must raise awareness," MacNamara said. "But we are working to try and remedy this in ways that are practical for the musicians." Among the solutions offered: the use of baffles between instruments and musicians; and the use of earplugs, which, some musicians have complained, could make it impossible for them to hear themselves play.

The law sounds like an ill-conceived joke, but many orchestral musicians may not be aware that they have a dangerous occupation. Most at risk are those sitting directly in front of the brass section, where sound-pressure levels (SPLs) during crescendos can approach 130dB—similar to the level of a jet engine—and damage the hearing. The *BBC News* item didn't note whether the sound levels under discussion are peak or average, which can have vastly different long-
In my office, a simple mistake can cost me plenty — in both time and money. With all the equipment I’ve got, I can’t waste time searching for the right cable or the last master tape.

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- Security tape: Leaves evidence of tampering if the label is removed
tern effects on hearing. High average levels — especially with substantial high-frequency content — are the more damaging.

The musicians also may not be aware of advances in hearing protection made in recent years as a result of widespread recognition of hearing damage in career rock performers. Some high-quality earplugs now commonly worn by rockers can lower SPLs by 10-20dB uniformly across the audio spectrum without the characteristic top-end rolloff of cheap plugs, thereby allowing musicians to hear high-frequency details without the risk of auditory overload. Organizations like Hearing Education and Awareness for Rockers (HEAR), which always have tables at Audio Engineering Society and National Association of Recording Merchandisers conventions, publish informative materials on music and hearing damage. HEAR’s website (www.hearnet.com) has links to makers of hearing protectors.

UNITED KINGDOM
Paul Messenger
Bristol Sound & Vision, now in its 15th year, is probably the UK’s premier hi-fi show. Jointly organized by specialist dealer chains Audio T and Audio Excellence, the event goes from strength to strength, and is equally popular with the trade and the public.

Highlights among the new products exhibited at the 2002 show in February ranged from Meridian’s technically sublime 800-series Version 3 to Soundpax’s appealingly ludicrous, NXT-style cardboard speakers, and hit all points in-between with a bewildering variety of styles and prices representing hi-fi and A/V today.

But Sound & Vision is still very much a hi-fi show — there was no sign of any loss of interest in two-channel stereo. Among the many new stereo products was Naim’s eagerly awaited NAC552 (£11,750), the preamp partner to the similarly priced NAP500 power amp, featuring a split-rail power supply to reduce noise and Naim’s new “triplych” styling. The outboard power supply incorporates an 800VA transformer, large reservoir capacitors, and no fewer than 14 power regulators.

Creek followed up the introduction of its CD53 CD player with other components that also hew to balanced-input/output protocols: a prototype of the neat, silver-fronted P53 preamp, and the A53 power amp and T53 tuner, all scheduled for introduction in 2002. Exposure has tidied up its upmarket range; the XXII CD player, XXIII preamp, XXVIII power amp, and XXVI phono stage all feature silver finishes as an alternative to black, and improved grounding and components. Meridian might be best known for its surround-sound technology, but the company’s new “entry-level” 507 CD player and 559 300Wpc stereo power amplifier reaffirm the company’s continuing commitment to two-channel.

Combining tube and solid-state technology seems to be catching on, and Morgan Audio is doing just that to deliver MOSFET power from its pretty, silver-finished, relatively upmarket Deva 500 components (£2000 each). Tube Technology is also pursuing the hybrid approach; its Fusion Platinum series runs alongside the company’s all-tube products and incorporates some original digital techniques. The Fusion 64 CD player, for example, uses an EPROM-programmed, 64-bit pulse array DAC followed by a tube output stage.

There were plenty of pure tube devices, too; a pre-/power combo from German firm Steinhart Audio particularly tickled my ears. With a generous power rating of 100Wpc, it apparently uses relatively low-impedance 6P45C Russian output tubes; the output transformer ratio is just 4:1.

Two-channel stereo might still be healthy, but many companies now depend on A/V and multichannel to survive, and these sectors are now enjoying the most rapid evolution and innovation. New high-end A/V preamp-processors, for example, nearly always show evidence of some new thinking. I’ve mentioned the Meridian 861 v3 and the Naim AV2 in recent months, but Chord’s still-to-be-launched DSP 8000 must be the most elegant and attractive example of the genre I’ve yet seen. It has 24-bit/96kHz digital architecture, balanced outputs, a slinky, shiny LCD-equipped remote control, and is certified for THX Ultra2.

TAG McLaren Audio is taking upgradeability to its logical conclusion by recycling any traded-in AV32R surround-sound A/V preamp-processor into the new, much more advanced AV192R (more details on this intriguing initiative next month). The AV192R differs from the norm in placing as much emphasis on advanced video features as on audio.
Another very interesting device is Pioneer's VSA-AX10, an all-singing, all-dancing A/V integrated amplifier designed by Pioneer UK's John Banford and engineers at George Martin's AIR Studios in London. This massive, 170W x 7, 65-lb heavyweight doesn't come cheap, but it's selling much more strongly in Japan than anyone at Pioneer expected.

Flat plasma displays are now de rigueur for A/V demonstrations—they take up less than half the space of a rear-projector, don't require the audience to grope in the dark (as with a front-projector), and their elegance provides the perfect accompaniment for the cute "designer" 5.1-channel speaker systems that continue to proliferate. As a two-channel enthusiast, I'm a bit stuffy about these subwoofer-satellite packages. But the reality is that they're probably half-decent systems that wind up in places that otherwise wouldn't have such good sound.

Acoustic Energy has finally got the 5.1-channel version of its Aego system together, just as newcomer Klegg Audio is coming to market with an egg-shaped and -sized rival. Jamo's clever and flexible package has satellites that look like notebooks or diaries, while B&W's versatile and shiny new VM1 Leisure Monitor manages to look both modern and retro at the same time. Celestion builds the alloy enclosure of one of its new SoundStyle satellites on a spine of 12mm-thick glass, which promises a fine combination of elegance and mechanical integrity.

Among stereo loudspeakers, Mission is replacing its midpriced 77 series with the new M50 series, and showing its mastery of craftsmanship yet again in the series' lovely, curvaceous moldings. The M50s' main driver cones are made of Paradigm, a new composite material that combines pulp and aramid fibers in a lacquer sandwich.

Quad has gone to Wharfedale's factory in China to create its new 10-liter 11L loudspeaker, more conventional than the Mission but equally gorgeous in glossy, real wood, and at a sharply competitive price. It's hard to believe that PMC has managed to fit a fourfold transmission line into its tiny new DB1 — and even harder to believe the quantity and quality of bass that this miniature was producing.

Another miniature, ProAc's classic Tablette, has been revived and renamed the Reference Eight, while a new bass/mid driver turns ProAc Response L5 into a Response D15, with "extra muscularity and a less squidy bass," as designer Smart Tyler put it.

Cyrus' dynamic/NXT hybrid speaker has evolved into the Icon X4, the "X4" indicating that the mid/top NXT panel section is now driven by four actuators. Naim's new SL2 succeeds its long-lived SBL, preserving core elements of the floorstanding 8" two-way in a new, elegantly curved enclosure that's much easier and more foolproof to install.

One good thing about Bristol is hanging out and meeting people in the trade. Townshend Audio wasn't formally exhibiting, but I keep hearing good reports about Max Townshend's add-on ribbon super tweeter, which is claimed to give good linearity up to 100kHz. Then there was German Kabelmeister Hans Strasser, of HMS Elektronik, who talked more sense about cable technology than I've heard in many a year. But I won't get to try his stuff until a UK distributor is found.

Finally, the SoundpaX speaker, a 700mm-high cardboard tetrahedron by DS Smith Packaging, is one of the better hi-fi jokes in years (if one likely to pall quickly with extended listening). That it works at all is impressive enough for many to shell out £25/pair ($38) for a great conversation piece whimsically decorated with pictures of woofer, tweeters, and ports.

US: CALIFORNIA
Barry Willis
An intriguing loudspeaker technology that generates believable surround effects from only two small enclosures will be arriving at stores later this year, according to a February 24 announcement from Nirotek America Corporation. Prototypes of the Niroson system, jointly developed by Martin Logan of Lawrence, Kansas, and Japan's Mechanical Research Corporation, were demonstrated at the Specialty Audio exhibit at the Alexis Park complex during the 2002 Consumer Electronics Show. Jon Ivenson and I were impressed by the system's ability to create a wide, deep soundfield using only one small speaker enclosure for the front channels, a similar one for the rear, and a compact powered subwoofer on the floor. The system's designers were able to generate big-speaker performance through clever use of digital signal processing and careful placement of drivers in the enclosures.

As all consumer-electronics salespeople are aware, consumers' biggest objection to multichannel sound isn't the performance, but the array of loudspeakers needed to create it. Nirotek estimates that fewer than 10% of multichannel-capable DVD players are actually used for multichannel playback; almost all are used in two-channel mode. Nirotek's Niroson products "will establish new standards.
Reduction to the essentials: The Karat series from Canton combines pure design with pure listening pleasure. State-of-the-art technology in simple yet elegant furniture quality cabinets represents the Canton ideal of loudspeakers. Information about the Karat series as well as the complete line of Canton loudspeakers is available in our new "Living HiFi" Magazine. To receive a free copy, please contact Canton, 1723 Adams Street NE, Minneapolis, MN 55413, call 612-706-9250, or visit www.cantonusa.com.
for increasingly popular theater-in-a-box systems” and “dramatically expand the possibilities for installing home theater,” the announcement stated.

The technology is now being licensed for production; the first Niroson systems will reach the US sometime in the fourth quarter of 2002. The official licensing agency is Nirotek USA, based in Lawndale, California.

“Niroson” and “Nirotek” are derived from the name of Niro Nakamichi, scion of the Nakamichi family and principal partner in Mechanical Research Corp. But fear not, Niro Nakamichi ventures, Nirotek America Corporation and MRC, won’t be affected by the Nakamichi Corporation Japan bankruptcy since they have no relationship to that company.

EUROPE/US
Jon Iveson

Just because you’re paranoid doesn’t mean they’re not out to get you. This is especially true for music lovers who have begun to fear that record companies purposely corrupt the data on audio CDs in an effort to restrict their use as a source for copies or MP3 files.

Unfortunately, those fears are coming true: Midbar, the developer of Cactus Data Shield digital-music-use restriction technology, announced in February that more than 10 million Cactus Data Shield “copy controlled and revenue generating CDs” had been released in the US and Europe by major labels to date.

Midbar reported that these 10 million discs (Compact Disc patent holder Philips says they can’t legally be called “CDs”) include releases protected by the recently unveiled CDS-200.0.4 version, which, the company claims, addresses known issues of playability. Restricted-use discs have been found to be incompatible with many DVD, computer, and game CD players as well as certain CD players, especially portable models.

Midbar’s Noam Zur puts a very positive spin on the problems encountered by his company over the last several months, stating, “It’s been an exciting year, packed with great achievements as well as useful learning experiences. Midbar’s CDS system continues to reign as the most effective copy control technology on the market. Topping the 10 million mark with a revenue-generating product is direct testament to this.

We will continue to upgrade this already proven technology as we embark on the path to the next milestone.”

Zur represented the copy control industry at the New Technology panel at Midem (International Record, Music Publishing and Live Music market) 2002, held on January 23 in Cannes, France. “I explained the basic premise behind copy control technology and clarified the common misconceptions. I believe that the industry is likely to move forward more easily should our collective purpose be better understood.”

NETHERLANDS/JAPAN
Peter van Willenswaard

A year ago, Marantz gained full command over its own operations when Philips reduced its participation in the company from 50.5% to 49% by selling 1.5% of the shares to Marantz Japan Inc. (MJI).

The Judge in the Napster case has described all the participants in the trial as “dirty”…There may, in fact, be no good guys in this story.

Recently, a new development took place. In a joint communiqué issued March 7, MJI and its largest shareholder, Royal Philips Electronics, and Denon Ltd. and its largest (98%) shareholder, Ripplewood Holdings LLC, announced the establishment of D&M Holdings, Inc. D&M will be a joint holding company created to merge the operations of Marantz and Denon. The transaction is expected to be effective as of May 2002. The research and development, production and purchasing, and financial-control activities of the two companies are to be combined as soon as possible. The Denon and Marantz brand names will be maintained, as will their respective sales, marketing, and distribution operations.

Marantz and Denon will set up D&M Holdings with its head office in Sagamihara City, Japan. Tatsuwo Kabumoto, the current chairman, representative director, and CEO of Marantz, will become president and CEO of D&M Holdings.

The ownership stake of Marantz and Denon shareholders in D&M Holdings will be 30% and 70%, respectively; Philips and Ripplewood will have respective stakes of 14.7% and 68.6% in D&M Holdings.

US: CALIFORNIA
Barry Willis

Napster may have finally won a round in court. The Federal District judge in the music industry’s ongoing case against the file-sharing service has allowed for the possibility that the plaintiffs may have abused their own copyright privileges in the launch of their online music services, MusicNet and pressplay.

On February 22, Judge Marilyn Patel of Federal District Court in Northern California wrote that she “found reason for concern” that the industry’s five major labels had colluded to create a virtual monopoly of the burgeoning online music business. “If Napster is correct, these plaintiffs are attempting the near monopolization of the digital distribution market,” Patel determined. Napster’s attorneys have argued that the music industry has acted cohesively to prevent alternate methods of distribution.

Many would-be online music services have complained that the industry makes licensing deals impossible. In October, the US Justice Department began its own investigation into potential antitrust violations by the music industry in dealing with the digital market.

Patel agreed that the court should allow evidence that could compromise the labels’ credibility and possibly undermine their lawsuit against Napster. The record companies insist that they have not colluded, despite the fact that their recently launched online services are joint ventures—pressplay is backed by Sony Music and Vivendi Universal, and MusicNet is backed by EMI, BMG, and AOL Time Warner, parent company of Warner Music Group. “The courts are relying entirely on a record submitted by Napster, which has neither been tested nor refuted by record companies,” said Matt Oppenheim, senior vice president and general counsel for the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA).

Napster has also questioned whether the record labels actually own all the copyrights to all the songs they claim to own. Although Judge Patel expressed doubts that the labels would have signed contracts that did not provide them with legal ownership of the music, she said that Napster’s attorney could seek documentation from them to prove that they do have such rights. The discovery process could add months to an already overly long piece of litigation. Napster has been shut down for many months as a result of an injunction obtained by its opponents. Judge Patel has described all the participants in the trial as “dirty.” There may, in fact, be no good guys in this story.

Stereophile, May 2002
"A level of refinement rare in something so inexpensive."

When you've already set the standard for high-end performance in a budget-priced speaker [see the Aegis One review in the May 2000 issue of Stereophile] what could you possibly do for an encore?

Enter the Aegis Evo One! [According to the folks at Acoustic Energy "Evo" is short for evolutionary.]

Priced at $349 a pair, the new Aegis Evo One builds upon the strengths of the original model, improving the drive units, cabinet, and adding bi-wire & bi-amp capabilities. According to the April 2002 issue of the British magazine Hi-Fi Choice:

"The result is a big and very solid sound, with a laid-back balance, low coloration, a wide dynamic range and an exceptional freedom from boxiness...it stands comfortably ahead of the pack in stereo imaging precision and low midband coloration, offering a level of refinement rare in something so inexpensive."

Sound: ****** Value: ******

"The ultimate sub $3500 solution." If the new Acoustic Energy EVO range of speakers are evolutionary, we call their Aesprit series revolutionary. At about twice the price of Aegis, Aesprit pushes the envelope, offering real wood finishes and a significant step-up in performance. Here's what the folks at Home Entertainment had to say about a complete Aesprit surround package in the January 2002 issue:

"...this is a great sounding system with all kinds of film making, whether it be the dynamics of a high-octane action movie or the more dulcet tones of a dramatic opus... The Aesprit package... is even better with music. If you're looking for a system for DVDs and CDs, this could be the ultimate sub [$3500] solution."

Movies: ***** Music: *****

With the new Aegis and Aesprit already available, you might well ask, "What's next from AE?" As this goes to press, the new Aego 5 surround system [$1199 complete with amplification and a DD/IDTS processor] is already in a sea freight container half way to the U.S. Here's what The Absolute Sound had to say about the Aego 5's two-channel cousin, the Aego 2 in the February/March 2002 issue:

"This modest system with immodest sound is a legitimate high-end product in that it remains faithful to the absolute sound...it doesn't do only the imaging thing. It's even better at tonality. If fact, the most striking characteristic of the Aego 2 is its rendition of instrumental timbres. It sculpts the sound of a human voice with realism... We're still waiting for the next level [the Aego5] to arrive. But I'm thinking Whoa! ... it should be a screamer."

For more information on Acoustic Energy and a list of dealers near you, visit www.audiophilesystems.com or call 1-888-272-2658.
Julian J. Holm. Fish story. It's better to everyone making bread, tube dough. Bought gear, leluiah, then, and not MC275 amp. Corderman, nal staple. Stereophile, 1999, by I. Now, I have the first MC2000 customer of McIntosh. Reissue was for the company's 50th anniversary, in 1999. McIntosh commissioned Sidney Corderman (who engineered the original and reissue of the MC275) to design the MC2000 Commemorative power amp. The amp was about a year late and went for $15,000. The MC2102 power amp followed, for a mere $6000 — also designed by Mr. Corderman.

For the McIntosh C2200, Sidney Corderman engineered the tube circuits and Roger Stockholm worked on the rest. Hence the $4500 C2200, meant to be matched with the MC2102 or the MC2000. (For MC2000 owners, a special edition of the C2200, with gold-plated endcaps and knobs, is available.)

"The C2200 is currently our best-selling preamp," Larry Fish told me. "You've met Larry before. He's McIntosh's vice president of product planning."

"Selling more briskly than solid-state, eh?"

I had to rub it in. Larry is so solidly solid-state.

"We can't make them fast enough. We're back-ordered."

I had a very hearty laugh.

"I knew you'd find that amusing," Larry said.

"Almost as amusing as the fact that Roger Stockholm was project engineer for the C2200." If anything, Roger is even more solidly solid-state than Larry. Or was.

Roger's official title is senior electronic design engineer. He joined McIntosh 31 years ago, just as the last of the original C22s was going out of production. Naturally, he started designing solid-state products. Roger has been project engineer for almost every McIntosh preamp since the C32, in the late 1970s. Until the C2200, he'd never touched tubes.

The company teamed Roger up with the legendary Sidney Corderman, Mac's Mr. Tube. For the C2200, Sidney engineered the tube circuits and Roger worked on the rest.

"It was a collaborative effort," Roger told me, involving Larry Fish and Chris Bonba, McIntosh's senior software engineer.

"Has Sidney turned you into a tube believer?" I asked Roger.

"I've come around a bit," he admitted. Hesitantly.

"If I had predicted five years ago that you, Jolly Roger, would be project engineer for a new McIntosh tube amp for the 21st century, what would you have said?"

"I'd have said you were crazy."

I first met Roger three years ago, when he and Larry delivered a McIntosh C42 preamp for me to audition with the MC2000. Poor Roger. He was so proud of his preamp, which was quite nice and remains in production, but all I had eyes for was the tube amp. (By the way, Roger and Larry are new hires compared to Sidney, who has been with McIntosh Laboratory since its founding, in 1949.)

The C2200 retails for $4500, and I find it hard to imagine that any McIntosh enthusiast wouldn't want to own one — even fans of Mac's solid-state amps. Tubes aren't as troublesome as they're sometimes made out to be — especially the small ones typically used in preamps. (The C2200 uses four 12AX7 and four 12AT7 tubes.) Such tubes can last for a decade or more, and are easy and inexpensive to replace. They don't give off anywhere near the heat of, say, a KT88 or 6550 output tube.
The C2200's front panel measures 17" wide by 7 3/8" high, and the preamp is 14" deep and weighs 26.75 lbs. The high-level (or line-level) circuitry uses two 12AX7A tubes and two 12AT7A tubes. Ditto for the moving-magnet phono stage: two 12AX7As, two 12AT7As. The phono tubes come on only when you select the phono input. If you don’t use the phono input, you won’t be burning tubes for naught.

Because the C2200 is a Mac product, there’s every user-friendly feature you could dream of, as well as features you couldn’t dream of but might actually use. The MM phono stage is standard—you don’t pay extra. There’s a Mono switch. There are Bass and Treble tone controls.

I asked Roger and Larry who’s buying the C2200.

Not just tube-amp customers, it turns out, but owners of Mac solid-state amps, too. Roger Stockholm, erstwhile solid-state stalwart, explained:

“You can get your tube sound in the preamp and then you can have bang for the buck with a solid-state power amp.”

“Tube sound? So there is a tube sound?”

“Larry warned me I was in for a terrible ribbing.”

Roger has come around...a little.

The C2200 has a busy rear panel. There are six pair of outputs—three balanced, three unbalanced. Mac knows many of its customers are into multiroom installations, so the C2200 can be configured to control a second power amp in a nearby room. The extra outputs might be useful for devices such as powered subwoofers, too. You won’t go wanting.

There are four pairs of balanced (XLR) line-level inputs and six unbalanced (RCA) line-level inputs. And if you reconfigure the phono stage to be line-level, you’ve got seven available RCA line-level inputs.

The C2200 is not fully balanced from input to output. Not that this matters much, because the preamp is so quiet. Larry recommends using balanced connectors with long cable runs — say, from your preamp to power amp. Any noise the cables will pick up will be nixed by common-mode rejection.

The phono input can be reconfigured by the user to serve as an additional line-level input. There’s a headphone jack, using an ICE buffer that lowers the high impedance of the line-stage tubes. There’s full remote control. And you can trim the inputs so the line levels match in loudness.

At first glance, a visiting manufacturer of tube gear mistook the C2200 for a power amp. That’s easy to do — there are twin McIntosh “blue-eye” power-level meters. The C2200 sports the familiar Mac glass faceplate. Labels for the various control functions are illuminated in white on black. A digital readout displays the input selected. Few preamps look so sexy in the dark.

At first glance, a visiting manufacturer mistook the C2200 for a power amp.

But...power-level meters?

Customers want them, said Larry Fish. “We made them useful,” he hastened to add. “The meters are calibrated so that ‘0’ represents full output at 2.5V. If your power amp’s input sensitivity is 2.5V, then a ‘0’ reading on the preamp’s meters will represent the amplifier’s maximum rated power.”

“But do you really need the meters?”

“Well, on some McIntosh amps you don’t have meters. Your MC275, for instance, I can see other uses for the meters — to check the channel separation and channel balance of your phono cartridge, for instance. You can dim the meter lights or turn them off completely, if you like. You can also dim the digital display.

I installed the C2200 in my main system, whose AR ES-1 turntable with SME309 tonearm and Shure Ultra 500 moving-magnet cartridge were perfect for the C2200’s MM phono stage. For digital, I used a Rega Jupiter CD player as transport with the Musical Fidelity A3+ upsampling DAC. Speakers throughout my listening were my reference Quad ESL-989 electrostatics.

I usually have trouble writing about preamps. Some designs—especially less expensive ones— have a tendency to intrude. If they’re tube, they might be noisy. If they’re transistor, they might impart a metallic haze. I’ve been big on passive preamps, especially for audiophiles on a tight budget.

Surprise, surprise — the C2200 was so quiet I thought I was listening to my Purest Sound Systems 500 dual-monaural passive unit. I heard no noise at all through the line-level inputs, even with the volume cranked way up. (Of course, I heard some noise when I selected the phono input, but not much.)

Larry explained the C2200’s silence: It’s the microprocessor-controlled post-attenuator stage. He believes that the C2200 is the only tube preamp that has one.

“Under normal listening levels, the C2200 is essentially a straight wire. The post-attenuator is working full blast and you’re listening at 12dB down from full gain. If you need more gain to blast the house apart, then turn up the volume and the post-attenuator starts being gradually removed. This allows you to get high volume out of the preamplifier, if you need it, but low noise under normal listening conditions. By reducing gain, the post-attenuator reduces noise. That’s what makes the C2200 so quiet.”

Larry paused.

“You’re an old-timer, Sam…”

“Gee, thanks.”

“Well, you’re probably old enough to remember preamps that had output attenuators. There were individual volume controls for left and right channels and then a master volume control. The master control set the overall gain of the preamp, and it was used to add gain only if necessary. In the C2200, a microprocessor does this automatically and you don’t have to think about it. As you turn down the volume control, the microprocessor reduces gain.”

The digital display reads from 0 to 100, but there are actually 214 volume-control steps. “You can set the volume in half-db steps.” From your easy chair, of course. If you turn the volume up or down very slightly, it might not show on the display.

“A lot of thought went into the volume control,” said Roger. “We used to have a certain taper that we used for our mechanical volume controls. As we introduced electronic volume controls, we made the action linear through a long range. But there wasn’t much action at the lower end. Linear all the way through wasn’t really desirable, so we changed the way it works. That’s the beauty of software: we build in the taper, or curve. The C2200 basically duplicates the old mechanical volume control.”

“That’s right,” added Larry. “The volume-control curve was developed over the years to come on very quickly. What we did was replicate the mechanical action with software so that the same rotation gives you the same result. For instance, if you go to the three o’clock position on the C2200’s front panel, the volume will be as loud as it would with a mechanical control.”
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“The advantage of the software is we are able to maintain the half-dB resolution,” Roger pointed out. “This would be impossible with a mechanical control.”

As I said, the C2200 sounded quiet — almost as if it weren’t there. Compared to my Puresst 500 passive preamp, the C2200 imparted more ‘oomph,’ more body to the sound. Yet at no time did the Mac seem to color the sound — to roll off the highs, for instance, or fatten the bass. It did not add extra warmth. The C2200 seemed neutral without being clinical. Another thing: the C2200 did not impart any tube glare, a problem with some tube preamps I’ve heard over the years. It did not overly brighten the sound.

I went back to the Puresst 500, using the Rega Jupiter CD player into the Musical Fidelity A34 DAC. I felt that the C2200 enhanced the presentation, giving the sound more body, as I said, and taking off some of the otherwise transitory edge. In a well-designed preamp, tubes tend to be harmonically restorative.

Roger had said that I could get my tube sound from the C2200 and bang for my buck from solid-state. That’s true to some extent, and maybe more so with McIntosh gear than with other brands. Mac solid-state power amps, after all, have transformer-coupled output stages; they’re built like tube amps.

There was certainly no penalty in terms of noise.

“Our goal was to make a tube preamp and have it be as good as solid-state,” Roger told me. What’s actually happened, I think, is that McIntosh has made a tube preamp that exceeds what, for $4500, would have been possible in a solid-state design. But I couldn’t get Roger or Larry to admit that.

“In the past,” said Roger, “there have been problems with a tube preamp hooked up to a transistor power amp. You had to turn on your preamp, wait for it to warm up, and then turn on your transistor amplifier. Your amplifier was ready to go before your preamp was.”

In the C2200, a delay circuit mutes the preamp for about 30 seconds, during which “tube warmup” appears reassuringly in the digital display.

Larry Fish: “Electromagnetic switching has a good deal to do with the fact there are no clicks and pops. All switching capabilities of the preamplifier are electromagnetic. This is far more reliable than the usual mechanical switching because the switches themselves are in an inert atmosphere.”

“Almost like a vacuum tube?”

“Not quite. The switches are in a glass chamber filled with nitrogen. Wires are suspended in the chamber, and the electromagnetic field brings the two wires together for contact.”

“Electromagnetic switching is super-reliable,” Roger added, noting that if a switch is going to fail, it usually does so right away — on the bench, at the factory, before it gets out into the field. McIntosh pioneered the use of electromagnetic switching nearly 20 years ago, Larry told me.

The C2200’s line-stage performance was superb. I couldn’t ask for more. But what of the phono stage?

Less than stellar. Though it’s nice to know it’s there, many C2200 owners will have no need of a phono stage; it probably made no sense for McIntosh to pull out all the stops and provide exceptional phono performance. As it was, I thought the C2200’s phono performance was very good — quite acceptable, in fact. Just not stellar.

I’ll put things in perspective: You could pay $4500 for a line-level preamp, not get any phono stage at all, and have nowhere near the convenience features offered by the McIntosh C2200. You could pay $4500 or more for a phono stage alone. What the C2200 offers for “free” is not at all bad.

But, using my Shure Ultra 500 in the SME 309 arm on an AR ES-1 turntable, I preferred the sound of my long-term reference, the AcousTech PH-1 phono stage, available for $1200 directly from Acoustic Sounds. I heard tighter, better-defined bass. The C2200’s phono stage sounded slightly muddy by comparison. I heard better definition and detail overall, a more natural, more spacious presentation of, er, space. More “there” there, in other words.

A lot might depend on your phono needs. If LPs are a secondary, occasional source, then the C2200’s phono stage might be all you need. The sound was full-bodied and dynamic. But compared with the AcousTech, the C2200’s
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onboard phono stage seemed to accentuate surface noise. The grooves seemed quieter with the AcousTech.

Remember, if you don't use the C2200's phono stage, the four tubes in the phono section won't turn on. And if you reconfigure the phono section as an additional line-level input, they'll never turn on. You could easily add an onboard phono preamp and let the onboard phono section lie dormant.

The McIntosh C2200 was one of the finest line-stage preamps I have ever used and the most user-friendly in terms of features.

The C2200's phono stage provides 40dB of gain. The phono sensitivity is given as 4.4mV for 2.5V output at 1kHz. In addition to moving-magnet cartridges, you can probably use most medium- to high-output moving-coils. Using the additional gain available from the line stage, you might even get by with a low-output (maybe below 1mV) MC. But you'd probably have to put up with some noise. Of course, you could always use a step-up transformer.

Meanwhile, I'm not sure I ever heard the onboard AcousTech phono stage sound better, which is a tribute to the C2200's line-stage quality.

I found using this preamplifier a pure pleasure. I welcomed the Bass and Treble controls, which offer 12dB of boost or cut at 30Hz and 10kHz, respectively. The tone controls are effectively out of the circuit at the center detente position. There's also a Tone Bypass button. There's a practical reason for this switch, says Larry. "You can put in some bass boost, for instance, and A/B back and forth between Tone Bypass to see if the boost is what you want."

There's also a feature that, as far as I know, is unique to McIntosh: A programmable feature called Autotone can memorize whether you want the tone controls on or off for each output. Autotone even remembers the bass and treble settings for the particular input. Need some treble cut with CDs or DVDs? Some bass cut with LPs? No problem. I'm not sure I'd ever use Autotone, but who knows?

I probably wouldn't use Pass Through, either, but I can imagine some audiophiles doing so—especially those who want to enjoy their audiophile two-channel purity and their surround-sound house theater, too. You engage Pass Through by programming this mode as one of your inputs. The C2200 then passes the left and right channels to your left and right front speakers. In other words, your surround-sound processor will control volume, source selection, etc.

Other features include the ability to drive multiple power amplifiers. You can have the C2200 control the main power amp in your listening room, for instance, and a separate amp in a room nearby, as explained in the owner's manual (downloadable as a pdf file from www.mcintoshlabs.com). Better yet, have your dealer demonstrate.

I loved many of the C2200's convenience features. When you run a power-control cable from the C2200 to your Mac power amp, you can have the preamp turn the power amp on and off. Nice for lazy folks like me. You can also have your preamp turn on your Mac CD player and/or tuner. The same remote control that controls your C2200 can control your Mac CD player and tuner. McIntosh customers do like their comforts.

Don't let this panoply of features put you off. I found that they never intruded—they were there if I needed them, but weren't in my way if I didn't. A preamp, especially, should be about convenience, no? It's a control center, after all. Once I had everything hooked up, I found the C2200 easy and intuitive to use.

The McIntosh C2200 was one of the finest line-stage preamps I have ever used, and far and away the most user-friendly in terms of features. I don't think you'll find a better tubed line-stage for $4500—the C2200 merits a Class A recommendation for this reason alone. As for LPs, the C2200's onboard phono section may be all you need. It wouldn't be fair to deny the unit as a whole a Class A rating because McIntosh has included this more-than-acceptable phono stage for "free."

"I'd put this preamp in my own system," said Roger Stockholm with pride.

So would I. In fact, I plan on keeping the review sample to use with my MC2102 tube amp. This new McIntosh tube preamp was well worth the wait of nearly 40 years.

And yes, I had been waiting all that time.

Stereophile, May 2002
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A LEGEND IN SOUND
In his "Manufacturer’s Comment" response to my write-up on the VPI Aries Extended turntable (March 2002, p.119), Harry Weisfeld wrote that, among other things, he wasn’t pleased with what I’d set his table on. So I tried supporting the VPI with a piece of very heavy slate resting on six of those big AudioQuest Sorbothane half-spheres and made a series of recordings of LP tracks on the Alesis Masterlink’s hard drive at 24-bits/96kHz. I then put the Yorke/Immedia RPM2/Graham 2.2 combination on the slate to level the playing field, and recorded the same tracks using the same Helikon SL cartridge.

I stand by what I said in March, with this clarification: I didn’t mean to say that the VPI Aries with the JMW-12.5 arm didn’t deliver musical “detail”; it did, but it didn’t delineate between spatial events as clearly or as cleanly as I have heard from other players. Its transient performance sounded somewhat slower — reverberant trails didn’t seem to fall off as quickly or as cleanly, for example — and ambient detail was somewhat muted. One man’s “sharp and clean” is another’s “bright and edgy,” so try to listen for yourself.

In fact, I distributed to Phonogram list subscribers four identical CDs — recorded from the Masterlink’s hard drive, each containing eight selections recorded using the Helikon SL with both front-ends sitting on the slate. The Masterlink — review to appear in the June issue — allows you to order the tracks after you’ve recorded them, so I was able to have the two versions of each tune go head to head. I didn’t identify which turntable/arm combo was which, and I mixed up the order so that version came first was randomized. I’ll let you know what these very good listeners heard and which they preferred.

I found it pretty easy to tell which was which. As I wrote in March, the Aries is extremely sensitive to what it sits on. For some reason, no matter what I did, the slate transmitted the motor noise to its semi-suspended plinth more effectively than did the acrylic platform I’d originally set the Aries on. Yet when I placed the essentially plinthless and entirely suspensionless Simon Yorke turntable on the slate, there was far less noise at a lower frequency from the outboard motor.

This is not to say that VPI’s Aries Extended is not a fine turntable. It is. But just so there’s no misunderstanding: The Aries Extended is very sensitive to what you put it on — more so than most other tables I’ve reviewed. Outboarding the motor only partially reduces the vibrations transmitted to the stylus. I recommend the Bright Star Big Rock TNT isolation device with split plinth.

But if you use multiple cartridges, no tonearm beats the JMW Memorial 12.5; the armubte is completely preset for all parameters, and swapping arms takes about 10 seconds. Then, the only thing you might have to do is adjust VTA. I’m currently using the Aries/JMW-12.5 combo to compare the Transfiguration Spirit Mk.2 cartridge with the new Mk.3 edition; with two armubes, the job’s a snap.

**Analogue Productions’ Creedence Test Pressings**

The Creedence Clearwater Revival test pressings that Analogue Productions/Acoustic Sounds’ Chad Kassem promised to send — all five LPs — arrived this morning. I played them through, mouth hanging wide open. The bass on “I Put a Spell on You” was so deep and massive that I thought it was a 45rpm cut played at 33⅓! But when the guitars, drums, and vocals kicked in, I knew I was listening to the results of what has to be one of the finest — if not the finest — cutting suits in the business today. Kevin Gray put it together, and he and Steve Hoffman are given mastering credit on the “dead wax” of the Creedence LPs, which exhibit breathtaking transparency, ground-shaking bass, wide-open dynamics, superb transients, and freedom from edge or grain.

With these and Gray’s mastering of Speakers Corner’s superb boxed set of *Ella Fitzgerald Sings the George and Ira Gershwin Song Book* (which includes the snazziest LP packaging job in recent memory), analog lovers have to hope that more reissue labels will be taking advantage of the facility, and that Analogue Productions picks up the reissue pace, after having let it slide for a few years.

Speaking of which, there’s yet another new source of vinyl: UK label Diverse Records (www.diversevinyl.com) has
announced its first release, Alison Krauss and Union Station's Grammy award winning *New Favorite*, recorded using Sony's DSD technology and available on a Rounder SACD. Diverse's 180gm vinyl issue was mastered from the DSD stream—I got a test pressing, and it sounds quite good. According to label head John Richards, there's more to come, and he assured me he'd cut from analog sources when available. I gave him George "Porky" Peckham's phone number, though Ray Staff mastered the Krauss LP. Staff cut the Absolute Analogue LPs of a few years back, and has mastered for Elton John, Led Zeppelin, Genesis, Peter Gabriel, the Rolling Stones, and many others in an illustrious career that goes back more than 30 years. He ain't exactly chopped liver.

**Wally Tools and Setting Up Your Cartridge**

I last wrote about cartridge setup in the November 1997 and May '98 *Stereophile*, but in the past few months a surprising number of letters and e-mails have poured in from new, mainly young vinyl enthusiasts asking for a repeat primer. In the meantime, Wally Malewicz has expanded his arsenal of phono setup tools and is now devoting himself full-time to making and marketing them. He's promised that any supply problems some readers might have previously encountered are now a thing of the past. He's hired an assistant, will be selling direct worldwide, and claims to be ready for any deluge of new business this writeup might inspire.

In addition to his WallyTracktor alignment device (custom-cut for any tonearm), WallyVTAGauge, and WallySkater antiskating adjustment tool, Malewicz has added two inexpensive WallyScales—electronic stylus-pressure gauges from Taiwan—and the really neat WallyAzimuthShop azimuth-adjustment box, which also offers cartridge demagnetization, super-accurate adjustment of turntable speed, and some other features I'll tell you about in a minute. I find many of Malewicz's devices indispensable for my work.

Wally's goals are optimization of: horizontal tracking geometry (overhang and zenith), tracking force, antiskating, vertical tracking angle (VTA), stylus rake angle (SRA), and azimuth. My goal here is to provide a practical, not overly theoretical discussion. I ask analog veterans to forgive me for restating the obvious: Don't attempt to set up a cartridge if you are 1) tipsy and/or high on legal or illicit substances, 2) in a foul mood, 3) just finishing reading the newspaper (see #2), 4) tired, and/or 5) cranky. (If you're new at this, you might want to start by setting up one of Grado's inexpensive cartridges.)

Once you've loosely mounted a cartridge on your tonearm using the appropriate hardware, secured the lead wires to the correct pin using needle-nosed pliers or tweezers, and carefully removed the stylus guard (if any), you'll probably have no idea to what weight the downward, or tracking, force has been set. It's always a good idea to carefully move the counterweight back until the arm "floats" horizontally, then forward just enough for the arm to drop down to the platter. (Always remove sticky and/or felt-type mats from the platter during this part of the setup so you don't accidentally rip the stylus from its mooring.)

Then, using a stylus-pressure gauge, measure and adjust to the approximate recommended force for your cartridge. This will change as you move the cartridge forward or back to set the overhang, but it's best to be in the ballpark, both for the health of your cartridge's cantilever and suspension, and to get accurate overhang—the heavier the stylus tracks, the more compressed the cantilever suspension will be and the more forward the stylus will sit.

I like using the Winds gauge. Unfortunately, it's very expensive ($599). A $15 Shure gauge will do in a pinch, but Wally Malewicz sent me a sample of the $250 electronic one he's selling (it's accurate to 0.01gm), along with a simple plastic device for lowering the measurement.
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point to the same plane as the LP surface—important for an accurate reading with any scale. The 0.1gm version of the WallyScales costs a very reasonable $150. Both gauges appear to be well-made, are easily calibrated for accuracy, and automatically compensate for the weight of the plastic device used to lower the height. I highly recommended both. But since, within your cartridge’s VTF parameters, you’ll be using sound as the final determinant, the $150 gauge should be all you need.

Next, if you’ve bought the WallyVTAGauge ($95), and assuming your tonearm has adjustable VTA, you want to measure the cartridge height, the distance from the record surface to the bottom of the headshell when the cartridge is playing a record. Remove the cartridge, making note of its approximate position in the headshell. (If you’re using a WallyVTAGauge, no need to secure tonearm leads in the earlier step until you remount.) Using the supplied shims to equal the cartridge height, mount the VTAGauge and adjust the arm height until the gauge’s blade lies flat on the record’s surface. Use a 180gm or normal-thickness LP to set your parallel-to-the-record reference point and note what adjustment needs to be made to keep the gauge’s blade parallel to the record surface using other vinyl thicknesses.

If you’re not using the Wally gauge, leave the cartridge in place and, with your reference-thickness LP on the platter, measure with a ruler the distance from the record surface to the top of the armmount at the headshell and as far back as you can measure, to ensure that the arm is parallel to the surface. Note that position on your arm’s VTA adjuster, if that’s possible. Later, when you make VTA adjustments by ear, you’ll easily be able to return to the reference VTA with the arm parallel to the record surface—a very good idea.

What’s equally or more important than VTA—especially with modern “line contact” and elliptical styli—is the stylus rake angle. The SRA is related to the VTA, but when you adjust VTA you’re also changing VTA. VTA is the angle between the surface of the record and a line described by the contact point of the stylus in the groove and the cantilever’s pivot point in the cartridge. Most experts agree that, ideally, you want to match playback VTA to cutting VTA. The SRA is the angle that the vertical center line of the stylus-contact area makes with the groove’s modulation ridges.

As the stylus moves up and down, it is really moving in an arc. That arc determines how the stylus mates with the groove modulations. With a conical stylus, SRA doesn’t matter—because the contact area is round, the SRA doesn’t change. However, the more extreme the stylus footprint, the more critical the SRA. Of course, you can’t change VTA without changing SRA: the angles at which the tip is connected to the cantilever and the cantilever to the cartridge are fixed. Suffice it to say, when you hear the sound lock in, you’re more likely to have gotten the SRA correct.

Next, reinstall the cartridge, secure the tonearm leads, and set the overhang using the gauge supplied with your arm, or a WallyTracktor. Pages could be devoted to the ideas of the two giants of tonearm geometry, Baerwald and Löfgren, and to whether you should use one or the other’s alignment—or something else entirely, depending on where on the record you want to minimize distortion. Remember: LPs are cut in a straight line. Unless you play them back with a tonearm that tracks in true linear fashion, the distortion inevitably caused by a pivoted arm’s arc across a record cannot be eliminated. This space is not the venue for that discussion—at least not this month.

Wally Malewicz’s gauge allows you to choose the Baerwald or the Löfgren alignment, placing the two zero track-error points at 66mm and 121mm from the record spindle. Malewicz cuts his gauges by laser, and assumes your arm has been properly installed and that the spindle-to-pivot distance is correct. But depending on who installed your tonearm, this is not necessarily the case. If it was installed at the factory, or you’re sure it’s correct, no problem. Otherwise, before Malewicz cuts the WallyTracktor for your arm, he’ll send you a spindle adapter and a ruler so you can measure your arm’s actual spindle-to-pivot distance. If it’s spot on or close (±0.5mm), he’ll then cut the gauge for you, either as specified or to compensate for the measured error. If your arm is way off, he’ll suggest that you reinstall with the correct distance from pivot to spindle. Malewicz charges $95 for a custom-cut WallyTracktor, including the ruler-spindle adapter. You pay $5 priority mail for the ruler adapter, and—once you’ve determined that your arm has
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the new 600 Series 3 at your authorized B&W dealer.

Dollar for dollar they simply can’t be beat.
been properly installed — another $5 shipping for the WallyTracktor itself. Malewicz charges $75 for Rega Tractors, which he stocks (sans spindle adapter-ruler) to keep the cost down.

When you perform this task, be sure to use a 4x magnifying glass (included with WallyTracktor) and an adjustable light, preferably a goose-necked LittleLite — it’s much easier with the light coming from certain angles and heights. Be sure to secure your platter with a rubber wedge or some other soft material, and disable your antiskating, if your arm is so equipped.

Malewicz provides good directions for correctly setting overhang. Repeat the process until you’re ready to scream — or until the stylus travels across the entire surface of the alignment device precisely in the groove of the arc. Do not settle for “almost.” When you’ve got the overhang precisely right, carefully lock down the screws a bit at a time on each side until they’re quite secure — but don’t overtighten.

The WallyTracktor also features four sets of triple parallel lines at four points across the arc to ensure proper zenith adjustment — in other words, the stylus’ perpendicularity to the groove wall at the point of contact. If the zenith is off, you’ll have interchannel phase error, as well as other problems. When the zenith is set correctly, the cantilever will be parallel to the lines at the null points, and slightly off at the other two points engraved on the arc. Zenith is adjusted by carefully rotating the cartridge around the headshell mounting slots. But this adjustment can easily affect overhang, which you’ll have to go back and recheck when you’re done. Patience is a virtue in properly aligning a cartridge, but the rewards are worth it.

Next to adjust is azimuth, assuming your tonearm permits it. The idea is to minimize the crosstalk between channels, not to equalize the electrical output of the two channels. That’s why playing a mono record, putting the channels out of phase, and adjusting for minimum output doesn’t always do the job.

Wally Malewicz has a new

and very handy azimuth-adjustment device called the WallyAzimuthShop, a $295 box that comes with the most recent Cardas test LP, an Ayre burn-in CD, and a high-quality Tenma voltmeter. Attach the box to your amplifier in place of speakers (8 ohm/25W load resistors are built in) on one side and the voltmeter on the other. Using the test LP, play the tracks that contain 1kHz modulations on one groove wall, then the other. With the meter set to 20V, turn the volume up until it reads about 5V on the modulated channel (a built-in high-pass filter keeps rumble from skewing the output). Flip the L/R switch on the Shop to the unmodulated channel and read the crosstalk voltage, which should read “0” but usually reads somewhere between “0.1V” and “0.2V.” Then, when the other modulated track plays, repeat the process. Convert voltages to decibels using the supplied chart.

By subtracting the crosstalk from the modulated channel output for each channel, you get the channel separation in dB. By minimizing and equalizing crosstalk between the channels, you get the maximum stereo separation — about 30dB at 1kHz under “real-world” playback conditions — which yields the widest and most accurate soundstaging and the best imaging. If the crosstalk is much higher for one channel, adjust the azimuth, however that’s done with your arm (adjust side weights, rotate arm tube, etc.), and repeat the test until you get the desired results.

You can adjust azimuth without buying the WallyAzimuthShop, of course. Just get a good voltmeter, the test record, and a chart for converting V to dB. But the Shop makes it much easier, and because the Tenma voltmeter has a frequency counter, the Shop can also be used to adjust your turntable’s speed. Play the 1kHz test tone, set the meter to “Hz,” and adjust your ‘table to 1kHz. The deluxe WallyAzimuthShop ($495) can be read in cables and has other features that I don’t want to get into here. Contact Wally.

Next, adjust your arm’s antiskating. With an offset (headshell angled toward spindle) pivoting arm, forces are created that make the arm want to “skate” toward the center of the record. That puts more pressure on the inner groove wall and less on the outer — not good for vinyl or stylus. The idea is to balance the force with a counterforce applied in the opposite direction. It’s tricky to compensate precisely — the groove modulations, the vinyl compound, and probably the cycles of the moon come into play — but I still believe it’s better to get it mostly right than not try at all.

On this I disagree with my friend Harry Weisfeld, of VPI, but most other tonearm designers are on my side.

The WallySkater ($95) is based on research by Thorens that demonstrates that the antiskating force should be about 10% of the tracking force across most of the record, and increase to 13% toward the center. It’s somewhat clumsy to use until you get the hang of it, but once you do, it makes

Note zenith error: cantilever will only be parallel at “null” points.

Prototype WallyAzimuthShop: ugly but it works.

1 Wally Malewicz, WAM Engineering, Tel./Fax: (703) 479-6645. E-mail: wmalew@ao.com. Web: www.simplyblack.net, click on “Wally’s Vinyl Corner.”
I told you in the last ad, if you want the warmth of tubes and the stability of solid state, you need to listen to the SMART 2X150VT amplifier.

"Mating the 2X150VT with a preamplifier of the opposite sonic persuasion could result in a system with truly outstanding sound. And the price is right." Michael Fremer - Stereophile magazine - January 2002

"Despite its modest size, price, and appearance, the 2X150VT is quite a powerhouse. Its sonically benign distortion characteristics and generally unflappable measured behavior indicate solid, conservative engineering." John Atkinson - Stereophile magazine - January 2002

"There was a definite sense of three-dimensionality, a palpable, compelling perception of "air," or atmosphere, from the sound I was hearing. I like to describe the audio images imparted by this amplifier as instruments, voices, etc., floating in air, sometimes even seeming to breathe." Perry Sun - Widescreen Review magazine - Issue 51.

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CES at Alexis Park, Room 1801
setting antiskating easy and reasonably accurate. (For a fuller description, see the May 1998 "Analog Corner." Another good antiskating setup tool is on Omnidisc (LP, Telarc DG-10073/74, out of print), which includes a track with a two-tone intermodulation test that rises in modulation velocity and thus gets increasingly difficult to track. One channel will mistrack before the other. Depending on which it is, you’ll have to adjust the amount of antiskating force until both channels begin to distort at the same time.

Check VTF once again with your stylus-pressure gauge and you’re pretty much done. Now all you have to do is play a favorite reference disc and lock in the VTA/SRA. Since you’re starting from a known reference point with the tonearm parallel to the record, you can play around and easily get back to where you started. Once you hit the spot, your LPs should sound spectacular!

**In Heavy Rotation**

1) Peter Townshend and Ronnie Lane: *Rough Mix* (Classic 180gm reissue)
2) Love: *Forever Changes* (Sundazed 180gm reissue)
3) Wayne Horvitz: *Forever* (Hi-Res DAD/Songlines CD)
4) Alison Krauss and Union Station: *New Favorite* (Diverse 180gm DSDA)
5) Creedence Clearwater Revival: First 5 LPs (Analog Productions 180gm test pressings)
6) Jacintha: *Lush Life* (Groove Note 180gm)
7) Starsailor: *Love is Here* (Chrysalis 180gm import)
8) Love: *Love* (Sundazed 180gm reissue)
9) Count Basie: *Chairman of the Board* (Classic 180gm reissue)
10) Karrin Allyson: *Remembering John Coltrane* (Pure Audio-philic 2x180gm DDA)
Eyris is not just another pretty face. Designed to offer the best possible performance from your DVD, SACD, DVD-Audio and vinyl discs, Tannoy Wideband™ loudspeaker technology uses the extended audio information available from these formats to bring your music and movie soundtracks to life like never before. You’ll immediately notice improved detail, faster transients, wider dynamics, pinpoint imaging and an exceptional sense of spaciousness.

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Ah me. Victoria's Secret underwear (sorry; lingerie) model Rebecca Romijn-Stamos' publicist politely declined my request for an interview with her. An interview with the model, not the publicist. But you already knew that, and you are (best Claude Rains voice) shocked — shocked!

This is too bad—not your state of shock, but my not interviewing Rebecca. Too bad, because one little-known fact about Ms. R-S is that when she was discovered as a model, she was studying music at the college level. (I delight in envisioning Birkenstock-clad Becca tower­ing over preschoolers as she student­teaches pentatonic recorder, or Orff's Schulwerk.) I suspect that she has retained some of her interest in music, and that it would be diverting to find out what she listens to, and through what components.

Had the interview eventuated, and had Ms. R-S wanted my advice about buying stereo equipment, I was (of course) prepared to make recommendations. Now I might as well share those recommendations with you, though I imagine your eyebrows and cheekbones have launched far fewer ships.

Absent that interview, I know nothing of Ms. Romijn-Stamos' tastes in music or what her listening room is like, and these are obviously important considerations in selecting a system. So I'll fudge a bit and assume that her tastes are both catholic and eclectic, and that her room is "average." We will also take a great leap of faith and assume that Ms. R-S is sane, and further that she just wants to listen to music, and does not want to own her own soldering iron.

On to the list. These recommended systems, ranging in approximate cost from $2500 to $90,000, consist of components I have heard at length, in most cases in the recommended combinations. In almost every case, careful setup will be necessary if the components are to sound their best as a system. I recommend vibration control by Symposium Acoustics, Room Optimizer software and acoustical treatments by RPG, power conditioning by Marigo, and power cords by Custom Power Cord Company (or similar items of equivalent quality) and a level of overall craftsmanship rare at this price. Marantz has discontinued its one-disc Original Special Edition CD player, but the remaining 5-disc carousel sounds nearly as good. Van den Hul's carbon-shielded cables are grain-free and unfussily relaxing to listen to.

**System 2: Little Jewels:** $5600

- Diapason Karis loudspeaker: $1995/pair (stands: $299)
- Plinius 8100 integrated amplifier: $2000
- Marantz Professional PMD 340 CD player: $789
- Nordost Solar Wind interconnect: $110/1m pair
- Nordost Solar Wind speaker cables: $400/3m pair

Show it off with: Milladoiro: *Castellum Honesti*

At this price point we begin to close in on what I think of as real high-end sound. Naturally, this system is going to give up bushels of bass extension, dynamic range, and soundstage finesse compared to a cost-no-object rig, but its reproduction of smaller-scaled music is at least on the threshold of why we all don't buy a nationally advertised on­box solution and have done with it.

Diapason's Karis has a driver comple­ment eerily reminiscent of the celebrated BBC LS3/5a's, but the design similarities end just about there. A rear-ported design with a simple crossover, the Karis is quick and lively, with dynamics and frequency extension quite surprising for its size. No venerated shoebox, the Karis is a smaller version of the famous Adamante, with the same solid Canello walnut construction and elegantly faceted front panel.

Plinius' 8100 is the award-winning 8150/8200 without phono stage or processor loop, and with a smaller power supply—fair tradeoffs in view of the $1000-lower price. I'm sure I drive designer Peter Thomson to tears by habitually describing Plinius' dynamic and open sonic signature as "peppermint," but that's the word I fix on as the specific­ic homeopathic antidote to butterscotch. Years ago, Brian Damkroger and I were slack-jawed in admiration at the huge but completely musical sounds that a Plinius/Alón system was making in Las

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To me, it looks like the product of a diligent consensus that valued consensus over individuality. Dr. Peter 17'Antonio, of RPG Inc., has covered critical-listening rooms in several articles for *Stereophile* Professional magazine (www.aurealpaul.com), and I find his approach intriguing. The fly in that ointment is that 17'Antonio posits room dimensions unlikely to be found in any but a purpose-built room.
Vegas; for $2000, the 8100 delivers at least some of that magic.

Marantz Professional's PMD 340 CD player has a broadcast-quality transport and an idiot-proof user interface. Love those huge, light-up buttons! Nordost's Solar Wind delivers much of the Blue Heaven's performance for significantly less money. The incremental expenditure over the first system brings you more resolution and a greater sense of musical flow.

System 3: Remarkable Coherence and Finesse: $9000

Acoustic Energy AE1 Series II Reference loudspeaker: $1995/pair (stands: $999)
Arcam FMJ A32 integrated amplifier with phono stage: $2100
Arcam FMJ CD23 CD player: $2200
JPS Labs Superconductor FX interconnected: $299/1m
JPS Labs Petite Superconductor+ speaker cable: $699/8'

Show it off with: Dido: No Angel

One of the most pleasant surprises for me at Home Entertainment 2001 was wandering into a suite and being stopped dead in my tracks by some Baroque music playing over an Acoustic Energy/Arcam/JPS Labs system. I briefly stuck my head into the larger rooms of the suite; quickly decided they were less inviting than this system, and sat down for a while and just enjoyed the music.

For me, this was an object lesson in system synergy — my previous experiences with Acoustic Energy loudspeakers had been more energetic than acoustical. Combined with Arcam's stylish CD player and integrated amplifier duo, the AE1 Series IIIs, heard in my own room, are tonally rich and ripe. The overall sonic presentation of this system is both detailed and solid, with a remarkably tall and wide soundstage.

System 4: Optimality: $15,000

Shahnian Obelisk loudspeaker: $3400/pair
Magnun Dynalab MD 208 FM receiver: $2970
Marantz SA-14 SACD player: $2900
Nordost Red Dawn interconnected: $400/1m pair
Nordost Blue Heaven speaker cable: $619/3m pair
Custom Power Cord Company 11 power cord: $280/6'
RPG Skylines: $125/2' by 2' panel
Show it off with: Canteloube's Songs of the Auvergne sung by Frederica von Stade

Especially for lovers of concert music, I think that this is the optimal system. Above $15,000, the returns are incrementally marginal, and, with a nod to Adam Smith, one could argue that "the market has spoken," at least in this regard.

System 5: Elegant sophistication: $25,000

Aerial 88 loudspeaker: $7000/pair in hardwood veneer with "kickstands"
Jeff Rowland Design Group Concentra II integrated amplifier: $6500
Marantz SA-14 SACD player: $2900
Wireworld Silver Eclipse interconnected: $800/1m pair
Wireworld Silver Eclipse speaker cable: $3900/3m pair
Symposium Acoustics Super Plus platforms: $499 each
Custom Power Cord Company Top Gun power cords: $650/6'
RPG Skylines: $125/2' by 2' panel
Show it off with: Tiny Island's Tiny Island (SACD)

Some of the enhancements and attractions here may be rather intangible, but for members of the style et luxe crowd who don't want to give up one iota of musical quality, the combination of Jeff Rowland's casework and Aerial's woodwork is something to behold. I can't resist, and my guess is that if fair Rebecca were to give her nod to one system, it would be this one — the "Central Park West" system below.

Aerial's 88 loudspeaker disguises its impressive bulk and weight by positioning its woofers on the side panel of a cabinet that's tall and narrow but deep. Perhaps it's the narrowness of the front baffle that creates what seems to be (to me, at least) a midrange timber and overall tonal balance preferable to Aerial's more expensive 10T. Whatever the cause, the 88's room-filling sound and pinpoint imaging are on a par with their meticulous finish.

The first version of Jeff Rowland's Concentra integrated amplifier impressed me with its stately sublety, although I had a few reservations about its treble presentation, which I found just slightly too reticent. The Concentra II embodies many improvements. The volume display and input indicator lights are now a restful blue instead of 1970s disco red. The rated power has jumped 50%, from 100 to 150Wpc. But most of all, the treble is more focused and lively. The Concentra II is gorgeous to behold and to hear, and Wireworld's next-to-best cable products complement the opulence of the sonic proceedings to a degree that is almost decadent.

System 6: Central Park West: $90,000

Wilson Benesch Chimera loudspeaker: $21,000/pair
Halcro dm 58 power amplifiers: $25,000
Accuphase DP-100 SACC/CD transport

Stereophile, May 2002
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Wilson Benesch's new Chimera
loudspeaker combines most of the
resolving power of WBI's Discovery with
most of the musical heft of their
Bishop, and just about splits the
difference in price. The Chimera has two
isobaric woofer pairs instead of the
Bishop's four, and is noticeably less
flamboyantly proportioned. The Bishop
in wood trim was merely "love it or
hate it," but the Bishop in all black was
a prop from an Alice in Wonderland
had dream scripted by André Gide with
the assistance of way too much
Pernod.2 The Chimera is not only a
less controversial design statement, it's
also much easier to move in and set
up, and doesn't seem to give up much
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swank CD players), a simple sliding
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Mark Levinson celebrates an important anniversary in 2002. Exactly 30 years ago he jogged onto the playing field of high-end audio, so early in the game that fans, then few and far between, could count the players on their fingers.

The high-fidelity industry seems a logical home for a jazz musician like Levinson, who once envisioned a career playing flugelhorn and double bass, but his voyage into audio was a detour that could be said to have begun at age 22, when he took a job working on a film about Joan Baez. "It was a joy to find people willing to pay me to do something," quips the trim, youthful 55-year-old, who is quick to recall his "nonexistent income as a musician."

The next leg of the journey was a film-sound equipment project. Levinson and a couple of friends were working on mixers for location recording when one said, "While we're thinking about what we're going to make and who we're going to sell it to, maybe we could listen to some music." After a quick audit of the equipment on hand revealed that there was no preamp, Levinson turned to Richard Burwen, who was providing him with engineering guidance. That led to the LNP-2...
"The HCA-2 driving the B&W N803's was the best sound by far I have ever had in my living room. I had the most foot-stompin', toe-tappin', knee-slappin', emotion stirring good time ever since I purchased my system."

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preamplifier, the first product from Mark Levinson Audio Systems.

In fall 1999, Levinson tucked elements of his previous companies, Cello¹ and Mark Levinson Acoustic Recordings as well as MLAS, into a petite, 750-square-foot store on the toniest stretch of Manhattan's Madison Avenue. He used that space, which more closely resembles the art galleries that dot the neighborhood than it does a conventional audio outlet, to launch yet another brand.

The traditional symbol for a 30th anniversary is the pearl, something a visit to Levinson's jewel box of a boutique could easily evoke. Nonetheless, when the authoritative history of high-end audio is written, the emblem associated with Mark Levinson during his 30th year in the industry will more likely be a rose.

David Lander: You used your own name and that of a musical instrument for your previous brands. What led you to name your current brand Red Rose?

Mark Levinson: A red rose is a symbol. It stands for love, passion, commitment. It's not about the technical; it's about feeling. It's also simple.

Lander: As you look back on your three decades of hardware manufacturing, what stands out?

Levinson: It's exceptionally meaningful when a company introduces not only products but some consciousness or special standard of reference or excellence. I think my previous companies introduced ideas that were important and that, in one way or another, have helped change things. My first company introduced the idea of using circuits, parts, and materials of exceptional quality to make preamps and power amps that would be exceptionally long-lasting and give good service, and offer performance that was on a par with the best electronics products in other industries—like instrumentation, medical instruments, and so forth. They also were very simple, very Spartan, the idea there being that quality and simplicity were more important than complexity.

From that came a whole ocean of products that were thin and black and simple. The knob I designed for the JC-2 preamp, which was later used on the ML-1, is now on dozens of different products from other companies in one permutation or other. And there was the idea that a small, dedicated distribution network was more valuable than having an awful lot of stores and a product without any real involvement in it or commitment to it on the part of the dealer. I would say that many of the important ideas I tried to develop at MLAS were inspired by the original McIntosh company.

Lander: And Cello?

Levinson: Among other things, Cello introduced the first sonically transparent tone control system, the Audio Palette, and the Audio Suite mainframe preamp. We advocated the complete system approach, and the use of high-quality audio equipment with video. Cello also made direct contact with customers rather than using a conventional distribution network.

There was an intimacy about the early days of audio that I find sadly lacking in today's audio world. Actually, I just caught the tail end of it, but stores at the time were usually proprietor-run. The proprietor had enthusiasm and commitment to the products, knew recordings, knew which recordings were out on what labels by what artists. There was a shared feeling for music and music reproduction both. At record labels, the proprietor was often the recording engineer, very friendly with the artists. It was a shared passion, and over the decades that's gone away. There's been this incredible loss of involvement and commitment and passion, and I think people miss that. People used to love their records. I remember when an LP was a treasured possession.

Lander: What was your vision for Red Rose Music when you conceived it?

Levinson: The heart of Red Rose is quality, simplicity, honesty, and protecting our customers. No one can perfectly envision the devel-

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¹ Mark Levinson’s work with Cello was described in a Stereophile interview by Harry Wills, published in November 1997 (Vol.20 No.11).

— Ed
opment of a company, and I wouldn't try to, but I think the founding spirit has proved enduring and fruitful. I've spent many years involved in what would be described as extremely expensive products, often very sophisticated and intended for a very small audience that can afford those price points, and I've enjoyed it very much. With Red Rose, I decided to make only a small number of products that were compact and truly affordable, that would be satisfying in such a way that people wouldn't feel any need to trade them in—products that are on the planet for a long time.

**Lander:** And the second part of the manufacturing/retailing formula is your store?

**Levinson:** I decided we should open up our own store, even though we couldn't afford to advertise. We were just going to see who walked in the door and be helpful. What was important was to build a new model of what an audio store could be. Actually, it's kind of a combination of some very old-fashioned things, with some new things. The thought was that we would develop the minimalist approach, boil it down, focus on what we thought were the very best products. In the early days, audio stores had only a few lines; there weren't that many lines. If you had a couple of amps and one or two speakers and a record player, a tape recorder—a few things—it was fine.

We would just offer a simple selection of what we considered the very best options in every category and design systems that focused on quality and simplicity rather than on mediocrity and complexity. Fewer boxes, but with the quality of sound, the quality of picture, the ease of operation, the freedom from obsolescence. All these factors are part of the Red Rose approach.

**Lander:** Red Rose is, of course, an audio equipment manufacturer with a factory and an engineering department in Redmond, Washington, just outside Seattle. How involved were you in designing the company's products?

**Levinson:** I'm still involved intimately in the design of every product, but like all the great products I know of, they're group efforts. Victor Tiscareno is our chief engineer, and there's a whole team of dedicated people who worked with Victor and myself, a group of people in the company who all contributed. But I have to say that, without Victor, we wouldn't have the line. He really provided the engineering that made everything lock in the way it needed to.

**Lander:** Some of your manufacturing is done in China. What led you to that source?

**Levinson:** I heard there were some high-end companies in China that had a limited market for their products, and I sensed a possible synergy. We found engineering, design, and manufacturing resources of the most creative and passionate kind—kindred spirits, people with a deep, fundamental involvement in music reproduction who were, curiously, inspired by my early work. So I decided to create a team, if you will, of the guys in the U.S. and the guys in China. There's also someone in Japan, one of the last master moving-coil cartridge makers. The idea is to work together to make a new kind of audio product that's sonically...let's call it satisfying, that just leaves you at peace, just makes you feel "I'm there," but is also very affordable, very compact, very pretty to look at, long-lasting. I don't think we could do it any other way. I think we were very fortunate to find people who could each contribute something to this end.

**Lander:** The meat and potatoes of the Red Rose line consists of just a couple of systems with a few possible permutations to them. Can you specify the basics for our readers?

**Levinson:** The Rosebud is a $3000 speaker, the Classic is an $8000 speaker, and the Revelation is a $50,000 speaker. The amplifiers generally associated with the Rosebud are the Rosette, a $2000, 35Wpc unit, and the Passion, a 100Wpc unit for $3000. The Rosette is very compact—it's only 4 1/2" wide and can sit on a shelf. It's extremely simple and unobtrusive. The Passion is for somebody who wants to go further. For an extra thousand dollars, you can have more than twice the power in a more traditional horizontal integrated amplifier with slightly more refined sound. The natural mate for the Classic is the Affirmation, a $7000 integrated amplifier. With the $8000 Classic speakers, it's a $15,000 idea. So you can say our basic ideas are $5000 and $15,000. The $5000 package can be augmented to $6000 with the Passion, and our $15,000 package can be reduced. If you felt you didn't need the power, you might be able to drive the Classics with a Passion or a Rosette.

**Lander:** You've also simplified the cable issue. You have a single Red Rose speaker cable and one interconnect, very flexible and thin enough to live with comfortably.

**Levinson:** It's $10 a foot, and our customers are very happy with it.

**Lander:** Why the leap from $3000 and $8000/pair speakers to one that costs $50,000/pair?

**Levinson:** There's something within me that still wants to express what can be done without thinking about the cost, just the musical result.

**Lander:** How many of your customers, regardless of whether their systems incorporate video components, tend to think of them as music ensembles?

**Levinson:** I would say probably 80% of our customers think of their purchases as music systems. We're very happy to do music-only systems; that's our heart and soul. But there's no law that says a music lover can't also be interested in video in some way—especially when, for $1200, he can buy a progressive-scan DVD/CD/SACD player, cable it up to the system, and watch a movie.

**Lander:** You feel strongly that the PCM operating system is antithetical to a musically satisfying listening experience. You're convinced it embodies some artifact or artifacts that you've called the "PCM signature." Just what is that?

**Levinson:** There's something about the PCM operating system that interacts with human beings to create a very peculiar result. Things occur outside us. We sense them, and we form a response to them. There seems to be something about PCM that human beings respond to negatively, that is not described or defined in the conventional tests.

**Lander:** Some psychoacoustic phenomenon?

**Levinson:** It may be psychological. Let's say it's something involuntary. We don't choose to do it. There really should be some studies on this, but I would say it's pretty clear how people feel about CD. When I see all this evidence piled up, year after year, there's no question in my mind. Having a
store in New York City has been a real education for me, an ongoing workshop that continues as long as we leave the door open. A wide variety of people walk in, and many, unsolicited, tell us that they’re not happy with CDs. You can’t imagine how many times we hear this from people. And these are mostly not audiophiles. They’re just people walking down the street—they don’t know my name, they’re not into high-end audio. And yet, when these same people take a listen to music recorded in DSD or on LP, the response is, “Wow. Now that’s something I love.” I don’t want to be misinterpreted. This is not to say you can’t derive pleasure from a CD. I’m sure many people do.

Lander: Do the ones who don’t tell you why?
Levinson: Oh, sure. It’s very consistent. People find CDs irritating, fatiguing, boring. Maybe it isn’t even something as overt as that. Maybe it’s, “Well, I just kinda stopped listening.” People who used to listen to music a lot “just kinda stopped listening.” At the same time, you see people who buy audio equipment getting more and more and more equipment—more expensive, more complicated: very expensive cables, D/A converters, this, that, and the other thing, loading themselves up with tons of gear, still not happy.

My associates and I have discovered that there are two ways to make this problem go away. One is the LP; the other one is SACD—if it’s implemented properly. There’s an unbelievable number of people getting back into LPs, because people miss the involvement, the emotional excitement that they used to have from LP.

Lander: Still, you’ve noted that we live in a world where our electronic destiny is digital. And you’ve expressed hope that, in recorded music, that destiny is Direct Stream Digital.

Levinson: Just about the time we started the store, we encountered DSD, and that proved to be a really wonderful path, which we’ve been following. Sony’s DSD technology was a starting point. Before that, there was almost no hope, because PCM was a roadblock to getting where we wanted to go. My first experience with the technology was through DSD on a hard drive, and from the first time we played it back, it was clear that this was something special. It didn’t feel like digital. It felt like my old analog master tapes, basically—this clear, natural, enjoyable medium that suddenly afforded the passion of analog and the convenience of digital. It had a profound effect on me.

Lander: How many channels do you think it takes to make a music listener happy?
Levinson: One. Mono’s fine. I’ve never heard anybody bitch about Louis Armstrong, saying, “I would enjoy it if it were only stereo.” Multichannel is an interesting idea and perhaps can be used with some interesting results, but there are a couple of problems. One is that most of the repertoire people want to listen to doesn’t lend itself to multichannel. It might be interesting for Mahler’s “Symphony of a Thousand”; you can think of a few examples. Another is that people will end up with five mediocre speakers and a mediocre subwoofer instead of a good two-channel system that would make them want to listen to music more. If it doesn’t do that, then what good is it? It’s the industry saying that the answer is quantity—more of this, more of that. But satisfaction isn’t created by quantity; it’s created by quality. It’s not created by complexity; it’s created by simplicity.

Lander: You’ve cited a parallel problem in music-industry products—recordings that lack content.
Levinson: The key ingredient is content. It’s the artists and repertoire. People are going back to recordings from the 1920s, ‘30s, ‘40s, ‘50s, and ‘60s, because they find content there that they don’t find in newer recordings.

There’s something in our culture that has come to value loud, distorted, booming, MIDI-synthesized, highly overproduced recordings that are essentially noise.

Lander: What distinguishes music from noise?
Levinson: If it touches the heart, it’s music; if it doesn’t, it’s noise. I believe the majority of people in this world want and love real music; that is, music made by human beings and their instruments in life. They’re tired of electronic, synthesized stuff—patchwork-quit, overdubbed productions created by engineers. I’m sure that stuff is meaningful to some people, but everywhere I turn, people are wondering, “Do I really have to hear this?” I would like to see Red Rose make a contribution toward delivering not just good audio systems, but recordings that impart the nourishing qualities that people are so hungry for. There are some amazing musicians out there. Our sampler gives an indication—people like Chico Freeman, Kenny Rankin, Bill Sims, Simon Mulligan.

Lander: They’re all featured on Live Recordings at Red Rose Music, Volume One. Ten of its 12 tracks were recorded in your store direct to DSD, weren’t they?
Levinson: Right. We just lock the door and turn on one or two lights and play. I feel the greatest musical magic happens when musicians are playing together, close to each other, with no headphones, no glass isolation booths, no cue tracks, no amplifiers if they can help it. If we can just capture that in a very simple, noninvasive way, then we have a better chance of getting magic moments. We’ve had some fantastic evenings, and we plan a series of recordings that are basically just that—musicians making music in an old-fashioned way captured with two mikes and going straight to DSD.

Lander: You recently released a group of SACDs made from some of the master tapes in your archive. Tell us a bit about that project.

Levinson: There are some recordings I made in the ‘70s that I think are musically significant, and I wanted to see what happened when we transferred them to DSD. It was a miracle. I was deeply moved when I heard the SACD pressings for the first time. It’s like being able to give people a near-perfect copy of my 30ips tapes for $20. In the past, this was just a dream, but now it’s a reality. DSD allows people to get so much more of what the musicians intended that it’s staggering. When recordings sound so natural, you don’t need systems with battleship amps and huge speakers.

Lander: Does your current schedule leave you time for playing the double bass?
Levinson: I’m starting to practice, at least. I’m starting to get some pads on my fingers.

Stereophile, May 2002
This year’s CES promised to be an exciting and daunting new experience for me. Rather than my usual assignment of “Expensive Loudspeakers,” I drew “Inexpensive Electronics.” Wow! Instead of checking rooms for huge, veneered monoliths, I’d be scrutinizing equipment racks. And since the cutoff for “inexpensive” was $6000, I’d be looking at a lot of racks.

My first stop needed to be for coffee — hot, strong, good coffee. I headed for the Wavelength/Nirvana room, where Gordon Rankin and Stephen Creamer always have a freshly brewed pot. The coffee was good, and they had a sweet-sounding system as well, featuring Wavelength’s new Sine NCE battery-powered preamp ($5000), with its cool keychain remote.

Cary Audio showed a batch of new tube gear, all with their trademark superb build quality and, in both systems I heard, great sound. One setup combined their new SLP-2002 balanced preamp ($3000) and 20Wpc CAD-808 ($2500) with B&W 801s. The other, which really caught my ear, had their new SLP-88 preamp ($2000) and the stereo version of their new V-12 amp ($4200) driving a pair of Roman Audio Senator two-ways. The V-12 uses 12 EL34 output tubes and puts out 50Wpc in triode mode, 100Wpc in ultralinear.
Margules Audio was another good-sounding room featuring beautiful, reasonably priced tube gear. Their main system mated a Meridian digital front-end with their SF220R preamp ($2590) and 30Wpc triode/60Wpc ultralinear class-A Active Bias tube amp ($3290), the latter driving a pair of Margules Orpheus three-way loudspeakers. In a smaller system, their MB-1 minimonitors were driven by the MB-1 hybrid integrated amp ($1600). The MB-1 was one of my favorite pieces at CES, with a striking, powerful sound and a stylish, Frank Lloyd Wright-esque cantilevered chassis.

Another of my favorite pieces was the compact, vertical-format Rosette 1 integrated amp ($2000) from Red Rose Music, a 35Wpc solid-state design. Mated with a Sony SACD player and Red Rose’s Classic ribbon-hybrid speaker, it was producing some of the show’s most impressive sound — clear, spacious, and with a dynamic authority and precision that were truly breathtaking.

For minimalist “industrial art” styling, it’s tough to beat 47 Laboratory, who debuted their Shigaraki series. The line includes a CD transport ($1750), DAC ($1250), and amplifier ($1500). On the other end of the style spectrum was the curvaceous JJ Electronics gear. The JJ 322 is a 20Wpc single-ended design with two 300Bs per side, weighs in at 92 lbs, and is an absolutely stunning sculpture of rosewood and gold that looks far more expensive than its anticipated price of...
GRAND SPEAKER SERIES BY CALIX

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$3500–$4500. JJE’s full-function 243 preamp, another gorgeous wood-and-gold unit, is expected to retail for between $1500 and $2000.

Another line that represented unusually good value was Tube City, a CES first-timer from Cerritos, California. Their KP-1 preamp and 15Wpc 300BC stereo amp ($3500 for the set) were superbly built on unusually long and narrow chassis: the controls were on their top surfaces and the I/O jacks on the side. The lush, detailed-sounding system also included an FIM SACD player, FIM cables, and Avalon’s new multichannel speakers.

Blue Circle Audio was showing their budget BC 25 preamp ($2950) and CS 50Wpc integrated amp ($1150), which retain the basic look and point-to-point, hand-wired construction of Blue Circle’s more costly models. Unison Research, Synthesis, and Nightingale all blended typically Italian style with great sound. Unison’s system featured their new Unico 80Wpc hybrid integrated ($1195) driving Opera SP3s. At Synthesis, it was a pair of Merlin VSM speakers driven by the Synthesis Ecstasy preamp ($1795) and 70Wpc Theatre monoblocks ($3375). Nightingale showed a full line of sumptuous electronics, including the new Armonia integrated ($1800). Samuel Johnson, from Scotland, also showed a line of gear that was all wood and curves and ranged from $1000 to $4000. Even Audes, the Estonian builder of good-value loudspeakers, got into the wood, gold, and tubes game, debuting the NS-1 ($3600/pair), a nifty little 7W monoblock that looked and sounded very nice.

No coverage of inexpensive electronics would be complete without the British contingent, a group that seems bigger every year. At Music Hall, the goodies included the new remote-controlled Creek 53505E integrated ($1495) and the Music Hall MMF T25 tuner ($295). The tuner is a particularly slick unit that, at its bargain-basement price, is making me reconsider adding FM to my system. Down the street, Arcam was showing their upscale (for Arcam) FMJ line and the new DiVA (Digitally integrated Video and Audio) line, the latter their launching pad for entering the world of home theater and integrated entertainment systems.

Exposure teamed up with Neat loudspeakers in a couple of systems, including an apartment-sized setup consisting of their 2010 CD player and integrated amp ($950 each) and Critique speakers. It did an amazing job for an inexpensive system, with a clear, open soundstage and wonderfully natural vocals. Rega’s system sounded great as well, and featured all new gear: the P9 turntable ($3400), Cursa preamp ($950), and 120W Exon monoblocks ($950 each) biamping Rega’s Ayla, a 5½ two-way.

I dubbed Myryad’s upscale Cameo “the ultimate bedroom system.” The Cameo, a “lifestyle” product, has upscale cosmetics—softly rounded curves, ½” aluminum panels—and is designed to be user-friendly. The three-piece system ($2695) is a CD player, clock-tuner, and 50Wpc integrated amp, all menu-driven and completely and functionally linked. Pop in a CD, hit Play, and the amp switches inputs and resets the volume. And the sound? Let’s just say that if I had a Cameo and the matching Totem Hawk speakers in my bedroom, I’d go to bed a lot earlier.

Remember how I said the ranks of British hi-fi manufacturers seemed to be growing? Talk Electronics was a good example. Making the trip to CES for the first time in 2002, Talk was showing their Thunder 3.1 upsampling CD player ($2999) feeding a Cyclone 100Wpc integrated ($1599) and Tornado 2.1 100Wpc stereo amp ($1599), the last biamping a pair of Spendor S8s. The Talk gear was typically British, with good sound, solid construction, and understated cosmetics. Another newcomer, Morgan Audio Systems, even goes as far as to describe its gear as “essentially British.” Morgan’s Deva 300 series includes a CD player ($1399), tuner ($1100), and integrated amp ($1399). The upscale 500 series includes a CD player, tube preamp, and 70Wpc power amp ($3500 each).

Sugden Audio has been getting raves in the British press for their A21 Classic line (an integrated amp and a CD player, $1500 each)

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*Sterophile, May 2002*
"Quads can deliver a sublime experience. They still take my breath away with their profound revelation."
- Noel Keywood (HiFi World)

"By any measure, the 989 is a triumph, as well as a bargain in high-end terms."
- Ken Kessler (HiFi News)

"At the price I've heard nothing that I'd prefer. In fact, even if price weren't an issue I'd be hard pushed to find speakers that better the 988s' combination of talents in my listening room. I can't recommend them too highly."
- Gramophone
audio chain. You'll be astonished at the muzzle velocity of the large-caliber bills flying outta your wallet.

Balanced Audio Technology introduced the 150Wpc VK-300x "modular" integrated amplifier ($4000-$6000, depending on options). You can select the circuit topology with various plug-in cards. You can also choose among solid-state, tubes (6922s), or SE superlubes (6H30s).

Gear from Lamm Electronics glowed brightly in several rooms with their trademark triple-nippled 6C33s. At their room at the Alexis Park one could hear and enjoy the Kharna Grand Ceramique ($45,000) running on ML1 monoblocks ($19,990/pair) and the exotic L2 Reference line-level preamplifier ($13,690, reviewed in May 2001). I fixed an eye on the C.E.C. TL 1X CD transport ($5700) feeding a dCS Elgar Plus D/A converter ($14,500). Positively yummy sound. Lamm's other big news was the introduction of the L12 phono preamp, which Conrude Fremer will scrutinize in near future.

At the Las Vegas Convention Center, Linn launched the Klimax preamplifier. Its "clamshell" construction means that the Klimax can be machined from solid aluminum, like the Klimax power amps. According to Linn, this "screens, protects and stabilizes the internal electronics." Linn principal Ivar Tiefenbruun is devoted to simple audio signal paths to optimize, quoth he, the purity and accuracy of reproduction. The Klimax at CES was a prototype, but the final product will likely closely resemble it, assured Brian Morris, Linn's Man in America. The Klimax has three line-level inputs and one balanced in, and is of course compatible with Linn Knexx multiroom systems. I won't spill too much ink on a prototype, but it did mate elegantly with the Klimax amps. If the production version sounds as good as the prototype looked, Linn will have another winner on their hands.

Simaudio was showing a number of new products, but the piece that caught my eyes, ears, nose, and throat was the Moon Rock monoblock ($29,995/pair). Maximum continuous power into 8 ohms is a blistering 1000W, and 2000W into 4 ohms! Each amp has a 2"-thick granite base and anodized top cover; the squarish chassis is available in black or silver. According to the press packet, the Rock's beauty is more than skin deep. Fully differentiaiated with proprietary toroidal transformers and precision-matched, fully decoupled bipolar output devices, the Rock runs 20W in class-A before switching into a more efficient mode of operation. A high damping factor, short signal paths, and an overbuilt power supply make the magic happen, Simaudio claims. At least with the system displayed — Merlin VSM Millennium speakers (reviewed in September 2001) and Simaudio's P-5 preamp and Eclipse CD player (reviewed in April 2001) — I'd have to agree.

Gordon Rankin of Wavelength Audio had a press kit all ready for me, and I lost the dang thing. Nevertheless, I can tell you for sure that he proudly showed me the Venus 100% Silver 45 SET amplifier, Cobalt edition. (Cobalt is used instead of iron in the output transformers.) These diminutive monoblocks will set you back a mere $15,000/pair. Wavelength also showed its cute Sine NCE battery-powered preamplifier with remote control, and Cosine 96/24 upsampling tube DAC. Cable of choice? Nirvana all the way, especially their S-X speaker cable. As well, PS Audio Power Plants could be seen poking their faceplates out from here and there. In the "active" portion of Wavelength's room the amplifiers driving the Von Schweikert dB100 speakers were Cardinal XTs ($7500/pair, reviewed in January 1996).

Axis Distribution had quite the setup, featuring the new Accuphase two-channel C-245 preamp (from $6500, depending on option cards). The other big news was the new E-212 90Wpc integrated amp ($3500). Accuphase also introduced, in that ultra-civilized, low-key Japanese way, their DC-330 digital preamplifier ($17500), which can take a DAC card. They balanced that expensive tour de force with an entry-level 24-bit/96kHz upsampling CD player, the DP-555 ($4800).

Viola Audio Laboratories was formed from Cello survivors Tony DiSalvo, Paul Jayson, and Tom Colangelo. They introduced the very elegant 350Wpc Bravo amps.
The McCormack MAP-1 delivers something that surround sound processors leave behind...

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($17,990/pair) and the “mainframe-styled” preamp they call the Spirito ($18,000 as configured at CES, with in/out modules and separate power supply). The user makes selections on the Spirito's touchscreen with a finger or stylus. The preamp boots like a computer, polls whatever cards are installed, then goes active. All very Mission to Mars. Watch for big things from these guys.

Hovland was happy as a claw with its well-reviewed HP-100 tube preamp ($6,995 with phono, $4,995 line-only) and beautiful Sapphire 40Wpc hybrid power amp ($7,800). With Audio Physic Avanti III, a Dodson DAC, and an Immedia turntable with Helikon cartridge—in all, a class act.

Powering the huge line-array Pipedreams speakers was VAC's new Virtu 105/105 amp ($7,800), which uses KT88s and an input similar to VAC's Renaissance electronics. The Pipedreams subs were driven by VAC's Standard 240 monoblocks ($7,000 each). VAC's Signature Mk.II triode dual-mono preamp with phono stage was also shining its audio lights, at a hefty $18,000.

A full complement of Nagra equipment was on hand in the Alexis Park, including the PL-P preamp ($9,500) and the line-stage-only PL-L ($6,000). Amps included the tubed VPA (reviewed in April 1999) and the remote-controlled solid-state MPA integrated.

The Wilson Audio Watt/Puppy 6es were sounding fine in the VTL room, inspired by a pair of VTL's MB-750s ($20,000/pair) and their prototype TL75 Reference preamp ($10,000). I don't think I've ever heard a pair of Wilsons sound so good. And Legend Audio Design was showing off their new Nirvana monoblocks ($6,500/pair) with four 650s per side.

I finally got a chance to sit down and listen to the Inner Sound amps ($6,995), and blow me down, did they sound great. The Kilowatt Monoblocs, as they're called, run 1000W into 8 ohms and 2000W into 4 ohms.

Nice to see Swiss firm Ensemble back. They make an entire chain of audio playback components. While Ensemble's CD transport is to be updated soon, their Dichrono Hi-DAC/preamp is an impressive piece of technology ($5,900), with one analog and five digital inputs—you can still run your turntable into it. An Eivvo, a hybrid tube input/solid-state (output) power amp, putted 150Wpc into 4 ohms and 100Wpc into 8. IsoLink Duo power enhancers scrubbed the juice and PowerLink cables and power extenders brought it all to you, along with all manner of Ensemble audio goodies. Even the connectors are little handmade jewels.

The imposing, vertically oriented Theta Digital Citadel's ($15,800/pair) sit in my listening room for review as we speak, and were also hauling the freight in the Joseph Audio room on pairs of RM33s, RM22 Mk.2s, and RM7 Signature Mk.2s, all through Cardas Golden and Neutral Reference cables. A Spogheim SpJ turntable was spinning its lovely way with records. The Theta Gen.8 DAC, available about the time you read this, is an upsampler rumored to be coming in for between $8 and $10k. And let's not forget the Theta Voyager transport ($6,500).

The big-to-do at Krell was the upgrading of their entire line. The entire FPB series has been reworked and reissued as the X series. Major differences include a greater class-A operating envelope, a new Plateau Biasing circuit (version 3), and the new CAST System 2 current-drive topology. The stereo units have been renamed the ex series: now we have the 300cx, 400cx, and 700cx (the model numbers indicate the power ratings). The monoblocks also go up in power, get the new biasing circuitry and the wider class-A operating envelope, and are now known as the 350Mcx, 450Mcx, and 750Mcx.

The McIntosh demo had a long line to get in. “Hot coffee!!! Hey, Sally Goff, how are you?” Took the tour, noticed McIntosh's devotion to stereo and home theater, and drooled appropriately over the tubed C2200 stereo preamp ($4,580). See this issue’s “Sam's Space” for a review of this exquisite enfant terrible.

—Jonathan Scull

Robert Deutsch on Accessories

It's well known in the fashion business that turning a so-so outfit into one that looks stunning is often just a matter of finding the right accessories: scarves, belts, jewelry, etc. In audio, much the same principle holds. You can have a high-quality source, amplification, and...
speakers, but the system might not sing until you've got the right accessories: cables, power-line conditioners, and resonance-controlling racks, stands, and footers. My assignment for the last few CES and HE shows has been "Affordable Electronics"; this time, ready for a change, I requested "Accessories." It made for a busy time at the old CES.

Cables

The biggest name in the cable business is still Monster, but their new-product announcements had to do mostly with cables for games and car stereos. The one new product that intrigued me was a high-performance IEEE 1394 (FireWire) cable, IEEE 1394 being one of the proposed transmission standards for high-resolution digital sound formats. If the standard is widely adopted for audio, we're likely to see more high-end IEEE 1394 cables; in the meanwhile, the Monster FireLink 300 is the first such cable from a specialist manufacturer, and the price is $24.95/meter. For more conventional digital connections—and in a very different price range—is the new Valhalla digital cable from Nordost, a single-filament cable with dual braided shield, which costs $2000 for a 1m S/PDIF cable and $2300 for the AES/EBU version.

Nirvana—I always have to concentrate to make sure I don't say "Valhalla" when I mean "Nirvana," and vice versa—makes the topline S-L speaker cable ($1620/3m); this is now joined by the new S-X Ltd. ($2365/3m), described as "S-L on steroids." Ensemble, from Switzerland, has an entirely new line of cables, featuring special RCA and speaker connectors designed for extremely tight fit. They also make tube sockets that grab the tube pins in a vise-like grip.

TARA Labs' upmarket "The One" and "The Two" cables have the so-called Isolated Floating Shield in combination with separate Floating Ground Station RFI/EMI "sink" boxes. I can confirm that this arrangement is effective sonically, but having a bunch of boxes with wires connected to them is cumbersome. It seems that TARA agrees; the new versions of these cables have the same technology incorporated into the cables themselves.

Chris Sommavigo's Illuminati digital cables (more recently marketed by Kimber Kable) have been among the most highly regarded; he now has a new company, Stereovox, and the first product is the SE1-600 interconnect. This is an all-out design with elliptical solid-core silver signal wire, concentrically wound PTFE insulators, "intimately stressed contact resistance soldering process," and special custom XShadow RCA connectors. A 1m pair will set you back $2500. The new products from the folks at Kimber Kable are the Palladian power cords, which feature standing-wave-reduction technology and WattGate connectors: $1060 for 6' of the 10-gauge PK 10.

If that sounds like a lot (and it is), the Palladians seem positively bargain-priced compared to the $2330 Shunyata Research King Cobra power cord. However, Shunyata has not abandoned the more impecunious audiophile; they've just introduced the Diamondback, a power cord that sells for $149 and still features 100% shielding, cryogenically treated copper, and heavy-gauge, solid-brass contacts plated with pure copper and an overlay of gold. Harmonic Technology is another cable manufacturer that has made a real effort to reach those without deep pockets. The new Harmony Link interconnect and Harmony Wave speaker cables use the same solid single-crystal copper used in other Harmonic Technology cables, but cost only $79 for a 1m interconnect and $129 for an 8' speaker cable.

For me, the most exciting cable news was from Cardas Audio: the SE speaker cable is specifically designed for SET/horn combinations, and although the price is only $235/5' pair, the sound, according to George Cardas, is better in this type of system than his top-of-the-line Golden Reference ($1824). This same cable is used for the wiring harness of the new Avantgarde Uno 3.0 speaker; I expect to be checking it out when my Uno 2.0s are updated.

Power-Line Conditioners

Power-line conditioners (PLCs) are now a major product category, and Chang Lightspeed has been at this game longer than most. Their "No Coils/No Transformers" PLCs are in Mk.II configuration, with a new filtering system that is said to produce even better results. Balanced Power Technologies is not ashamed to use isolation transformers (as well as other filtering devices) in PLCs; their claim is to offer "balanced power for the masses," with models like the BP-1 ($449), which features a 1000VA transformer, four balanced isolated outlets, and four unbalanced outlets for power amps. Monster Cable's new PLC entry is the flagship PowerSource HTS 7000 balanced transformer ($1295), with "tri-mode circuitry" and sequenced AC power turn-on/off. Sequenced turn-on, with adjustable delays, is also featured in
PS Audio's Power Director ($1495), which has 12 power outlets and four 20-amp Ultimate Outlet circuits.

Other PLCs that caught my eye include the new Sound Application XE-12 ($4200, each one made by Jim Weil with fanatical attention to detail), the Power Wing from Jena Labs ($2800 customer-direct price, broadband capacitive filtering and proprietary distributive filtering on each duplex outlet, cryogenic treatment), and, now distributed by May Audio, the Quantum Octave ($449)—a power bar that includes, in addition to surge protection and series filtering, the controversial Quantum Resonance Technology material treatment (similar to that used in the famous Tice clock), which is claimed to "stabilize" the AC line.

**Stands, Racks, Footers**

The name of the game here is resonance control: isolating components from the effects of vibration from the outside and/or to drain off internally generated vibration. If all of this can be done within the structure of an attractive stand that houses equipment, so much the better. This is the approach taken by a number of designers, including Volkmar Dribbisch of pARticular Design. The pARticular stands have been exhibited in art galleries as well as at CES; a measure of their success is that they started in 1997 with two stands and four dealers and now have 16 stands and 50 dealers.

**Naim Audio** is not a company I normally think of as being in the stand/rack field, but the new Naim Fraim modular equipment stand looks attractive and well-thought-out, with a tripod structure, inter-level cup-spice surfaces, and ball decouplers under the equipment shelves. A four-shelf unit sells for $3050.

Ball bearings are used for isolation by several companies, including Visteck, whose Aurios MBs have been changed for easier leveling, and Symposium, whose Rollerblocks are now Series 2 and have available the Grade 3 Superball, a tungsten-carbide ball with tolerances of sphericity and diameter of three parts per million. The other new products from Symposium are the top-of-the-line Quantum platform ($1199), which is divided into quadrants, each isolated and having a complex foam/honeycombed sandwich configuration, and the Precision Rack, constructed of solid "aircraft" aluminum and serving as a frame for the various Symposium shelves.

Carbon fiber is favored as a material for resonance control by the well-known Black Diamond Racing and by SR Composites, a company I hadn't encountered before. **Black Diamond Racing** has recently supplemented the Mk.3 and Mk.4 Pyramid Cones with The Pock ($60), a 2.75" disc that can be used alone or in combination with Pyramid Cones. **SR Composites** makes amp stands and component racks with carbon-fiber composite shelves; the four-tier SRX-4 costs $5000. Resonance control of another, much more specialized sort is provided by the Diendle Creature tube damping rings from Divergent Technologies. Available in a variety of sizes and costing $1750-$35 each, these PTFE/titanium rings slip over tubes to reduce microphones.

You want vibration control at a bargain-basement price? **Bright Star Audio** has the improved (heavier, greater load capacity, improved lateral stability) Air Mass 3 and Air Mass 1VID isolation platforms at $99 and $149, respectively. If that's still too much for you, the new Bright Star IsoNode visco-elastic polymer feet are $12.50 for a set of four. Who said that accessories had to be expensive?

**Miscellany**

Headphones are usually classified as accessories, but they're really loudspeakers (or amplifier-loudspeaker combinations) for intimate listening by one person. In any case, I found a couple of interesting new headphones and headphone systems at this year's CES. The Stax Model 4070 ($2650) is the first closed-back electrostatic headphone from the company that pioneered open-end headphones. It sounded great combined with the new SRM-717 ($2750) driver unit. The Amphony Model 1000 ($129) is the first wireless headphone to use the 2.4GHz transmitter frequency, which allows a data rate of more than 3Mbps, with no audio compression applied.

**Shakti Innovations** has a new room acoustic treatment called The Holograph, which is supposed to reduce the audiobility of room reflections by generating "musically complementary reflective energy." The Holograph is a set of wooden panels, to be placed in corners behind loudspeakers. A brief demo convinced me that it did something, but I can't say whether, as claimed, the result was "a stunning increase in realism."

Finally — whew! — a demonstration of the **Digital Innovations** SkipDoctor scratch-repair kit was totally convincing: a 1VID scratched with steel wool would not even load, but after a polishing treatment from the SkipDoctor MD ($99), it played without a hitch. Just the thing for resurrecting those CDs you've been using as coasters. —**Robert Deutsch**

*Stereophile, May 2002*
"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 bi-amped 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...."

Michael Fremer, Stereophile, January 2001
Have Jake Heggie & Terrence McNally

THE DEAD WALK

given new life to American opera?

by Wes Phillips

People are wrong when they say the opera isn’t what it used to be. It is what it used to be. That’s what’s wrong with it. —Noël Coward

If there’s any single person who has made it his mission to prove Noël Coward wrong, it is former San Francisco Opera general director洛夫·曼苏里。He spearheaded the SFO’s Pacific Views program, which undertook to vindicate the vitality of the opera repertoire by commissioning new works and presenting rarely performed operas. The program was responsible for Conrad Susa’s Dangerous Liaisons (1994), Stewart Wallace’s Harvey Milk (1996), and André Previn’s A Streetcar Named Desire (1998).

In March 1998, Mansouri announced what many observers considered a reckless gamble: The SFO had tapped Jake Heggie, an unknown composer, and Terrence McNally, a playwright who had never written a libretto, to produce a major opera based on the award-winning book Dead Man Walking, by Sister Helen Prejean, for the 2000 season.

Heggie was then known primarily for having composed eminently singable music, most significantly for Frederica von Stade, for whom he had written three large-scale song cycles, two major works for soloist and chorus, and orchestral songs.

McNally is well-known as the Pulitzer Prize–winning author of Bad Habits, The Ritz, Lips Together, Teeth Apart, The Lisbon Traviata, Master Class, Love! Valour! Compassion!, and the books for the musicals The Kiss of the Spider Woman, The Full Monty, and Ragtime. However, while he had never written an opera before, he was an enthusiastic and knowledgeable opera lover, as he had so wittily revealed in The Lisbon Traviata and Master Class. He leapt at the chance to produce a significant new work.

But McNally was not enthusiastic about Mansouri’s original suggestion that he and Heggie adapt René Clair’s Les Belles de Nuit.
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Reflect
“Terrence just could not have been less interested,” said Jake Heggie. “He wanted his first opera to be a serious drama and he wanted it to be an American story. A year later, we got back together. Terrence arrived with 10 ideas and he said, ‘But there’s only one I really want to work on.’ The first one was Dead Man Walking, and the hair on the back of my neck stood up. I said, ‘You can stop right there.’

“Terrence said, ‘I took the trouble to write this list, can I at least read it?’

“I said sure, but I honestly don’t remember a single other thing from the list—I was already working out the story. It was just so operatic. It needed an opera house, or so it seemed to me.”

Mansouri agreed, and set about acquiring a cast that could do the project justice. He tapped mezzo-soprano Helen Graham for the crucial role of Sister Helen. Longtime

“Dead Man Walking was just so operatic. It needed an opera house.”—Jake Heggie

Heggie protagonist Frederica von Stade enthusiastically accepted the role of the convicted murderer’s mother. Patrick Summers, principal guest conductor for the SF Opera, agreed to conduct—when Heggie had worked in the opera’s public relations department, he had given some of his songs to Summers, who was immediately supportive. Broadway veteran Joe Mantello was chosen to direct. The only hitch was casting the convicted murderer, Joseph De Rocher. A casting call went out and 50 baritones were auditioned. When John Packard walked on stage, Mansouri said his first thought was, “Oh my God, I hope he can sing! Then he opened his mouth! Yes!”

The casting completed, the group was summoned to read through the initial draft. Before that reading was over, several cast members were in tears. “From the first workshop, we knew Dead Man Walking would be a success,” said John Packard. “We singers knew. That first reading, it sounded like really good musical theater, and Jake rewrote it in front of us to sound like a real opera. Everybody had their two cents, and Jake encouraged people to put in their two cents. Patrick Summers had a lot to say—especially when it came to orchestration.”

Heggie, too, remarked on Summers’ contribution. “Patrick Summers is a remarkable conductor and he really knows how to make things come alive as I imagined them—sometimes even better than I imagined them. He found elements of the score that I wasn’t even aware that I had put in.”

Susan Graham put it like this: “Dead Man Walking is different on every single level from anything I’ve done before. It goes beyond the language—although I do believe that when a singer sings in her native language, it packs a more emotional punch. And when we sing in the language the audience speaks, it’s that much more direct for them. But the thing that made Dead Man Walking so different was the subject matter and the way it was addressed by Terrence and Jake. Their take on it was extremely human. They weren’t interested in telling a political story; they were telling the real human drama and exploring the relationships that developed because of those unspeakable acts and how that develops into something that transcends all of them.”

Even though everyone was convinced they had the makings of a success in their hands, the material itself took an emotional toll. Dead Man Walking tells the tale of a convicted murderer, Joseph De Rocher, who reaches out to Sister Helen Prejean—first as a pen-pal, later as a spiritual advisor—in the final days before his execution. In a prologue, the audience witnesses his participation in a brutal rape and murder; the rest of the work recounts Sister Helen’s journey as she attempts to help him achieve a level of moral comprehension of his crimes as means of finding redemption. But the opera is not simplistic in its approach—mirroring the balance in Sister Helen’s book, it addresses the inescapable grief of the victims’ families and the toll the whole death apparatus takes on those who live with it.

“Sister Helen was an outsider who came into this prison world of darkness,” said Susan Graham. “She was such an inspiration—both tangibly and by her very existence. Her spiritual philosophies and the kind of person she is informed the opera. The work would have been very different if she weren’t the kind of person she is. But Jake and Terrence took her sense of humor into account, and her ability to reach out and speak to and embrace the fallen man.

“The opera is about the journey of these two people, but I would venture to say that it is almost more about Sister Helen’s journey—I think De Rocher’s journey is her journey. Because it’s a very close human story, to do it effectively you couldn’t avoid sort of living it each time—and when you’re living it every day for six hours in rehearsal for six weeks, it can wear you down. It was very, very tough.”

“Composing Dead Man Walking was challenging because one lives with the emotion every single day,” Heggie said. “There’s a lot of grief and anguish throughout the piece, and I definitely internalized all of that, which is why I needed to take breaks during the writing. The characters are so intense. To keep them honest and real I had to give them balance. For instance, Sister Helen has a great sense of humor. If I wanted to make you care about her, I had to give her that human side, too.”

That sense of humor comes to the fore in several memorable scenes, most notably an encounter with a highway cop on Sister Helen’s first trip to Angola Prison. “Lady, no one’s in a hurry to get to Angola… I never gave a nun no ticket before. Gave a ticket to an IKS agent one time. Got audited that year.”

That encounter also illustrates another of Dead Man Walking’s strengths: McNally’s libretto is written in contemporary American English that’s as plain as stone and clean as bone. But that doesn’t mean it’s flat. “One of the reasons it was so easy to set Terrence’s words is that he has a sense of forward motion in his language,” said Heggie. “That means there’s a rhythm and an innate musicality on the page, and I just picked up on that.”

Indeed, it is widely accepted that operas sung in English can be just as hard for American audiences to understand as those
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written in Italian or German or French, but a great deal of DMW's impact comes from the way the words, buoyed by Heggie's athletic melodies, bypass the intellect and lodge in the emotions. "Jake has a unique ability to write as language is spoken," said John Packard. "It has a musical line, but it is very much like the spoken line. That's like Mozart. We didn't have to stretch out a whole sentence to fit a line like you have to do in Puccini."

"Jake's writing carries these sweeping melodic lines," Graham agreed. "Terrence wrote great text that is eminently singable, and Jake knows a lot about singing and he set it so it was as easy to sing as it could possibly be."

"I just love the play of the English language," said Heggie. "The way the vowel sounds work and trying to find musically equivalent expressions, to find the right dynamic, the right ressaut to make a vowel or a consonant work. I like those challenges.

"The hard thing about this score is it never stays in one tempo for very long. It's like performing in a space ship."

DMW honors operatic qualities: music combined with literature in service of a great story.

English, or like speech, where you are constantly changing ... and I think that's particularly true of Americans. If you're setting English to music, you're doing something you have to be sensitive to—that's just the way we talk.

As the world premiere drew closer, director Joe Mantello joined the cast and crew to begin the arduous process of actually staging the new opera. "When I first arrived for rehearsal, I had my idea of how to act the part and how to project the bad-guy image," said Packard. "Joe told me to 'Go to the dark spot.' As we rehearsed it, it all became more and more real—and it became increasingly hard for me to get out of that character after I left rehearsal. That's a fairly dark place to be."

"I was in virtually every scene," said Graham. "And on top of everything else, it was really hard music to sing. There are times when you really have to just think technically, but you can't dissociate so much that you lose the emotional thread. There are just so many things to think about during the performance of a piece like that—not to mention the fact that we had open recording microphones on the very first performance of the piece ever!

Adding to the pressure during the premiere run was the death of Graham's father. She took solace in her work and her collaborators. "Sister Helen, the person, and Sister Helen, the role, helped me deal with some of that loss. Because I was so involved with her on so many levels, I had a heightened spiritual awareness which informed what I was dealing with in my private life."

Dead Man Walking premiered on October 7, 2000 to packed houses and almost universal critical acclaim. Even more significant, audiences embraced the new opera with a passion that necessitated the addition of two performances to the initial run—an almost unheard-of event for a contemporary opera. Five opera companies—Opera Pacific, Cincinnati Opera, New York City Opera, Austin Lyric Opera, and the State Opera of South Australia—have already commissioned new stagings of the work, and the Dallas Symphony Orchestra has arranged to perform Heggie's orchestral suite from the opera on tour, making Dead Man Walking the most successful American opera premiere in more than half a century.

In February, Erato released its live recording of the premiere performance, a handsomely packaged two-CD set that includes a libretto liberally illustrated with photos from the SFO production. It's an amazing document, and the strongest possible argument for the opera's merits.

The recording is blessed with full-bodied, natural sound; the only clues that it was recorded live are some subdued audience reactions during the drama itself, and extended—and well-deserved—applause at the end of each disc. The balance between orchestral accompaniment and singing is well-judged, and the singers can all be heard clearly, even in the massed choruses when different groups sing opposing lyrics.

Heggie's music is thoroughly contemporary and completely accessible. If McNally's text achieves much of its beauty through its undorned plain-speaking, Heggie's soaring melodies offer a similar straightforward appeal. The orchestration is unfussy and full of color and texture. The musical vocabulary is modern and eclectic—Heggie incorporates rock and jazz elements—but this is unmistakably opera, not Broadway in evening dress.

Nowhere is this better illustrated than in the orchestral music that accompanies the prologue. A gentle, almost Debussian evocation of a warm summer's eve turns tense and violent when the De Rocher brothers attack the young lovers. In just a few measures Heggie covers a broad swath of emotion, from wistful promise to abject terror, with phenomenal precision. His bold rhythms and surging melodies are beguilingly tonal for the most part, but when needed, the music takes on a menacing edge.

Susan Graham's performance as Sister Helen is a wonder. Her character is loving and good-natured, but overwhelmed by the emotional toll her vocation requires. She likes De Rocher, but is horrified by his crimes and upset by her inability to offer his victims' parents the solace they, too, seek. Shouldering the lion's share of the opera, Graham sings the first words we hear from the stage as well as the last.

Frederica von Stade, as De Rocher's mother, is sublime. She's a loving mother who can't understand how two of her boys have ended up in jail for hideous crimes. Horrified by what her Joe has done, she cries, "I just don't understand what good my Joe's being dead will do." It would be hard to choose a high point from von Stade's career, but this performance must surely count among the contenders.

John Packard has the almost impossible task of making a brutal character sympathetic in just four scenes. Astonishingly, he succeeds. His Joseph De Rocher comes across as genuinely tough but, ultimately, human. He gets the sneer right, but he also imbues the man with a vulnerability that makes us care about his redemption. His death, portrayed in painfully stark simplicity, delivers an emotional payoff that can only be called operatic. That, as much as anything else, illustrates the triumph of Dead Man Walking. The work reinvigorates opera by honoring the qualities that opera has always venerated: music combined with literature in the service of a great story.

Jake Heggie remains modest. "When you consider it was a first effort—it was Terrence's first opera, it was my first opera—it's quite amazing how much it has resonated with people."
A

s we all know, it's the sound that counts. However, good looks enhance pride of ownership, and Theta Digital's class-AB, 400W Citadel is as handsome a monoblock as these jaded eyes have laid eyes on.

The Citadel fairly screams "buy me!" Your first enthusiastic glance will take in the bright aluminum case, standing almost a dizzying 20" high. The aluminum (a black finish is also available) clads a steel chassis and back panel. A thick, curved aluminum endcap faces the listener, with a nicely styled control panel set out slightly from the cap. Viewed from the front, it looks like an architectural element set into a high-tech building—the entrance, perhaps. Ah, Metropolis.

The endcap is polished to such a shine that it positively dazzles when any light is shone on it. The control pod (excuse me, Mr. Kubrick) has a matte finish, the two textures played off against each other with subtle elegance. Very textual.

The control surface carries a trick Standby/Operate switch that I find beautiful in execution—it makes you think about Theta every time you switch from Standby to Operate, or vice versa. That's because the solid, chromed-brass Theta logo above the LEDs is the switch in question. It has a positive, precise movement when pressed—something like the heavy, short-throw, gated manual gearbox on a '60s Ferrari—and makes a nice, confidence-inducing click when engaged: "Sir Yes Sir! Switch to 'O' position Sir!"

Under the logo-switch are three LEDs. Right to left, the first glows red in Standby mode, green in Operate. The central LED is a Thermal indicator that shines on if the Citadel's temperature exceeds preset values, and shuts it off so it can cool down. (For the record, this never happened during my auditioning, and I blasted the Citadels from here to kingdom come!) The left LED, which does much to explain the "Digital" in Theta's name, is the Digital Lock indicator for the planned upgrade (retrofitable) D/A board. Alas, the board wasn't ready in time to be reviewed. But when a Citadel is so equipped, this LED will first glow red, then orange when you've got a lock. And green will the LED if you select an analog input.

Finally, there's an input-selector button centered below the LEDs, but it does nothing without the upgrade DAC board installed.

The Citadel has no visible heatsinks.

Heat transfer—blessedly, there wasn't too much of it—is handled by a series of curved, punched-out blanks on the sides and top. The punched-out areas are filled with contemporary-looking black-metal inserts that are perforated with small circular holes to let the heat out. On the Citadel's sides are four cutouts about a third of the way up from the base—the "belt" line, where a strip of solid metal adds rigidity. Below this belt are three cutouts that more or less line up with those above, while above the belt line a fourth strike opens up a good-sized cutout for maximum thermal efficiency.

The Citadel is beautifully executed, with a subtle, handmade Aston Martin look. There's a hint of quality in its looks that wheedles its way into your consciousness. No one element seems overemphasized; everything points to a simple, elegant, unified aesthetic.

**We need backup!**

At the top of the Citadel's rear panel is an overhang that's—all together now—curved! A lot is going on beneath this overhang—there's a sort of Superman-in-a-phone-booth change of identity to a pro-world layout: markings and LEDs, a board expansion bay, and separate power switch and IEC mains-in for analog and digital signals. Compared with its sides and top, the Citadel's rear panel is all business.

Center top of the back panel is a perfectly sized handle, which can't hurt—each Citadel weighs 110 lbs. Below that, to the left, are one or (optionally) two sets of output binding posts for biwiring. Theta calls these unusual posts "high-contact/low-pressure." They use Cardas 9 AWG Crosslink/Teflon wire, and a custom-made Delrin/rhodium-plated output connector tightened down with a hex key—perfect for audiophiles who don't change cables at the drop of a hat. The manual contains dire warnings about overtightening these posts when using spade lugs: You don't want to feed them bent-to-hell brass spades. But give them something nice and flat and they'll make a tight surface-contact patch. It's

---


**Dimensions:** 19 \ 11/16" H by 8 15/16" W by 23 3/8" D. Weight: 110 lbs.

**Finishes:** silver, black.

**Serial numbers of units reviewed:** 024907, 024908.

**Price:** $15,800/pair (second set of output terminals for biwiring adds $300 per amplifier; communications I/O also adds $300 per amplifier). Approximate number of dealers: 85.

Theta Citadel monoblock amplifier
Measurments

Following its 60-minute pre-conditioning period at one-third full power into 8 ohms, the big Theta Citadel's aluminum casework was warm, though the inset black grilles on the top panel were too hot to keep my hand on. Although the specified voltage gain is the usual 6dB higher from the balanced input, due to the doubled voltage swing, the measured gain at 1kHz was actually the same from both balanced and unbalanced input terminals—you need to flip a switch to select the correct jack—at a fairly low 25.35dB into 8 ohms. The typical 2V maximum output from a CD player will therefore not be sufficient to drive the Citadel to clipping. The amplifier didn't invert signal polarity from either input and its input impedance was a high 129k ohms balanced, 64.3k ohms unbalanced. At 0.36 ohm across the audioband, the Citadel's output impedance was higher than we usually see from a solid-state design; this is presumably due to its balanced-bridged topology, with which the speaker is driven in push-pull between two amplifier outputs. As a result, there was a moderate degree of interaction between the amplifier and Stereophile's simulated loudspeaker, resulting in ±0.25dB of response modification (fig.1, top trace). This graph also reveals a response that is flat throughout the audioband and rolls off by 1dB at 180kHz. This was with an 8 ohm load; the small-signal bandwidth decreases a bit with decreasing load impedance. Fig.1 was taken using the balanced input jack; the behavior via the unbalanced jack was identical.

Fig.2 shows the Citadel's reproduction of a low-level 10kHz squarewave; the risetime is suitably short, and there are no signs of ultrasonic instability. The 1kHz squarewave (not shown) was essentially perfect. The Citadel was pretty quiet, with an unweighted, wideband signal/noise ratio (ref. 1W into 8 ohms) of 85dB, which is equivalent to a very wide dynamic range of 111.5dB with respect to the amplifier's clipping point. A-weighted, the S/N ratio improved by 10dB.

Small-signal THD into 8 ohms was low: 0.001% or below across the audioband (fig.3). But as this graph shows, the THD rises by a factor of three every time the impedance halves, and at 2.83V into 2 ohms, the distortion hovers at around 0.1%. At low power levels, the harmonic content is a mix of low-order products (fig.4), but at high powers appears to be almost pure third-harmonic (fig.5). This behavior was identical from both balanced and unbalanced inputs.

Fig.6 shows the spectrum of the Theta's output while it drove a low-frequency tone of 50Hz at 100W into 8 ohms. Despite this level being 6dB below the amplifier's specified clipping point, the third harmonic lies at a quite high −56dB (0.15%). The sec-
two massive chokes almost as large as the power transformer. These are fed from an ultrafast, soft-recovery, 35A bridge rectifier. Theta claims this results in a high-current power-supply line more than 8000% cleaner than conventional supplies provide.

### Sound

In Dido’s “Here with me (Chillin’ with the Family Mix),” from the UltraChilled 01 Trip Hop compilation (2 CD’s, UL110-2), a woman’s voice floats way back in the soundstage. The first time I heard it, I wanted to dive into that soundstage to inform this woman that I was the guy she was singing about, grab her, and...er, give her a big hug. There was a wonderful dimensionality to her voice, backed by powerful drums and a small, eclectic quirky band. The whole sonic construct floated like a butterfly: light, transparent, truly musical.

Then, from the same set, Morcheeba’s “Another Chance (Afterlife Mix)”: I have the original of this recording, and the remix sounds better. Again, I noted that affinity for beautiful, stainless female vocals and a full and lovely mid-range, even as I noticed that the bass was a touch lighter than that of the Linn Klimax or the big Krell FPB 350Mc’s—until I turned the volume up. Then the Citadels hauled off and gave it to me, top to bottom, in a manner most remarkable—the bass, which sounded rather light at lower levels, took on a dynamic, articulate, detailed, and powerful sound at higher volumes that was just splendid. Everything else stayed in place: nothing broke up, bloated out, or became strident or

ond, fourth, and fifth harmonics all lie at around the ~80dB point (0.01%), however, and while some 120Hz power-supply content can be seen, this is not, at ~100dB (0.001%), going to be audible. Halving the load impedance doubled the level of the third harmonic to 0.3%; increasing the power to 367W into 8 ohms, while below the specified clipping point of 400W, gave almost 2% of third harmonic.

There was also a slightly higher level of intermodulation distortion than I was expecting. Fig.7 shows the spectrum of the Citadel’s output

![Fig.5 Theta Citadel, 1kHz waveform at 104W into 8 ohms (top), distortion and noise waveform with fundamental notched out (bottom, not to scale).](image)

while it drove an equal mix of 19kHz and 20kHz tones into 4 ohms at a level close to clipping. The 1kHz difference component is acceptably low, at ~74dB (0.02%), though the higher-order components at 18kHz and 21kHz rose above the ~60dB line (0.1%).

Fig.8 plots the percentage of distortion and noise in the amplifier’s output against continuous output power. An amplifier’s clipping point is usually defined as 1% THD+noise, at which point the waveform, viewed on an oscilloscope, is visibly squared-off. The Citadel failed to meet its specified output power of 400W into 8 ohms at the usual 1% clip point, raising just 250W (24dBW). It did deliver 400W into this load (26dBW) when the specified clipping point was relaxed to 2% THD+N as specified by Theta. At this level of distortion, the Theta delivered 610W into 4 ohms (24.8dBW) and 715W into 2 ohms (22.5dBW). In case it might be thought that the Citadel’s failure to meet its specified power was due to a low AC voltage from the wall, my test bench has its own 20A circuit, and I do monitor the mains voltage. The supply voltage was a high 125V when the Citadel clipped into 2 ohms.

The Citadel’s balanced-bridge design meant that I couldn’t test its behavior with low-duty-cycle tonebursts using the Miller Audio Research analyzer. But perhaps most significant regarding the Theta’s effect on sound quality is the very gentle way in which it clips, as shown by the traces in Fig.8. The low noise floor means that the point at which the measured THD begins to reflect the distortion content is quite low: around the 200mW mark into 8 ohms, and below that into lower impedances. The distortion stays at around the same level until the amplifier is delivering a few tens of watts, at which point it starts to gently climb, without the usual sharp “knee” in the trace. While high-power transients will be accompanied by high levels of distortion, these will disappear as soon as the transients are over. In this respect, the Theta Citadel behaves more like a traditional tube amplifier.

—John Atkinson
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grainy. The soundstage and everything on it held their positions. The only profound difference was in the bass, which reared up and roared.

Also on the Ultra Chilled compilation is ZERO’s “Destiny,” which not only delivers another female vocal to die for, but has a prominent guitar that showed off the Citadel’s speed. Through the Citadel’s there was always a beautiful bloom to music, with no artificial flavoring. In fact, everything on this album simply flew at me from deep behind the speakers and way off to the left and right, behind and to the sides — very, very expansive, and superbly transparent.

Lingering in the world of Trip Hop, I switched to another compilation disc, Paris Lounge (Wagram 3069692), a faster, more dynamic recording than Ultra Chilled. Although I earlier described the Citadel’s bass as “somewhat light,” this nimble CD set everything straight in that department with powerful, deep, very pacy, fast, and — again — articulate bass. Nothing missing down there, I can tell you. In “Sporto Honitz,” a plaintive horn blows behind what must be the hottest female vocal I’ve ever “seen” between my speakers. The entire musical presentation was nicely balanced; my feet tapped with no particular control from my brain. The atmosphere the Citadel’s re-created had me imagining that I was in Pamplona, and tomorrow was the Running of the Bulls.

I couldn’t leave Paris Lounge before nodding to DJ Stani and DJ Peco’s “Le Peuple de l’Herbe.” Ostensibly a song about “the people of the herb” (one of the lyrics is “you wanna smoke somethin’”) it’s a little tongue-in-cheek but very enjoyable, with wide, deep, dense, articulated bass, a fine midrange, and highs (ahem) that were remarkable in their naturalness. (There’s also a Berlin Lounge; Wagram 3069692. These recordings are widely available; I bought both Lounges and Ultra Chilled at my local Virgin Mega-Mega.)

The Citadel was delicate, detailed, intricate, articulate, and sweet.

And now for something completely different: J.S. Bach’s Adagio with cellist Mischa Maisky (from Toccata, Adagio and Fugue in C, D’G 439 863–2), made the hairs on my neck stand straight up. The air, the emotion, the microchanges in volume and the sounds of bow on string — it all made my heart race with pleasure. What better recording could there be for limning the mid- and lower midrange? This disc, with works by Handel, Schumann, Chopin, Debussy, and others, highlighted a certain lithe- ness, delicacy, and transparency in the Citadel’s reproduction.

A little jazz? How about Bags Meets Wes (DCC Jazz GZS-1093)? The dynamics were right on time. The acoustic bass was more detailed than I’ve ever heard it through my JMlab Utopia loudspeakers, if not as powerful and tractor-pulling strong as the Krell 350Mc can manage. The guitar was marvelous — fast and detailed, yet harmonic — and I could almost see Wes Montgomery’s fingers at work. Drummer “Philby” Joe Jones sounded just as one might have heard him in a small club; so real to the touch, Wynton Kelly’s piano was fulsome, if, again, somewhat lighter than heard through the big Krells, or the Linn Klimax, but there was nothing missing, just a sweeter swing to the music. Listening to Milt Jackson’s vibes can tell you a lot about a component’s ability to reproduce music, and the Citadel was superb, just superb.

The initial taps on the bars were there, followed by a delightful blooming of harmonies that mixed with the next mallet stroke, and so on. Heaven.

What better to follow this with than Louis Armstrong letting us have it in “St. James Infirmary,” from Satchmo Plays King Oliver (Audio Fidelity AFSD 5930). Right from the first note, it was obvious that the Citadels were the amps to play back this richly textured cut. The cymbals sounded so real that, once again, I had to kick those damn neck hairs back under my collar. Talk about midrange magic and perfectly rendered male vocals — how could one possibly do better? Clean, harmonic, timely, delicate beyond description, and rich — with no chestiness at all to muck up the man’s marvelous voice. The soundstage was airy and transparent, Armstrong almost there in the room with me.

Listening to a Japanese K2-processed CD of The Modern Jazz Quartet (Atlantic 1265), I confirmed that there was something almost feminine about the Citadel (talk about a misnomer!). It was delicate, detailed, intricate, articulate, and sweet — not warm, but musical and airy, especially in the highs. And if I turned up the volume, the bass could whack the ball with aplomb behind the left-field fence. Elegant, that’s what it was. Elegant.

One can demonstrate this most easily by spinning This One’s For Blauw (Analog Productions CAP015). The difference in sound between the various amplifiers I compared the Theta to in the course of this review told me practically everything I needed to know about the Theta. The Klimax was fast and extended, a little “tinkly” in the highs on Duke Ellington’s piano (an artifact of the

Associated Equipment

Analog source: Forsell Air Force One turntable and tonearm; van den Hul Grasshopper GLA IV, Koetsu Rosewood Signature Platinum cartridges.

Digital sources: Accuphase DC-101 D/A processor, and DP-100 SACD transport, dCS Purcell D/D converter, dCS Elgar Plus D/A processor, Linn CD12 CD player.

Preamplifiers: Mark Levinson No.32 Reference, Balanced Audio Technology VK-505E, Lamm L2.

Power amplifiers: Linn Klimax Solo 500 and Krell FPB 350Mc monoblocks.


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leading hear on Ray the recording), with a lovely midrange, and Ray Brown's bass was as speedy on the leading edge as you could ever hope to hear and harmonically fully developed. The Krell was heavier, slower, more rich and luscious through the midrange, with sweeter highs not quite so extended, but Ray Brown's bass was phenomenal with power and richness of tone.

The Thetas were an amalgam of both. With the volume turned up, the bass was incredibly detailed and taut, if not the most powerful and balanced a little on the light side. The mids were true to life, and the highs were as sweet as could be. You want to enjoy your music? You want something delicate and filigreed, something with the tonal colors of the rainbow, you got it in the Citadel.

The sound of the Theta Digital Citadel monoblocks can be summed up in a single word: delightful.

Put a bow around it and I'll take it home to me bride.

Theta Digital's Citadel is a terrific amp for the audiophile who likes detail, delicacy, and sweetness without euphonics. It has more personality than the similarly priced but sternly linear Lamm M1.1 monoblock (see StereoFile, Vol.18 No.4 and Vol.22 No.7), it's lighter and less heavy-handed than the slightly more expensive Classe Omega stereo amp (Vol.22 No.3, WWW), and more transparent than the big Krell FPJ 350Mc monoblocks (but without the big bass) which are just a bit more expensive (Vol.23 No.8 WWW). If anything, the Citadel monoblocks sounded most like the $20,000/pair Linn Khinux with just a slightly lighter touch to the music.

As all these amps cost about the same, it comes down to purely a matter of taste, associated equipment, and the type of music you appreciate. Find a dealer who's willing to lend you one or the other (or hopefully all) of these amps, or who's ready to set up a proper demo for you with appropriate associated components. If you've got the scratch and one or another turns you on, go for it! If it comes down to the Theta, all I can say is it's worth the money and then some.

If you're asking yourself if $16,000 gets you more than $1,600, I'd have to say yes, and in a big way. Refinement, detail, spatiality, truth of timbre, timing, huge soundstages that make you feel like you're at the recording session...all these elements are what you get with the big bux. And certainly what you get with the Citadel. Highly enjoyable, highly recommended. Well done Theta!
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Quicksilver Audio Horn Mono monoblock power amplifier

Single-ended triode (SET) amplifiers are typically paired with horn loudspeakers, for good reason: most SETs produce very low power, so to get acceptable loudness you need a highly sensitive speaker, which means horns. Similarly, horn owners are often advised that the best amplifier for their speakers is a SET. Certainly, the horn-SET combination can be magical, but, in my experience, SETs are not the only type of amplifier that can sound good with horns.

Mike Sanders of Quicksilver Audio agrees. He’s a fan of horns, but his preferred amplifier design is push-pull rather than single-ended. According to Sanders, the reason for push-pull amplifiers often not being at their best with horns is that they’re normally optimized for the higher gain necessary to drive “standard” lower-sensitivity speakers, and the result with horns is too high a noise level. He also feels that it’s vitally important to keep distortion very low in the critical below-0.5W range, in which horns work most of the time. He initially designed a push-pull amplifier meeting these criteria to drive his own horn-based system, and he liked the results. He built a few more for friends with horns, and the response was sufficiently positive that he decided to turn it into a commercial product: the Horn Mono.

A low-gain Mini Mono?
Sam Tellig has written favorably about the Mini Mono (see Stereophile, March 2001, Vol.24 No.3), a Quicksilver amplifier that bears some resemblance to the Horn Mono but costs a third less ($998/pair). A superficial look at the two amps’ specifications might lead one to describe the Horn Mono as the “low-gain version of the Mini Mono,” which would make it difficult to justify the difference in price. However, according to Mike Sanders, the differences between the amps go far beyond the differences in gain. (He did build a Mini Mono that just had lower gain, but didn’t like its sound with horns.)

The Horn Mono uses a number of different components and has a substantially different circuit from the Mini Mono’s. The Horn Mono has a larger output transformer, which allows for greater power delivery in the bass: full power (25W) is available down to 20Hz for the Mini Mono, to 10Hz for the Horn Mono. While both amplifiers use the same output tubes (Tesla EL34s as supplied; auto-biasing allows use of several other types of tubes), the rest of the tube complement is different. The Mini Mono uses a single 12AX7 for driver and gain, whereas the Horn Mono uses a 7247, a more expensive dual-function tube that’s half 12AX7 and half 12AU7, the 12AX7 section being used for gain, the 12AU7 as the driver. The Horn Mono’s driver configuration permits lower output impedance and greater voltage swing—both desirable qualities.

The Horn Mono has a greater level of overall negative feedback (20dB vs 10dB for the Mini Mono), which results in about a tenth the distortion. The use of higher negative feedback is likely to

Description: Tube monoblock power amplifier. Tube complement: two EL34s, one 7247. Power output: 25W into 4 or 8 ohms (14dBW). Peak power: 50W. Bandwidth: 9Hz-100kHz. Input impedance: 100k ohms. Input sensitivity for full output: 9V.
Dimensions: 9.25” W by 6” H by 14.75” D. Weight: 30 lbs each.
Serial numbers of units reviewed: 0017 & 18 (auditioning), none visible (measuring).
Price: $1595/pair. Approximate number of dealers: 20. Warranty: 3 years parts & labor, 90 days tubes.
Manufacturer: Quicksilver Audio, 5635 Riggins Court, Unit 15, Reno, NV 89502. Tel: (775) 825-1514. Fax: (775) 825-1552. Web: www.quick silveraudio.com. E-mail: info@quicksilveraudio.com.
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rise eyebrows in some audiophile quarters, but Sanders feels that negative feedback is neither good nor bad in itself; its effect depends on the exact amount of feedback and how it's applied in a given circuit. Too little feedback can result in excessive distortion; too much impairs stability.

Other differences from the Mini Mono include a larger, chrome-plated chassis, and heavy-duty, high-quality speaker connectors. The Horn Mono is quite attractive in a way that recalls the Dynaco tube amplifiers of yore, its chrome plating adding a touch of high-tech luxury without elevating the product into the class of "audio jewelry."

Like all Quicksilver Audio products, the Horn Mono is hand-wired, and Mike Sanders personally checks each amplifier before it leaves the factory. The build quality is excellent.

As its name implies, the Horn Mono is designed to match horn loudspeakers, and the important criterion is the speaker's sensitivity, not the use of horn loading. Sanders suggests sensitivity ratings in the upper 90dB range as being appropriate, which usually means horns. In any case, my own Avantgarde Unos have a sensitivity rating of 100dB (John Atkinson actually measured 102.5dB in the September 2000 review), so it seemed that the match with the Horn Mono would be a good one.

**Setup**

Not much to say here. Introducing the Horn Monos into my system was completely straightforward, the amps blessedly free of the glitches and malfunctions that have plagued some more esoteric—and much more expensive—amplifiers I've recently had for review.1 If there was a break-in

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1 Late in the review period, one Horn Mono developed a pop about 30 seconds after turn-on—likely due to a tube warming up—but otherwise, this had no effect on the amplifier's sound.

**Measurements**

Compared with the immaculate-looking Holand Sapphire and Music Reference RM-200 tube amplifiers that preceded it on my test bench, the Quicksilver Horn Mono amplifier, with its three tubes atop its chromed chassis, looked unprepossessing. But you should never go by looks; it's performance that matters, right?

The input impedance at 1kHz was usefully high, at 98k ohms, and the amplifier preserved absolute polarity. No surprises there. However, the voltage gain into 8 ohms measured a very low 8.86dB from the 8 ohm output transformer tap. It was an even lower 5.5dB from the 4 ohm tap, meaning that no less than 1.51V will be required to pull 1W from the amplifier into 8 ohms, and that the maximum "Red Book" CD-player output level of 2V will increase the power level to just 1.75W!

This isn't a bad thing, but those using the Horn Mono will find that their preamplifier's volume control will be set much higher than they're used to with more normal amplifiers. The upside of this low sensitivity is that, as RD found, the Quicksilver is enormously quiet. Even with a very wide measurement bandwidth—<10Hz to >500kHz—the signal/noise ratio (ref. 1W/8 ohms) was 98dB, this increasing to a staggering 116dB when A-weighted. In terms of its gain and noise architecture, the Quicksilver is the best amplifier I have encountered for use with high-sensitivity speakers like horns.

Presumably as a result of the fairly high level of loop negative feedback used, the Horn Mono also has a surprisingly low output impedance for a design using an output transformer: 0.18 ohm across most of the audio band from the 4 ohm tap, rising to 0.22 ohm at 20kHz; and 0.33 ohm and 0.37 ohm, respectively, from the 8 ohm tap. As a result, the modification of the amplifier's frequency response as a result of the interaction between its source impedance and the loudspeaker impedance will be moderately low. Even from the 8 ohm tap, the response into our simulated loudspeaker load varied by only +0.2dB, -0.3dB (fig.1). This graph also shows that the response is very slightly more curtailed outside the audioband into 2 ohms than 8 ohms at this 2.83V level. (At lower levels, the response was flat down to the 10Hz limit of this graph.)

The ultrasonic rolloff, however, is complex, with a couple of shelves marking what should be a smooth curve. This kind of behavior is associated with the presence of ultrasonic resonances, even though they may be well-damped. A 1kHz squarewave (fig.2) does feature slight overshoots, though the shape of the waveform is superbly square. Repeating this test with a 10kHz squarewave (fig.3) also gives a good square shape, but with one cycle of damped ringing visible on each leading edge. Unusually, the frequency of this oscillation appears different for the

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Fig.2 Quicksilver Horn Mono, 4 ohm tap, small-signal 1kHz squarewave into 8 ohms.

Fig.3 Quicksilver Horn Mono, 4 ohm tap, small-signal 10kHz squarewave into 8 ohms.
period, it was either too short or too subtle for me to take much notice of it.

Placing the amps on the latest (1.2 MIB) Aurus component supports improved instrumental focus within the soundstage, but the effect was smaller than I'd heard with some other tube amplifiers, which suggests good vibration control. The amps sounded considerably better when getting AC through a PS Audio High Current Ultimate Outlet power-line conditioner and PS Audio Lab Cable power cord, so this is how I listened to them most of the time. The choice of interconnects between preamp and power amps had a significant impact on the tonal balance: the Nirvana SL sounded a bit too mellow; the Nordost Quattro Fils were a better match.

The Horn Monos' most immediately noticeable characteristic was their lack of noise.

Sound
The Horn Monos' most immediately noticeable characteristic was their lack of noise. Every other amplifier I've used with the Avantgarde Uno horns has produced noise — varying from being almost inaudible from the listening position when music was not playing, to being audible during soft passages in the music. Like most horn owners, I've learned to tune out the noise, but the Horn Monos eliminated the need to do this. With the Horn Monos powering the speakers, there was simply no noise from the Horns at the listening position. I had to go right up to a speaker to hear any noise at all; even then, it was barely audible.

But there's more to amplifier performance than lack of noise, and the Horn Monos impressed in other ways as well.

The Horn Monos' most immediately noticeable characteristic was their lack of noise.

**Measurements**

- **Fig.4** Quicksilver Horn Mono, 8 ohm tap, THD+N (%) vs frequency at 2.83V into (from bottom to top at 1kHz): simulated loudspeaker load, 8 ohms, 4 ohms.
- **Fig.5** Quicksilver Horn Mono, 4 ohm tap, THD+N (%) vs frequency at 2.83V into (from bottom to top at 1kHz): simulated loudspeaker load, 8 ohms, 4 ohms, 2 ohms.
- **Fig.6** Quicksilver Horn Mono, 8 ohm tap, 1kHz waveform at 3W into 4 ohms (top), distortion and noise waveform with fundamental notched out (bottom, not to scale).
- **Fig.7** Quicksilver Horn Mono, 4 ohm tap, 1kHz waveform at 750mW into 4 ohms (top), distortion and noise waveform with fundamental notched out (bottom, not to scale).
- **Fig.8** Quicksilver Horn Mono, 4 ohm tap, spectrum of 50Hz sinewave, DC-1kHz, at 13W into 4 ohms (linear frequency scale).
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The sound was smooth, engaging, with little in the way of a distinctive characteristic that could be described as coloration or lack of faithfulness to the source. I find "accuracy" to be a troublesome concept when applied to audio equipment, in that it's difficult to predict the significance of different sounds and degrees of deviation from absolute accuracy for various individuals. Granted, if we could get reproduced sound that was a 100% accurate facsimile of the original, we would all want that — well, I think we'd all want that — but as long as reproduction falls short of 100% accuracy, there are varying preferences about the sorts of deviations from absolute accuracy that are acceptable. If components with 100% accuracy were available, or if there were no variations in the preferences for different sorts of deviation from 100% accuracy, then we'd all be buying amplifiers with the same general design approach and measured performance. We don't.

In the case of the Horn Monos, the sound, while not deviating from "accuracy" in any gross or obvious way, was in the classic tube amplifier tradition of being just a bit soft and forgiving rather than clinical or hyper-detailed. The sound was entirely comfortable, with an easy-on-the-ears quality that invited continued listening. It was also wide-ranging, with good bass extension, and highs that were perhaps very slightly on the soft side. I've heard deeper, better-controlled bass from solid-state amplifiers, and more airy treble from some other tube amplifiers (SETS like the Wavelength Gemini and the Cary CAD-2A3), but the Horn Monos were not far behind on any of these parameters. The soundstage was wide (mono-block amps come by channel separation honestly), with a very good sense of depth within the soundfield.

The Horn Monos also excelled in providing dynamics. Constantine Orbelian and the Philharmonia of Russia's Vodka & Caviar (Delos 19S-3288), a re-

**Measurements**

RD with the Avantgarde Uno horn speakers (fig.9), it's no surprise that he found the sound of the Quicksilver amplifier "smooth" and "engaging."

The Horn Mono gives out moderate power levels, of course, which will not be an issue with high-sensitivity horn speakers, nor with more typical speakers like the inexpensive Paradigms RD also used in his auditioning. The Horn Mono overload in a very "soft" manner, the distortion rising in proportion to the power level.

**Fig.9**

Quicksilver Horn Mono, 4 ohm tap, HF intermodulation spectrum, DC=24kHz, 19+20kHz at 1.5W into 4 ohms (linear frequency scale).

**Fig.10**

Quicksilver Horn Mono, 8 ohm tap, distortion (%) vs continuous output power into (from bottom to top): 8 ohms, 4 ohms, 2 ohms.

Fig.10 shows the THD+N percentage changes with continuous output power from the 8 ohm tap. The amplifier doesn't actually "clip" until after the normally defined "clipping point" of 1% THD+N is reached. At this 1% point it gives out 20W into 8 ohms from the 8 ohm tap (15dBW), but less power into lower impedances, of course, which is typical of an amplifier with an output transformer. At the true clipping point from this tap, which can be just seen as the "knee" in the right-hand trace just below the top of the graph, the Horn Mono puts out 36.3W into 8 ohms (15.6dBW). However, it takes an input of 6.64V for the amplifier to reach this level, which might be beyond the capabilities of some preamplifiers.

From the 4 ohm transformer tap (fig.11), the 1% THD power was 27.3W into 8 ohms (14.4dBW); slightly less, 22W, into 4 ohms (10.4dBW); and a still useful 10W into 2 ohms (4dBW).

I used the Miller Audio Research Amplifier Profiler to examine how much power was available from this unassuming amplifier, using a tone-burst signal more typical of the transients to be found in music: 10 cycles of 1kHz followed by 400 cycles of silence. The results from the 4 ohm taps are shown in fig.12. Into 16 ohms (red trace), the THD (noise, as this FFT-based measurement actually sums the levels of the actual harmonics) is astonishingly low for a tube amp, before rising to reach the 1% THD point at 12W (13.8dBW). Into 8 ohms (black), this point is reached at 23.6W (13.7dBW), while into 4 ohms (blue), the relevant figure is 44.9W (13.5dBW). The very small difference in the measured dBW rating means that, into impedances that are equal to or greater than the specified transformer tap, the amplifier behaves very close to being a pure voltage source with this transient signal — which is more typical of a high-performance solid-state design!

This graph shows that the maximum power available from the 4 ohm tap with this transient signal is no less than 62.7W into 2 ohms (green trace, 12dBW), equivalent to an RMS output current of 5.6A! Note, however, the fairly rapid rise in distortion at lower output powers into this low impedance. And current limiting sets in into impedances lower than 2 ohms, limiting the maximum 1 ohm power (magenta trace) to 29.6W (5.7dBW), which is again around 5.6A current.

I was frankly astonished by the
cent recording of Russian orchestral showpieces and one of my "Records To Die For" this year, is full of material to give any system a dynamic workout, and selections like Khachaturian's "Sabre Dance" simply crackled with energy. Compared to the Wavelength Gemini and the CAID-2A3, whose power output is in the 3–5W range, the Horn Monos were, as one might expect, able to drive the Avantgardes to a higher undistorted level.

One aspect of performance where, I believe, SETs like the Wavelength and the Cary are still superior is in providing a kind of see-through quality — what Sam Tellig refers to as music being "lit from within." The view through the Horn Monos was by no means veiled or obscured, but when the speakers were driven by SETs, voices and instruments seemed to have a more rounded, three-dimensional quality. I would also put the sound of the SETs ahead (though not by much) in communicating the most subtle aspects of musical expression — what some call microdynamics. Again, it's not as though the Horn Monos were obviously deficient or lacking in this area, but that the best SET designs offer even more. Of course, the Wavelength Gemini and Cary CAID-2A3 amplifiers cost more than three times the price of the Horn Monos; they're not nearly as quiet, and won't play as loud.

A real-world paradigm
The Horn Mono appears to be a niche product designed specifically for high-sensitivity speakers, and I was initially content to use it only with my Avantgarde Unos. However, I did wonder what the amplifier would sound like driving a speaker with average sensitivity, and, given the low gain, whether the preamp would have sufficient output for this type of setup. As it happened, as an adjunct to a review I was working on for Stereophile Guide to Home Theater, I had on hand a pair of Paradigm Reference Studio/20s, and I thought that using these speakers would provide a good test of the Horn Mono's performance in a more conventional system.

The results were astonishingly good. First of all, the Studio/20 (the ones I had were the v.2 series, updated since the version reviewed by Bob Reina in February 1998, Vol.21 No.2) is a terrific little speaker. It's superior in some ways — more coherent, with better imaging — to the Studio/100 v.2, which I reviewed for Stereophile in June 2000 (Vol.23 No.6). The Studio/20 has a rated sensitivity of 89dB, about 10dB lower than recommended by Quicksilver Audio, but the Horn Monos were able to drive the speakers to surprisingly high levels. The CAT SL-1 Ultimate preamp had to be turned up a few clicks beyond the usual setting for the Avantgardes, but there was no indication of any sort of electronic mismatch, and the preamp was still a few clicks short of full gain when the amplifier-speaker combo reached its maximum comfortable level. The sound was quite really excellent, and hard to credit to a combination of amp and speaker costing less than $2500.

Conclusion
The Quicksilver Horn Mono is very much my kind of amplifier: a solid, no-nonsense product singularly lacking in

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measured performance of the Quicksilver Horn Mono, given that it uses just one small-signal tube and two of that workhorse output tube, the EL34. The use of a sensible amount of overall negative feedback gives very low noise, excellent linearity, and a low output impedance, all of which, in combination with its excellent power delivery, will contribute to the good sound it gave with the very revealing Avantgarde Unos. Yes, there are the well-damped but still noticeable ultrasonic parasitic resonances, and the amplifier is not as tolerant as cost-no-object tube models when it comes to driving speakers with loads that drop well below the specified impedance of the output transformer tap. But some compromises have to be made for an amplifier that retails for just $1595/pair, and provided the purchaser has sensitive speakers (or more normal speakers in a small room), the Quicksilver will work well. —John Atkinson

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References

2 The CAT SL-1 Ultimate preamplifier has higher-than-average output capability, so the match with other preamplifiers may not be as good. Check and see.

Stereophile, May 2002
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quirkiness, with design principles that involve no extravagant or controversial claims. Intended primarily for use with high-sensitivity loudspeakers—a purpose for which it is eminently suited—the Horn Mono can also work well with speakers of just slightly higher than normal sensitivity.

Although the Horn Mono doesn't offer the ultimate in every parameter of sonic performance, its presentation is always convincing in musical terms. I recommend it especially for audiophiles who can just stretch their budget to go for a pair of Avantgarde's other expensive horns, but have little left over for suitable amplification. The Horn Mono is good enough not to be outclassed in this sort of system.

Quicksilver Audio does little or no advertising, which may help explain how the Horn Mono can be offered for $1595/pair. Given its sound, as well as its quality of parts and construction, this is an obvious bargain.

Associated Equipment

**Analog source:** Linn LP12 turntable (fully updated), Ittok tonearm, AudioQuest AQ-7000nxc cartridge.

**Digital source:** PS Audio Lambda II CD transport, Perpetual Technologies P-1A and ModWright P-3A digital processors.

**Preamplifier:** Convergent Audio Technology SL-1 Ultimate.

**Loudspeakers:** Avantgarde Acoustic Uno 2.0.

**Cables:** FS: Mystic Reference. Digital: Illuminati Orchid AES/EBU. Interconnect: Nordost Quattro Fil, Nirvana S-L. Speaker: Nirvana S-L with Avantgarde Uno 2.0 wiring harness. AC: PS Audio Lab Cable, Mini Lab Cable, TARA Labs Decade.

**Accessories:** Argent Room Lenses (4), Monolithic Sound P3 power supply, PS Audio P300 AC synthesizer and High Current Ultimate Outlet, Bright Star Little Rock (atop CD transport), Shakti Stone (atop P3 power supply), VPI DB-5 Magic Bricks (atop digital processors), Arcici Suspense Rack, Vistek Aurios 1.2 MIB component supports, PolyCrystal amplifier stand, Furutech RD-1 CD demagnetizer, Auric Illuminator CD treatment.

— Robert Deutsch

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Ultimate Audio, Winter 2001

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Chip Stern
Stereophile, December 2000
Paul Barton is a legend in the speaker business. For 30 years this musician and engineer has dedicated his life to providing speaker purchasers with higher levels of sonic realism at lower prices. Barton is a frugal perfectionist, and his obsession with psychoacoustics is evident in all his designs. I was mightily impressed with his mid-priced Image 4T (Stereophile, February 2001), which was, like all Barton designs, designed with the assistance of the facilities of Canada's National Research Council.

Although PSB makes more than two dozen speakers ranging from $199 to $2999/pair, it is the affordable Alpha speaker, introduced 10 years ago (and reviewed in the July 1992 and January 1994 Stereophile and the very first issue of Stereophile Guide to Home Theater, in 1995) that created all the fuss, at the time setting a new benchmark for affordable loudspeakers.

But Barton is not one to rest on his laurels. Into this third and latest generation of the Alpha, the Alpha B, he has trickled down some of the design and manufacturing innovations of his more expensive Image Series.

The Update
The trickle-down from the Image Series to the diminutive, two-way, rear-ported Alpha B is evident in the B's manufacturing as well as its design. First, the 5 1/4" polypropylene woofer cone is identical to that used in the Image models — with, however, a different voice-coil, one more appropriate for the smaller cabinet. (The aluminum-dome tweeter is the same as that recently introduced in PSB's entry-level speaker, the Alpha Intro.) As I indicated in my review of the PSB Image 4T, Paul Barton keeps costs down by using modular, molded design in all his Image speakers, thus minimizing separate manufacturing processes for each model. With the Alpha B, PSB has for the first time extended this modular construction to one of their least expensive models.

The Alpha B has molded plastic front and rear baffles connected by an MDF "sleeve" available in black or light cherry wood-grain finish. My cherry-finished sample was understatedly elegant. Unlike the original Alpha and the successor Alpha A/V, which JA reviewed in April 2000, the Alpha B has a grillecloth of fine perforated metal, removable "if one is careful," says Barton. I don't recommend removing it; it's difficult to do without bending the thin, attractive grille. Anyway, the Alpha B sounded virtually the same, with or without grilles. Like the Alpha A/V, the Alpha B is magnetically shielded for home-theater applications.

The Alpha Bs are available with the solid-wood SP25i stands ($99) in attractive black, but I listened to them using my trusty single-pillar Celestion 5i stands, loaded with lead shot and sand.

The Sound
I was immediately struck by the Alpha B's smoothness and its uniformity of frequency response from the midbass to the extreme treble. In fact, aside from a slight forward character in the mid-to-upper midrange (which adversely affected only certain instruments), the Alpha B was one of the most neutral inexpensive speakers I've heard.

The Alpha B excelled with vocals, especially those of the seductive female type. I'd just moved my VPI TNT/Inmedia/Koetsu analog rig back to the large listening room of my relatively new house; anxious to mine my vinyl collection, I cued up a track from my original pressing of Ella Fitzgerald's Clap Hands, Here Comes Charlie! (Verve V64053). I was so taken by the warm, vibrant,
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The Alpha B's natural vocal production was enhanced by the speaker's excellent articulation of subtle transients and microdynamic inflections. This is critical to achieving a realistic reproduction of a unique voice such as Joni Mitchell's, on "Chinese Cafe/Unchained Melody," from Hits (CD, Reprise 46325-2).

I have never heard a speaker costing less than $1000/pair that reproduces woodwinds more naturally than did the Alpha B. I cued up an old mono pressing of Louis Armstrong Plays WC Handy (LP, Columbia CL 591), and, during the entire recording, found myself ignoring the vocals and trumpet (difficult to do with Pops) and just following the clarinet. My notes: "Damn, that's a real clarinet!"

The PSB's bass was quite extended, with good definition down to about 50Hz.

Further down the frequency spectrum, the Alpha B's midbass reproduction was superb. On well-recorded jazz discs, the string bass was as realistic as I'd heard from such an inexpensive speaker. The bass solo on Sonny Rollins' "Oleo," from Our Man in Jazz (LP, RCA/Classic LSP-2612), had a woody, resonant quality that was uncolored and rich without a hint of overhang. In fact, the bass was quite extended, with good definition down to about 50Hz, but without a trace of the kind of hooty flanellence I've heard from many inexpensive ported speakers. Below that frequency, however, the bass went missing in action, and recordings with significant pipe-organ pedal content lacked bottom-end air.

In the upper-middle frequency range, the only instruments that at times lacked naturalness were the brass, particularly the trumpet. In a mellow jazz...
recording such as Miles Davis’ Kind of Blue (LP, Columbia/Classic CS 8163, Quiet pressing), Davis’ trumpet was not harsh, but seemed highlighted, as if the engineer had added another spot mike. On recordings with more energetic and highly modulated trumpet passages, such as Buena Vista Social Club (LP, Nonesuch/Classic RTH 79478), trumpet passages sounded, well, too brassy, detracting from the realism of this excellent recording.

Strangely enough, this anomaly of brass reproduction didn’t extend to strings, even those with significant high-frequency content. John Atkinson’s recording of Kohjiba’s Transmigration of the Soul, from Festival (Cl), Stereophile STPH0007-2), is not sweet and mellow — the music is dissonant, and the acoustic of Santa Fe’s St. Francis Auditorium is anything but warm and plush. That said, the more aggressive violin passages were appropriately biting and soaring, but never harsh. In fact, the strings on this recording, including the cellos, sounded more natural than through any other speaker under $1000 I’ve heard.

I’ve already mentioned the Alpha B’s superior transient articulation, and sure enough, it was a superb reproducer of percussion recordings. On John Cage’s Third Construction, from Pulse (LP, New World/Classic NW 519), I could follow each subtle articulation of each percussion instrument suspended in realistically three-dimensional space on the deep, wide stage. For such an inexpensive speaker, the Alpha B’s detail resolution and low-level dynamic resolution were excellent.

The PSB’s only real shortcoming was its limitations in high-level dynamics on passages that had considerably complex, highly modulated content, significant bass energy, or both. This is not an atypical shortcoming of small box speakers, and the Alpha B didn’t distort or irritate when compressed in this fashion. Rather, on bombastic rock recordings such as Janis Ian’s “Walking on Sacred Ground,” from Breaking Silence (LP, Analogue Productions CAPP 027), or on full-throated orchestral blockbusters such as Messi-

**Measurements**

tuning frequency of 58Hz, is the woofer response; the trace with the broad peak centered in the same region is the port response. Adding these together in the ratio of their radiating diameters, taking into account both acoustic phase and the fact that the port is on the rear of the cabinet, gives the top trace to the left of the graph. The broad, shallow peak in the upper bass will be mainly due to the nearfield measurement technique, below which the speaker’s output is down by almost exactly 6dB at the port tuning point.

Moving higher in frequency, BJR did note the PSB’s slightly midrange-forward balance, and it can be seen from fig.3 that although the overall response, averaged across a 30° horizontal window on the tweeter axis, is basically quite flat, the 800Hz–2.5kHz region is slightly higher in energy in the regions immediately above and below. (The grille was left off for these measurements.) Above the audioband is a sharp peak due to the tweeter’s primary dome resonance, though this is too high in frequency to have any audible consequences.

(Note: I actually measured two
Mercury/Classic

If one recording capitalized on the Alpha B's strengths while avoiding its shortcomings, it was George Crumb's aen's **Tunangalila Symphony** (LP, EMI SLS 5117) and Stravinsky's *The Firebird* (LP, Mercury/Classic SR 90226), it sounded as if the final mix had been passed through a recording-studio limiter—beyond a certain point, the record refused to get louder.

I don't wish to imply that the Alpha B's constraints in high-level dynamics limited its desirability as a rock speaker—quite the contrary. During a high-volume spin of Aimee Mann's *Bachelor #2 or The Last Remains of the Dodo* (Super Ego SE002), the music had a realistic sense of dynamic swing, and it was easy to follow the intricate transients of the guitar and bass articulations behind the forwardly mixed vocals.

pairs of Alpha Bs for this review. The matching, both between the members of each pair and between samples from different pairs, was superb, which is particularly commendable considering the Alpha's $250/pair price.)

The dispersion also affects the PSB's perceived tonal balance in a real room. Fig.4 shows the speaker's response as the measuring microphone moves from 90° on one side of the tweeter axis and below the woofer axis. The Alpha B is best used on stands high enough to keep the top of its cabinet just above the listener's ears.

In the time domain, the Alpha's step response (fig.6) indicates that both drive-units are connected with the same, positive acoustic polarity, while the waterfall plot (fig.7) is surprisingly clean for such an inexpensive model. Overall, its measured performance gives no hint of the PSB Alpha B's low price.

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**What was most surprising about PSB's Alpha B was its outstanding performance as a home-theater speaker.**

*Quest* (Bridge 9069). This sparsely orchestrated work for soprano saxophone, guitar, double bass, and percussion makes considerable use of space and silence—rarely are there more than two instruments heard playing concurrently. The saxophone's low-level dynamic articulation and phrasing and the subtle transient nuances of the vibraphone, guitar, and bass revealed a level of realism I normally associate with much more expensive speakers.

**The Movies**

What was most surprising about PSB's Alpha B was its outstanding performance as a home-theater speaker. Its smooth and detailed tonal presentation made for an involving and unfatiguing reproduction of film soundtracks, and I found its slightly forward midrange presentation made the dialog and Foley tracks highly intelligible. The mid bass reproduction was such that, watching DVDs, I never longed for a subwoofer. What this means to me is that a true cheapskate could create a wonderful entry-level home-theater system with a single pair of Alpha Bs and, say, an entry-level NAD or Creek integrated amp.

**The Competition**

I pitted the Alpha B against the usual stiff competition: the Polk Audio RT25i ($319/pair), the JMLab Chorus 706 ($450/pair), and the Alón Petite ($1000/pair).

Although I felt the PSB was detailed and transparent, the Polk was still a step better in these areas, sounding more open and transparent, as if an additional veil had been removed. The RT25i also revealed more detail and high-frequency extension, but with no harshness in this region. Although its midrange was not as forward as the PSB's, I could hear more into the music with the Polk. And although the RT25i shared the Alpha B's overall high-level dynamic constriction, I felt the Polk was still a hair better than the PSB in this regard. However, the PSB had a warmer, richer, more inviting midbass reproduction; in comparison, the Polk sounded rather thin in this region.

The JMLab Chorus 706 was more warm, rich, and silky, with a riper midbass, sweeter midrange, and more open, delicate, and relaxed high frequencies than the PSB. Although the JMLab was more colored overall, its overall sound was more detailed and sophisticated, and its high-level dynamic performance was only slightly better than the PSB's or the Polk's.

The Alón Petite revealed more detail, delicacy, and articulation when compared with all of the aforementioned

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Fig.7  PSB Alpha B, cumulative spectral-decay plot at 50° (0.15ms risetime).
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speakers, without a trace of coloration. Bass extension and high-level dynamics, however, were also rather limited.

The Conclusion
Paul Barton should be congratulated for not leaving well enough alone and continuing to try to improve an already successful product. The PSB Alpha B is an excellent speaker for music and home-theater applications, and is a classic example of the benefits of trickle-down technology in a serious high-end speaker design. Wrapping up this review, I had to go back to PSB's literature and specs several times to remind myself that this speaker doesn't cost $250 apiece but $250 per pair. Even now, considering again the quality of construction and sound of these remarkable little boxes and checking the price yet again, I'm still shaking my head.

Associated Equipment

Analog sources: VPI TNT IV turntable, Inmedia tonearm, Koetsh-Urushid cartridge; Rega Planar 3 turntable, Syrius PU-3 tonearm, Clearaudio Aurum Beta S cartridge.

Digital sources: California Audio Labs Icon Mk.II Power Boss, Creek CD53 Mk.II CD players; Pioneer DV-333 DVD player.

Preamplification: Vendetta Research SCP-2D phono stage, Audible Illusions Modulus L1 line stage.

Power amplifier: Audio Research VT100 Mk.II.

Integrated amplifiers: Creek 5350SE, JoLida J1-101A.


Accessories: Various from VPI, Simply Physics, Bright Star, ASC, Sound Anchor. — Robert J. Reina
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Interest in super-efficient, horn-loaded, compression-driver loudspeakers has grown in the past few years, fueled in part by a renewed fascination among many hobbyists with low-powered, single-ended triode tube amplifiers. But staring down the maws of two Tubby the Tubas is not every audiophile’s idea of a good time—even when the resulting sound is spectacularly fast, coherent, and extended.

I’ve sat before arrays of unadorned horns and marveled at their rapid-fire transients and super-clean high-frequency extension, and—as designers have made great progress integrating cone woofers to create coherent full-range, real-world-sized systems—the idea of actually owning one becomes more attractive. But the thought of staring down those monstrous throats stops me every time.

That’s why, when I saw and heard Odeon’s Tosca speaker at the Frankfurt HiFi show a few years ago, I asked Axiss Distribution, the US importer of the German product, if I might review it. The Tosca’s mid/11F horn was integrated with a conventional-looking baffle also containing a reflex-loaded cone woofer. For all intents and purposes, it looked like a normal loudspeaker, but what it was doing with a CD of Sonny Rollins’ Hey O! Hey Was anything but. The sound made me horny.

Odeon’s founder, Axel Gersdorf, began designing loudspeakers in the late 1970s. In 1987 he founded ARS to design and engineer OEM products for home and professional applications. Between 1990 and 1993 he developed the spherical multiplex horn system used in Odeon speakers, the third generation of which was completed in 2000 and premiered at the 2001 high-end audio show in Frankfurt. Gersdorf says his design is “fast, phase-coherent, efficient, exhibiting a smooth frequency res-

Two Years Later
It took two years, but finally, Art Man-


Finishes: Gloss black; burled veneer adds $3000/pair.
Serial numbers of units reviewed: A01.90.01.
one of two positions, allowing for either More Bass or Less Bass, depending on how much of the port the support covers. This constitutes Odeon’s Tunable Port System, or TPS. I got the smoothest bass and most effective woofer/horn integration in my room with the TPS set to More Bass. Nominal impedance is 8 ohms, specified sensitivity - a high 93dB.

**Setup**

Upending the Traviatas to attach the base plate, which holds two of the spikes and sets the TPS, I noted that the cabinet is constructed not from the usual medium-density fiberboard (MDF) but from plywood. Most speaker designs use MDF because it’s dense and does a good job of damping cabinet resonances. The mitered edges of the back and side panels on one speaker didn’t mate snugly, leaving a visible gap on the inside seam. The frames of both woofer grilles, which are supposed to friction-fit into recesses in the front baffles, were warped and wouldn’t lie flat in the recesses. Worse, as soon as the woofers produced bass, both grilles popped out onto the floor. I hate when that happens. Though the Traviata’s exterior finish was superb and the speaker looked gorgeous overall, I found the level of craftsmanship disappointing for the $9500–$12,500 pair of loudspeakers. The Traviatas sounded best where most speakers do in my room — approximately 2’ from the front wall, 30’ from the side walls, and 9’ apart — but

**Measurements**

As expected from its use of a horn-loaded tweeter, the Odeon La Traviata is almost 10dB more sensitive than the average for a direct-radiating design, at an estimated 96.4dB(I)/2.83V/m. It will go immensely loud with only a few amplifier watts, though the downside of this high sensitivity is the need for exceptionally quiet amplifiers and source components. (See, for example, RD’s review of the Quicksilver Horn Mono amplifier elsewhere in this issue.)

In addition, the Odeon’s plot of impedance magnitude and phase (fig.1) reveals it to be an extremely easy load for an amplifier to drive. As well as an audioband impedance that drops below 8 ohms only in the lower midrange, the speaker’s electrical phase angle is high only when the magnitude is also high, which will mitigate the effects of this angle. The one exception is the octave above 25kHz, where the impedance magnitude dips to just above 1 ohm at 42kHz, which is probably just the residual resistance of the wiring. Yes, it’s extremely unlikely that there will be any significant energy in this frequency region, but amplifiers that are only marginally stable might not react kindly to this load.

Some small peaks and dips between 180Hz and 300Hz in the impedance magnitude trace suggest the presence of mechanical or acoustic resonances. The undamped cabinet did sound quite lively when subjected to the traditional knuckle-rap test, but investigating the plywood panels’ behavior in a more objective manner with a piezoelectric plastic accelerometer revealed only some fairly low-level modes. Fig.2, for example, taken with the accelerometer fastened to the center of the top panel, shows both that some pumping of the panel occurs at the port-tuning frequency of 42Hz, and that some resonant modes are present at 255Hz and 313Hz. These modes could be detected on the other cabinet walls, but they are fairly low in level; in any case, the Traviata’s 10dB-higher-than-average sensitivity should lower the audibility of any cabinet problems.

The notch at 42Hz in the magnitude trace in fig.1 reveals the tuning of the twin ports in the Odeon’s base. (These ports are actually rectangular openings — the cover plate was fixed to its rearward, More Bass position for these measurements, with the spikes fitted to give the proper ground clearance.) It can be seen from the traces to the left of fig.3 that there is a notch in

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**Fig.1** Odeon La Traviata, electrical impedance (solid) and phase (dashed). (2 ohms/vertical div.)

**Fig.2** Odeon La Traviata, cumulative spectral-decay plot of accelerometer output fastened to center of top panel. (MLS driving voltage to speaker, 755V; measurement bandwidth, 2kHz.)

**Fig.3** Odeon La Traviata, anechoic response on horn axis at 50°, averaged across 30° horizontal window and corrected for microphone response, with the nearfield woofer and port responses and their complex sum plotted below 300Hz, 1kHz, and 300Hz, respectively.
pointed almost straight ahead, instead of being foed-in so the tweeter axes cross just behind the listening position.

**Colored links in the chain**

Go room to room at a Consumer Electronics Show and you'll hear more sonic signatures than are on The Declaration of Independence. That's especially true when you compare speakers using different methods to move air. Every technology has particular characteristics, whether it's a paper cone, a ceramic-coated metal cone, a sheet of Mylar, or a tiny compression driver loaded into a horn. You have your point-source crowd, your line-source true believers, and on and on. Partisans conveniently ignore the specific character each design imparts to the sound, preferring to concentrate on what it does best. We all do this. What choice do we have if we want to build the mental illusion of musical "reality" coming from a box—or a panel, or whatever? That we can be fooled is a testament to a successful design.

**Measurements**

the woofer's nearfield response at this frequency, and that the ports' response does peak between 37Hz and 75Hz. As MF noted in his in-room measurements, the Traviata offers useful bass down to around 40Hz, just below the lowest note of the four-string double-bass—though you can see from fig.3 that the complex sum of the woofer and port outputs rolls off steeply below 40Hz.

Note, however, that the ports' output continues up to the 1kHz limit of the measurement and that—as well as peaks at 300Hz, 380Hz, 510Hz, and 675Hz—there is a severe cancellation notch at 230Hz. Because the ports fire down into the rug, this higher-frequency output will probably not affect the Traviata's perceived balance. However, this behavior does indicate that there are acoustic problems inside the cabinet. While, again, the speaker's high-voltage sensitivity will work against these problems having audible consequences, I would have preferred there to be no problems in the first place. And I do note that MF was bothered by a consistent character that afflicted the tonalities of instruments that have rich harmonic content in the same region as these problems—the alto saxophone, for example.

Looking higher in frequency in fig.3, the Traviata's farfield response on its horn axis rises throughout the midrange and treble before rolling off sharply above 20kHz. (The slight on-axis peak above 15kHz is probably the contribution of the horn-loaded supertweeter.) Sit on-axis and the sound will indeed have too much HF content, though in itself this might not necessarily correlate with MF's having found the speaker's tonal balance "blue-light" bright (see below).

More disturbing to me was the suckout in the crossover region between 1250Hz and 2kHz. I initially measured the averaged response on the supertweeter axis, 43° from the ground, but the notch at 1.8kHz was even deeper. And if you look at the family of responses in the vertical plane (fig.4), you can see that the notch doesn't fill in until you sit at least 10° below the horn axis, which places your ears an unrealistically low 2° from the ground. Even then, a notch begins to develop a little higher in frequency.

![Figure 4](image1.png)

**Fig.4** Odeon La Traviata, vertical response family at 50°, from back to front: responses 15°-5° above supertweeter axis, response on supertweeter axis, difference in response 5°-15° below supertweeter axis.

![Figure 5](image2.png)

**Fig.5** Odeon La Traviata, lateral response family at 50°, from back to front: differences in response 90°-5° off-axis, reference response on supertweeter axis, differences in response 5°-90° off-axis.
Houages, Infinity Preludes, Audio Physic Avanti IIIs, ProAc Future Ones, Red Rose 13s. Merlin VSM system — has required modest shifts in listening perspective to accommodate differences in presentation so that the illusion of reality could be maintained. You kind of make peace with a loudspeaker — unless it's so off the mark it goes to war with your senses. The truly sniffling think that their choice in speakers is the Holy Grail or the reference or whatever, and these people will find followers, but count me out of that game. Transducer technology and speaker-system design have come a long way, but the speaker is still the most colored link in the audio chain.

That Horn Sound

When I first sat down to listen to the Traviatas after putting them in the usual places and toying them in as per usual, their midrange/top-end presentation was so different from what I was accustomed to that I immediately began playing with toe-in. One person's “bright” is another's “extended,” but to my ears what I was hearing would sound bright to anyone. Not “bright” as in “peaky” and “ragged,” just “shine a blue light on the music” bright. I decided that having two horns aimed at or near me was not a good idea, and ended up with them firing almost straight ahead. But the balance, though slightly warmer, still struck me as somewhat clinical on top — though incredibly detailed and remarkably transparent — and remained so even after break-in, warmup, and long-term acclimation.

Fig.5 is a similar family of curves revealing the Odeon's behavior in the lateral plane, though this time only the difference between the off-axis responses and the response on the super tweeter axis are shown. The notch deepens off-axis at 1.6kHz, though the horn-loaded tweeter's wide dispersion at the bottom of its passband might well mitigate this behavior. Note that, other than in the 1–2.5kHz region, the contour lines in the graph are evenly spaced. But both the woofer in the octave at the top of its passband and the horn in the octave at the top of its band are quite directional. As MF reported, sitting off-axis will bring down the Traviata's top-octave energy. However, because of the horn's wide dispersion around 3kHz, this will still leave the presence region in all but large rooms a little protruberant — and it is energy in the presence region and in the octave above that gives rise to perceived “brightness.” Note the narrow band of wider radiation around 17kHz; I suspect that this is the effect of the super tweeter, though it doesn't have as wide a dispersion pattern as I would have expected.

In the time domain, the Traviata's impulse response on the super tweeter axis is shown in fig.6. There is a slight positive-going hump from the woofer, over which is laid a later-arriving sharp up/down impulse from the horn-loaded tweeter. I can't see the super tweeter's output in this graph, unless it contributes to the tweeter's spike. The step response (fig.7) reveals that the horn is set back a little too far for the speaker to be time-coherent, the slow rise of the woofer step starting about 200μs before the much faster rise of the tweeter. A reflection can also be seen about 800μs after the initial step, which might be from the edge of the horn.

Finally, fig.8 shows the Traviata's cumulative spectral-decay plot, again taken on the super tweeter axis. The sharp notch in the crossover region can be seen to be followed by some delayed energy, suggesting that it is an interference phenomenon. Two small ridges of delayed energy are evident at 5.1kHz and 10kHz, but the waterfall plot is otherwise fairly clean.

“Bright,” said MF of this speaker's in-room balance, and “bright” is what I would have expected from its measured behavior, and what I heard when I listened to it in Mikey's room, even with the speakers driven by the Dynaco tube amplifier with its melowy top octaves. But what a wealth of recorded detail was revealed by Odeon's La Traviata.

—John Atkinson

Stereophile, May 2002
Last year, HeadRoom brought their "World of Headphones" to the Home Entertainment Show in New York City. Never before have human eyes seen, nor human ears heard, such a gathering of the world's best headphones and headphone amplifiers. Attendees were able to hear the incredible, and now unavailable, $12,000 Sennheiser Orpheus electrostatic headphones. They had their Adam's apples wobbled by the amazing HeadRoom Blockhead with Cardas-wired, balanced Sennheiser HD600s. In fact, they were able to hear every headphone and headphone amp worth hearing, all in one place. It was not to be missed!

But that assemblage didn't do you much good if you live in Atlanta, or Phoenix, or anywhere else but the Big Apple. If you're feeling a little left out, never fear! This summer we're hitting the road to bring the HeadRoom World of Headphones to a city near you, so check the dates below. Dates and locations could change, so visit our website for further details on coupons and giveaways. See you soon!

HeadRoom Road Show Schedule

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1. May 18  Dallas  Courtyard N/R Highway at Stemmons/1-35 E 2353 Stemmons Trail Dallas, TX 75220  Phone: 1-214-352-7676
1. May 19  Austin  Courtyard Austin Central 5660 North IH-35 Austin, TX 78751  Phone: 1-512-458-9340
1. May 22  New Orleans  Courtyard New Orleans Convention Center 300 Julia Street New Orleans, LA 70130  Phone: 1-504-598-0878
1. May 25  Orlando  Courtyard Orlando-Maitland/ Altamonte Springs 1750 Pembrook Dr. Orlando, FL 32810  Phone: 1-407-659-9100
1. May 28  Atlanta  Courtyard Atlanta Executive Park 1256 Executive Park Drive Atlanta, GA 30329  Phone: 1-404-728-0708
1. June 2  St. Louis  Courtyard St. Louis Creve Coeur 1345 S. New Ballas Road Creve Coeur, MO 63146  Phone: 1-314-993-0515
1. June 5  Chicago  Courtyard by Marriott O'Hare 370 N. Rt. 83 Elk Grove Village, IL 60007  Phone: 1-630-941-9444
1. June 6  Detroit  Courtyard Detroit Southfield 87087 Northwestern Highway Southfield, MI 48034  Phone: 1-888-358-1202
1. June 9  Buffalo  Courtyard Buffalo Amherst 4100 Sheridan Drive Buffalo, NY 14221  Phone: 1-716-626-6300
1. June 12  Boston  Courtyard Boston Norwood 300 River Ridge Drive Norwood, MA 02062  Phone: 1-781-768-4700
1. June 19  Washington D.C.  Courtyard New Carrollton Landover 8330 Corporate Drive Landover, MD 20785  Phone: 1-301-577-3373
1. June 23  Pittsburgh  Courtyard Pittsburgh Airport 450 Sherrength Parkway Coraopolis, PA 15108  Phone: 1-412-804-5000
1. June 25  Minneapolis  Courtyard Minneapolis/ Roseville 9905 Centre Pointe Drive Roseville, MN 55113  Phone: 1-651-746-6800
1. July 8  Salt Lake City  Courtyard by Marriott Sandy 10701 S Holiday Park Drive Sandy, UT 84070  Phone: 1-801-571-3600
1. July 13  Los Angeles  Courtyard Los Angeles LAX/Century Blvd 6101 LAX Century Blvd Los Angeles, CA 90045  Phone: 1-310-649-1400
1. July 14  San Francisco  Courtyard Foster City 550 Shell Boulevard Foster City, CA 94404  Phone: 1-650-377-0600
1. July 17  Portland  Courtyard Portland N. Harbour 1251 N. Anchor Way at Marine Dr. Portland, OR 97217  Phone: 1-503-735-1818
1. July 19  Seattle  Courtyard Seattle/ Sea-Tac Area 16058 West Valley Highway Tukwila, WA 98188  Phone: 1-425-955-0300

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Familiar references such as The Weavers’ Carnegie Hall Reunion 1963 (LP, Analogue Productions APF005), Davey Spillane’s Atlantic Bridge (LP, Tara 3019), Mel Tormé and Friends at Marty’s (LP, Finesse W2X37484) — even the excellent-sounding if warmish JVC XRC3s from RCA’s Living Stereo catalog such as the Charade (JVCXR-0213) and Breakfast at Tiffany’s (JVCXR-0212) soundtracks, and The Reiner Sound (JVCXR-0215) — were just too much on top. Again, they didn’t sound peaky or even bright, as you’d hear from a zingly dome tweeter, but too much like a laser beam for my tastes. Even the Sonny Rollins Way Out West XRC1 (VICJ60088) didn’t gel for me as it had traversed the Toscas when I heard them in Germany. Still, there was no denying the speed, openness, and transparency of the presentation.

And it wasn’t the super tweeter, which kicks in at 16kHz. I put my ear up to one while music played and couldn’t hear a thing. I don’t think you’re supposed to. As with a good subwoofer, you should be aware of its presence only in its absence. But unlike most super tweeters, the Traviata’s can’t be turned off, so I can’t be sure what its contribution to the total sound was.

But along with the HF extension came superfast, effortless, ultraclean transients. Bells, cymbals, percussion, and plucked instruments were presented grain-free and with excitingly crystalline clarity. Air and hall ambience were presented with a stunning resolution that contributed to an enormous sense of space with live recordings, and superbly focused rear-wall reflections with well-recorded classical CDs and LPs. The Traviatas were exciting to listen to, and never edgy or harsh unless the recording was. Though the promised “you are there” experience never materialized, “the speakers are there” experience did.

Air and hall ambience were presented with a stunning resolution that contributed to an enormous sense of space with live recordings.

My ears told me that the Traviata’s bass response, though limited to about 40Hz in my room and rolling off rapidly below 50Hz, was well-suited to the horn’s speed and extension and blended well with it. Whether or not a 40Hz response for $9500/pair makes it for you is your decision to make, but unless you listen to a great deal of organ music, I don’t think you’ll find the Traviata’s low end lacking. Whatever it gave up in response it made up for in nimbleness and reasonably good articulation and control. More important, the low end from the cone woofer didn’t separate out from what the horn was providing above.

My Primitive Measurements
Mating a cone woofer with a superfast compression horn mid/tweeter can’t be an easy task, and is one of the usual drawbacks to a hybrid design like this. Subjectively at least, Odeon has accomplished it in the Traviata. The response in my room, primitives measured from my listening position with a RadioShack SPL meter and Mobile Fidelity’s out-of-print Sound Check CD (produced by Alan Parsons), showed the response down 6dB at 40Hz, but flat referenced to the 1kHz test tone at 50Hz. There was a 6dB dip between 100 and 123Hz, and a 5dB dip at the 315Hz and 400Hz tones, probably due to room effects.

The car is far more sensitive to peaks than to dips, and there was only one peak in the bass: +4dB at 63Hz. But the in-room response from 500Hz to 2kHz (beyond the 1800Hz crossover) was ±1dB, which I consider pretty good. A 3dB dip at 12.5kHz might have been related to the crossover a few hundred Hertz up. From 2kHz to 8kHz, the measured response was an excellent ±1dB. Between 10kHz and 16kHz, the response was down 6dB, which doesn’t contradict my subjective observations because the microphone in the cheap RadioShack meter doesn’t offer flat response above 10kHz.

Problems
The midrange presentation in my room measured better than it sounded because, no matter how much I tried to ignore it, I couldn’t help but be aware of a consistent, subtle coloration — a mild bubble — in the midrange that messed with instrumental timbres. Whether it was due to a cabinet resonance, I don’t know, but saxophones, which had sounded so intoxicating on the Toscas in Frankfurt, had an overlay that made an alto sound more like a tenor, while clarinets sounded bigger, thicker, and more like saxes.

I pulled out Clarinet Summit (India Navigation IN-1062) a reference-quality live recording that produces a delicate and accurate rendering of a clarinet quartet that includes a bass clarinet. While the venue’s air and space were well suggested, I felt the timbres of the clarinets were not accurately reproduced — or at least not as accurately as through my reference Audio Physic speakers. I upended the Traviatas and switched them to Less Bass in case that had something to do with it. It didn’t — to my ears, the midrange coloration was still there.

**Odeon La Traviata**

**Associated Equipment**

**Analog sources:** Simon Yorke, VPI Aries Extended turntables; Graham 22, Immedia RPM2, VPI JMW-12.5 tonearm; Lyra Helikon, Helikon LE, Helikon mono, Benz Glider L2, ZYX R-100SF cartridges.

**Digital sources:** Musical Fidelity Nu-Vista 3D CD player, Marantz SA14 SACD player, Alexis Masterlink hard-drive-based digital recorder.

**Preamplification:** Hovland HP-100 preamp; Manley Steelhead, Zen den 1000 phono sections.

**Power amplifiers:** Musical Fidelity Nu-Vista 300, Dynaco Stereo 70.


**Accessories:** PS Audio Power Plant, P300 and P600, Sounds of Silence Vibraphone active isolation platform, Symposium Rollerblocks (Tungsten and Grade 3 Superball), Grand Prix Audio Monaco amplifier stands, Symposium Acoustics Ultra shelves, Audiodharma Cable Cooker 2.0, Walker motor drive, Finite Elements Pagode equipment stands, A.R.T. Q dampers, Walker Val'id Points, ASC Tube Traps, Shakti Stones and On-Lines, RPG BAD and Absfusor panels. — Michael Fremer

_Stereophile_, May 2002

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I'm sure many listeners will be able to easily listen past the Traviata's sonic character to what the speaker does exceptionally well — just as fans of electrostats do. (Chalk it up to imagination or prejudice or what you will — when I listen to most electrostats, I hear the sonic overlay of a plastic panel vibrating, even as I hear spectacular resolution, speed, detail, and transparency.)

Most disappointing was that I was never able to achieve the kind of 3D imaging, soundstaging, and dimensionality I've gotten in my room with speakers using direct-radiating tweeters, such as the Merlin VSMs, Red Rose R3s, Amati Homages, Infinity Preludes, and Audio Physic Avanti III. With the lights out, I didn't "see" the horns as much as I sensed two sources for the sound on the sides and the rest of the picture suspended between the horns — a single holographic sound picture before me. I know what's possible in my room, and I couldn't get it with the Odeons.

**Alternative Amplification**

After three weeks of listening, adjusting (physically and mentally), and trying to maximize the horn experience, I replaced my Musical Fidelity Nu-Vista 300 power amplifier with a tube amp of low to medium power: a Dynaco Stereo 70 retubed and tweaked by Alan Rauchwerger, who builds Virtual Image Audio amplifiers. With the Dynaco's tubey top and bottom, (read: less extension on top and a big, voluptuous bottom), the Traviatas were more pleasing on top, but the bottom lost some of its resolve. Still, it was a worthwhile tradeoff; I kept the vintage Stereo 70 in the system for the rest of my listening.

With the Dynaco in the system, I made tentative peace with the Odeons and spend a great deal more time listening for pleasure. I tried Less Bass, but that just thinned out the less-resolved bottom without improving the overall balance. For my final two weeks of listening I found the Odeons pleasant and sometimes exciting, but never convincing as a low-coloration, high-resolution transducer — something that many modern $9500/pair loudspeakers are.

**Conclusion**

Odeon's La Traviata has a specified frequency response of 35Hz-24kHz, ±3db. Not in my room, my ears tell me. Perhaps because of the horns' speed, high sensitivity, and low distortion, there were aspects of the sound that I admired: The Traviata had a light-on-its-feet quality that was addictive, and its superb transients were noteworthy. But as a whole, the system of woofer, port, and cabinet added up to a loudspeaker whose sonic signature I continued to hear even after a long period of acclimatization. And for $9500/pair, one should get a low-coloration speaker that can reproduce believable instrumental timbres.

I still remember what drew me to the Toscas at the Frankfurt HiFi show. But with the Odeon La Traviatas, I never achieved that kind of seamless sound in my system.
### Technology Precess HD HO

- **Sennheiser**: HD-800<br>  - **Price**: $1200
- **Grado**: GT-250<br>  - **Price**: $249
- **Rega**: RP-201<br>  - **Price**: $209
- **Cleer Audio**: S950<br>  - **Price**: $199

### Stand Design HD 4 SHELL 5 SHELL

- **Diamondback**: $95<br>  - **Price**: $95
- **Lehmann Audio**: Black Cube SE 4 SHELL 5 SHELL<br>  - **Price**: $875
- **Creek**: OBH-8 mm<br>  - **Price**: $199

### Accessories

- **Pro-Ject**: Phono Box mm/nc<br>  - **Price**: $120

### Prices

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Here at Stereophile we get a surprising amount of e-mail, and even more since our server lost a firewall. Now I’m deluged with “inspiring quotes,” offers for septic-system maintenance, altering metaphysics (“Keep your resolution!”), seemingly desperate pleas of “Are you okay?” (the sure sign of a computer virus), cyber-hazookas such as “Top Secret CD/Ruin anyone” (also a virus), and offers to reduce my debt or mortgage or enlarge my penis or breasts.

Amid all these exciting engagements and reductions there is often real e-mail from real folks, like the one I got recently from some fine folks in Alabama. Imagine my surprise when I walked into my boss’s office and he said, with a devilish smile, “Gee, Robert, I didn’t know you were on cocaine…and anthrax?”

It seems that this Bama couple (roll tide) had taken my enthusiasm for Shelby Lynne’s Love; Shelby record to be evidence that I was mixing recreational drugs and deadly viruses in a mind-numbing, rave-ready cocktail that had shattered any modicum of taste I might have once possessed. (The letter also contained a long tale about how audiophiles are all druggies, but that’s another story.)

Understandably shaken by this accusation most foul—death threats are one thing; this here was sunthin’ else—I ran my mind back across my nightly activities to see if perhaps, in some club, when peer pressure had proved too much…but alas, no, I hadn’t been abusing this virulent speedball. This misunderstanding was just a matter of taste.

Many years ago now, back in 1997 when I began writing this column, I explained my feelings about taste and the way I think music writing should be read. So, to restate my philosophy for those who may have begun reading “Aural Robert” since that first explanation…

Yes—I and Stereophile’s other music writers, like music writers everywhere, enjoy a bully pulpist. The key principle, however, is that anything any of us says in print is only that person’s opinion. Hopefully, the reviewer is an informed person who’s interested in communicating more information than opinion, but still, at the end of the day, it’s only his or her opinion. This is why I’ve always stressed a simple principle to all of our music writers: Tell me what the music sounds like. Say it in terms everyone can understand. Give as much context as you can. The readers will do the rest.

As for the offending Shelby Lynne, I never said it was Abbeay Road or Blonde On Blonde or even Marquee Moon (that last one’s by Television). I merely said, in the context of today’s rock releases—which, for my money, continue to be a fairly sad lot—that Low; Shelby is tuneful, well-made, and surprisingly well-engineered.

No band on earth has better embodied the principle of “one man’s taste is another’s poison” than Giant Sand.

But that’s only my opinion. Speaking of opinions, no band on earth has better embodied the principle of “one man’s taste is another’s poison” than Giant Sand, formed in 1980 in Tucson, Arizona, with the now sadly departed guitar legend Rainer Ptacek. The band’s music (which I’ve often referred to as “music as anarchy”) is a mix of manicured pop tunes, crazed, cracked country music, bash’n’crash noise, and some of the funniest covers ever attempted.

Led by singer-guitarist-pianist Howe Gelb, Giant Sand has, over the years, thrown into its mix everything from prepared tubas to babbling infants. The band is completed by drummer John Convertino and bassist Joey Burns, who have a thriving side project these days in the band Calzexio.

But perhaps it’s best to let GS’s voice and frontman, not to mention mad metaphysician, describe their music:

“Giant Sand is basically a petri dish for sonic evolution,” Gelb said backstage at New York’s Joe’s Pub one night this past March. “If we lived in New York in the 50s and we played our music it would make sense to the guys who had the monthly engagements on 52nd Street, where they had a lot of the same people coming to see them every night. As opposed to playing on tour, where you’re in a different city every night and you play the same thing, [a steady gig] lends itself to an evolutionary, Darwinian form of music. "Giant Sand does that anyway, but we’re playing to a bunch of different people every night. A small percentage in the UK put it on and follow us, the Deadhead thing, ‘cause they’re aware. But for the most part it’s not conducive to a great deal of popularity because there’s no marketing involved. We virtually evolve and become the next record instead of representing the last record. And it’s always been that way."

Needless to say, with such a self-definition, it’s no surprise that Giant Sand performances like the one at Joe’s Pub are a species of musical mêlée—as much hippie as punk, as much country as rock, as much Sun Ra as Jerry, Bobby, and the boys. Joining the trio for that gig were such angular talents as Kurt Wagner (Lambchop), Evan Dando (Lemonheads), and Vic Chesnutt, among others.

It was also at that show that Gelb began making noises about Giant Sand’s new album, Cover Magazine (Thrill Jockey), being its swan song. After 22 years and more than 15 records (counting side projects and import-only live discs), is Giant Sand really calling it quits?

“All the plans that you’re making, everybody wants to know what’s your next step, what you’re going to do, what your goals are, what the next level is, all that crap. None of that exists anyway, but we all talk like, ‘Yeah, that will happen,’ ” Gelb said, reinforcing his lifelong disgust with expectations.

“Instead, you let that go and realize, this is it. Not only do you play better and celebrate the last moment, but you’re happy about it instead of lamenting. That’s what’s been happening. "So yeah, this is the last record. This really feels like the last time.”

Then again, that’s only one man’s opinion.
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Recording of the Month

NEIL YOUNG: Are You Passionate?
Performance: ****1/2
Sonics: ****

Like Bob Dylan's, Neil Young's 1990s recordings were a mixed bag: some good (Sleeps With Angels), some less thrilling (Mirror Ball). Notorious not only for his recorded missteps (anything on Geffen from the mid-1980s), Young has also been known to swing from acoustic album to loud electric album and back. But, also like the resurgent Mr. Zimmerman, in the last two years Young has found new energy and a new laser focus. In 2000, his soft, Harvest/Cones A Time—like Gold & Silver was a triumph. Now, in Are You Passionate?, Young has claimed a middle ground rare for him: a smooth, tuneful, lightly funky album unlike almost anything else he's ever recorded.

Part of the reason is the presence of Hammond B-3 organ legend Booker T. Jones and bassist Donald "Duck" Dunn: two members of the MG's, the Memphis rhythm section that has added its distinctive driving beat to everything from Otis Redding and Sam and Dave to Eddie Floyd and The Blues Brothers (not to mention their own hit, "Green Onions"). The opening track, "You're My Girl," is a kind of slow, one-beat evocation of the whole Stax/Volt soul-music ethos. Deep into the record is "Be With You," Young's salute to and imitation of that classic Memphis sound, and Jones adds organ blips and burbles to the final track, "She's a Healer."

Young deftly answers the question of the album's title in 11 appealing tunes, and like Dylan's latest, "Love and Theft", this collection is most notable for the peace Young seems to have found—at least for the moment. "When I hold you in my arms, it's a breath of fresh air / When I hold you in my arms, I forget what's out there," he half sighs in "When I Hold You in My Arms." In "She's a Healer," he admits that "The touch of my woman can soothe my soul / When she makes me feel right that's when the good times roll."

But Are You Passionate?'s emotional heart is the trio of songs at its center. "Mr. Disappointment" has the kind of fragile singing Young evinced on "Only Love Will Break Your Heart," his high voice lingering over "I'd like to shake your hand, Disappointment / Looks like you win again, but this tune might be the last." On the peppy strongest vocal performance. "Quit" is very much in a league with the best songs Young has written.

"Differently," fuzzy electric guitar and organ drive the riff, and each line of the chorus begins with a chant of "differently," most in a tone not of hard-edged recrimination but of a gentle desire to do things... differently. A beautiful, relaxed guitar part highlights the last of these three and the album's strongest tune, "Quit (Don't Say You Love Me)." Young extols the power of love and his own resilience in a gentle bit of funk that also contains the record's

"When I hold you in my arms, it's a breath of fresh air / When I hold you in my arms, I forget what's out there," he half sighs in "When I Hold You in My Arms." In "She's a Healer," he admits that "The touch of my woman can soothe my soul / When she makes me feel right that's when the good times roll."

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Not all of Young's pessimism has disappeared—it's obvious from the guitar rumble in the opening bars of "Goin' Home" that Crazy Horse has returned, if only for this song. Into a lazy narrative mixing personal discontent with Custer's Last Stand, Young drops this acid stanza: "Droppin' in on you my friend / It's just like old times / Said the fool who signed the paper / To assorted slimes." It's all set to the kind of archetypal Tomahawk Chop chant used by football teams with Indian nicknames, and churned out menacingly here by Frank Sampredo on electric guitar. Bizarre as that may sound, it works — and it's a nice, noisy change of pace in an otherwise reflective album.

Young has carefully crafted the sound of most of his recent albums, and Are You Passionate? is crackly, crisp, and spacious enough to suggest that this album was recorded in the famous barn pictured on Young's 1972 masterpiece, Harvest. It's a pleasure to hear Neil Young and Bob Dylan still turning on the jets in the opening decade of a new century.

—Robert Baird
Recordings like these could almost make you nostalgic for the CD boom of the 1980s, when Herbert von Karajan, Leonard Bernstein, and Georg Solti held sway in the symphonic repertoire and we were all sure that up-and-comers like Riccardo Chailly would take their place, endlessly re-recording standard repertoire within the high-budget circumstances of great orchestras under ideal studio conditions. Now, Chailly is one of the few conductors still making recordings as in the old days. (In fact, the Bartók Concerto for Orchestra was made in the old days, 1995, but not released until now.) Why him?

In a time when so many standard-rep recordings telegraph the message “I’m different—buy me,” Chailly delivers middle-of-the-road readings that won’t come close to challenging anyone’s preconceived ideas about the music. There are no special claims of ethnic authority, since neither Chailly nor the orchestra are Hungarian or Viennese. There are no obscure textual variations — no discarded endings or such. These performances are smooth, comfortable rides, giving pleasure that grows in successive hearings, borne out of superb playing, well-judged interpretive decisions, and glimpses of the music’s interior mechanics.

Chailly reveals just enough of the music’s inner workings to let you experience the piece on a new level — such as holding a climactic chord just long enough to show how the delayed addition of a trumpet puts everything into focus, but not so long as to distort the piece. Transitional passages are given just enough spotlight to show more clearly and ingeniously how the composer got from one musical event to the other. Slight tempo modifications usher in different episodes in Bartók’s Miraculous Mandarin (heard here in its complete ballet version) that accentuate the narrative in what can too often be played as a mere orchestral showpiece.

Everything, of course, is bathed in the famous acoustic of the Royal Concertgebouw’s eponymous concert hall, which bestows warmth without losing definition. That means the biting, often violent Mandarin (about a beaten-up Mandarin who can die only after a prostitute returns his love) never loses impact, making all the needed dramatic points with all the necessary emphasis without resorting to orchestral brute force. That doesn’t mean the playing isn’t descriptive — the trombones are suitably woozy — but Chailly is more content than many conductors to let the orchestration do the work it was meant to do.

That sets the tone for Chailly’s relatively non-interventionist Mahler 2. You could wish for Simon Rattle’s more penetrating insights, or the glints of madness in Otto Klemperer’s earlier recordings, the weighty profundities of his later ones. But Chailly’s performance doesn’t have the kind of fussiness or gravity that leads you to expect such things; he seems to trust listeners to have the intelligence to enjoy equal participation in the piece, instead of overmanaging their responses. Neither approach can claim legitimacy over the other; that’s not our world, now that dozens of recordings of this symphony are available, and most people who love it are satisfied with just one.

Points in favor of Chailly include: Petra Lang, the superb new mezzo-soprano heard in the fourth movement; the celestial tone colors the conductor draws from the orchestra shortly before the mezzo’s fifth-movement entrance; and a wide sound picture that allows the finale’s climaxes to be heard with immediacy but not the slightest hint of congestion.

This set also includes Totenfeier, an early version of the symphony’s first movement, before Mahler clarified and

**John Williams**

**The Magic Box**

John Williams, classical guitar, arrangements; Richard Harvey, flutes, whistles, panpipes, woodwinds; John Etheridge, steel-string acoustic guitar; Chris Laurence, double bass; Paul Clavis, hand drums, percussion; Francis Bebey, sanza, vocals; African Children’s Choir


Performance ***** Sonics ****

*Virtuoso guitarist John Williams has long chafed at the hoary, hidebound preconceptions associated with the so-called classical guitar. Williams is second to none when it comes to mastery of the traditional repertoire — his performances of Bach’s Lute Suites are simply miraculous, and his famous recordings of Rodrigo’s Concierto de Aranjuez pretty much cemented that piece’s reputation in the popular imagination. But he has also long championed a variety of overlooked composers, such as the phalanx of modernists featured on his last and most decidedly non-Spanish disc, 1998’s *The Guitarist*, and on his magnificent tribute to the legendary South American guitarist Agustín Barrios, on 1994’s *From the Jungles of Paraguay*. Williams’ desire for greater contact with other musicians and a modern audience has led him to a wonderful*

**John Williams THE MAGIC BOX**

*Stereophile, May 2002*
series of duets with the likes of Julian Bream and Timothy Kain, and has caused him to reach out to contemporary musicians as a member of Sky, a popular classical/jazz-rock ensemble, and in a series of recordings in which he tried to establish a bridge to mainstream audiences with recordings of popular movie themes and a decidedly romantic repertoire. Not at all surprising, when you consider that Williams’ father, his primary mentor, was a jazz guitarist in a more or less Django Reinhardt mode. In the conversations that resulted in my feature story on him in the December 1998 Stereophile, Williams was enthusiastic about the process of bringing guitarists together to make music, and urged classical guitarists to broaden their horizons by listening to the likes of Joe Pass, Leo Kottke, and Muddy Waters.

I’m happy to tell you that, with The Magic Box, Williams has fashioned a context so varied, buoyant, and lyrical that it marks a creative breakthrough for this musician’s musician. Inspired by his collaborations with noted West African musicologist and musician Francis Bebey (who died shortly after the completion of this project), The Magic Box is a celebration of the heritage of African guitar music, and wanders from Cape Verde to Madagascar, from Cameroon to Zimbabawe and South Africa. All arrangements are by Williams, who has created a simple, expressive instrumental palette with which to support his solo explorations. Note his sparse use of cellos, double bass, and bongos in “Maki” (in which his sparkling chords and harp-like figTreegrees suggest a kora), or his contrasting use of bass clarinet and sanza in “Engueme,” in which Williams mirrors Bebey’s chanting vocals with incantatory lines and harmonized intervallic sequences. And in “Nkosi Sikelel’Afrika,” composed by Enoch Sontonga, the guitarist uses double bass, dulcimer, and pampipes to underscore the tune’s folkish airs, while evincing exceptional clarity and tonal grace in his lower-register chords and a sparkling “joy to the World” interlude that introduces the African Children’s Choir. The performance is elemental and deeply moving in its lyrical charm and earnest simplicity.

Bebey’s “O Bi,” “Guitar Makossa,” and “Sangara” form a dancing West African leitmotif that runs through the heart of this recital, sharing the special dancing quality that distinguishes the Makossa style of Cameroon (which some listeners might recall from violinist Jean-Luc Ponty’s performance of “Mouma Bowa” on his own African odyssey,
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This is a concert performance of an almost entirely unknown opera by Donizetti, one that he revised so often (its original title is Otto mesi in due ore) that no definitive version of it exists. It combines buffo moments with serious, the vocal writing is lovely and/or interesting, with big arias and ensembles, and the plot—which involves our heroine's voyage on foot (!) from Siberia to Moscow to overturn her father's exile—allows new characters, in different situations, to keep showing up. What's most important is that there's much vintage Donizetti here, for the most part beautifully performed, and the sound is excellent. This is more than worth searching for. —Robert Levine

**Sunglare Serenades**


Stereophile, May 2002

**Performance **** Sonics ****

**GEM**

Indie music hounds who've watched the Cleveland, Ohio, music scene wax and wane over the years will be familiar with the name Gem. The quartet features the twin songwriting and guitar talents of Doug Gillard (formerly of Death of Samantha and Cobra Verde) and Tim Tobias (formerly of 4 Cypresses). Gillard and Tobias are concurrently in another Ohio band, Guided By Voices. (An early Gem nugget, "I Am a Tree," was redone by GBV and remains a much-requested concert fave.) Although Gem has been together for almost a decade now, this long-overdue follow-up to 1995's Haxel is only its second full-length album. And while Gem isn't quite ready to overtake the better-known and extraordinarily prolific GBV, *Sunglare Serenades* is a key addition to any Clevo-area completist's library.

Stylistically speaking, the Gem m.o. includes ornately patterned power pop, hookishly shiny art-rock, and the odd slab of metal. Unsurprisingly, given a pedigree that stretches back to the early 1980s, Gillard is the dominant personality. From track 1, "Carass and Crow" (a complex Pete Townshend–like electric rocker interrupted by a gorgeous acoustic interlude), to the T. Rex—does–Peter

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**DONIZETTI: Gli esiliati in Siberia**

Brigitte Hahn, Elisabetta; Luca Canonici, Polotksi; Christine Neithardt-Barbaux, Fedora; Alfonso Antonini, Michele; Valery Ivanov, Iwanos; others; Orchestre National de Montpellier Langue-doc-Roussillon, Choeur de la Radio lettone, Enrique Diemecke


Stereophile, May 2002

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Stereophile, May 2002

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**J.H.S.,** recovery.— Hexed of "Ghostville"

Among guitar cited Evil group's yielded perched notably drawl, a fore on Stereophile, His talc-spinning to Broken Sunglards With all Teen Sunglards to 1993's 53:33

Two the Martin, an AC/DC-esque effort doesn't charm of its. But even if the immediate come-hither charm of Tilbrook's old band isn't all here, _The Incomplete Glenn Tilbrook_ still seduces the listener (if a bit more slowly and subtly) with the stuff that made Squeeze so winning: inventive and inviting melodies, smart and sincere wordplay, and Tilbrook's chewy-caramel voice. To call this album "Incomplete" is also to acknowledge that Tilbrook sans Difford is still a work in progress. But with a solid foundation, and intimations of further musical glories as wonderful as those from his former band, Tilbrook promises to soar in solo flight.

— Rob Patterson

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**GLENN TILBROOK**

_The Incomplete Glenn Tilbrook_


**Performance ***

**Sonnics ***

The title of this debut solo set by the Squeeze singer, songwriter, and guitarist wittily tells its tale. After decades of setting Chris Difford's clever, sharp, distinctly English lyrics to music and fronting a band with him, Tilbrook has set out on his own, with occasional lyrical assistance from Ron Sexsmith and Aimee Mann. Anyone who cherished the long and fulfilling creative partnership that resulted in Squeeze's winningly delightful post-Beatles British pop-rock is bound to at first feel a void. But even if the immediate come-hither charm of Tilbrook's old band isn't all here, _The Incomplete Glenn Tilbrook_ still seduces the listener (if a bit more slowly and subtly) with the stuff that made Squeeze so winning: inventive and inviting melodies, smart and sincere wordplay, and Tilbrook's chewy-caramel voice. To call this album "Incomplete" is also to acknowledge that Tilbrook sans Difford is still a work in progress. But with a solid foundation, and intimations of further musical glories as wonderful as those from his former band, Tilbrook promises to soar in solo flight.

— Rob Patterson

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**KEVIN KINNEY**

_Broken Hearts and Auto Parts_


**Performance ****

**Sonics ****

Every few years, singer-songwriter Kevin Kinney puts his rock band Drivin' N' Cryin' into Crazy Horse-like hiatus to concentrate on his less strident, folk-blues-roots side. To date, that focus has yielded several low-key gems, most notably 1993's _Down Out Low_. Kinney's fourth solo effort incorporates the stripped-down acoustic charm of his predecessor, but doesn't shy away from plugging in, DNC style.

With an evocative singing voice perched equidistant from a Dylan croak, a Buddy Holly warble, and a Tom Petty drawl, Kinney is a natural storyteller. His tale-spinning abilities come to the fore on numbers like the title cut, a countrypish tune that finds him reflecting on darker, more down-and-out days when he'd lost his girl and was close to having to live in his car, and "A Good Country Mile," in which he meditates on the elusiveness of dreams against a spare backdrop of acoustic guitar, dobro, and piano.

But Kinney's skill at crafting memorable pop hooks—well showcased in past DNC hits "Fly Me Courageous," "Scarred but Smarter," and "Straight to Hell"—puts him a notch or two above the average folksinger. "Yes That's Me" has an irresistible crunch'n'tumble vibe on which a couple of AC/DC-esque riffs saddle up and ride, while the graceful "Why Does It Feel So Hard to Say" has the kind of gorgeous, slow-jangle chord progression patented by the late George Harrison. Speaking of whom, there's an interesting moment at the very end of the title track. Kinney's final line, sung almost as a wry afterthought, is "something in the way she moves me"—then, barely catching his breath, he eases into the lyrically bleak but sonically upbeat "Comin' Down the Way," the opening chord progression of which is a near-copy of Harrison's "Wah-Wah." Talk about acknowledging one's influences.

Elsewhere, Kinney essays everything from yee-haw cowpunk to Appalachian balladry to smoky, boozy blues, but wondering whether or not he was aiming to show off his stylistic diversity is beside the point. _Broken Hearts_ ' cozy analog warmth and intimate feel—particularly in the vocals, which are nked whisper-in-your-ear close—combined with a song sequence that flows naturally and organically, make for relaxed but never soporific listening.

— Fred Mills
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The absolute gems of Simple Things, however, are: "This World," in which Earth, Wind & Fire meet Massive Attack, and the gut-wrenching "Distractions." Thankfully, the album’s US edition also includes the previously released B-sides “Salt Water Sound” and “Spinning.” You’ll be enchanted by this evocative late-night excursion.

—Craig Roseberry

short takes

THE BOTTLE ROCKETS:
Songs of Sahm
Performance ****½
Sonicity ****½

When he died unexpectedly in 1999 at the age of 58, Texan Doug Sahm was one of the most undeservedly obscure figures in American music. Although he and his Bay Area–based, faux British invasion group The Sir Douglas Quintet had late-’60s hits with “She’s About a Mover” and “Mendocino,” and his subsequent band, The Texas Tornados, had a modest degree of success (albeit mostly in Texas and the Southwest), Sahm remains a shadowy figure.

Now, as a testament to the power of Sahm’s work, the Bottle Rockets—a much-loved, Missouri-based roots/country-rock quartet who, like Sahm, also never managed to hit it big, and who parted ways in 1996—decided to regroup for the sole purpose of cutting an album of Sahm songs.

Given that kind of lineage, it’s no surprise that Songs of Sahm sounds impassioned from the start. Interpretive liberties are kept to a minimum, making for an album that strives to bring...
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and Monk's "Let's Call This" has a swagger I think the composer would like. On the latter, bassist Ugonna Okegwo adds a typically strong, fat-noted solo.

Barth also produced LaVern Butler's new album. Butler is a relaxed, generally unpretentious singer with a flexible, honey-hued voice and an assured rhythmic feel. She doesn't yet stand out in the currently crowded room of female vocalists, but she's got enough talent and pizzazz that she might well hold in time, and on A Foolish Thing to Do, Butler proves she can handle just about anything. The title track is a smoky, bluesy, he-done-me-wrong creeper that Butler just tears up; Barth's accompaniment, as elsewhere, is just so. The singer turns the mediocre pop tune of "Go Away Little Boy" into a deft jazz vehicle, aided by a loping New Orleans beat. And she swings heartily on "West Coast Blues," which is enlivened by juicy notes from regal ex-Ray Charles saxophonist David "Fathead" Newman. "Just One of Those Things" has a bubbling backbeat that Butler rides with nary a jostle; she seizes in the closing vamp, wisely accenting the rhythms as she trades phrases with Wilson. "Dindi" and "Never Let Me Go," however, are overly animated; Butler obscures the deep sentiment in each.

As on Barth's album, the sound is vibrant and detailed, with a large, wide stage that smartly depicts the participants' intents.

---Zan Stewart

**NORAH JONES**

**Come Away with Me**

Nahor Jones, vocals, piano, electric piano; Kevin Breit, Bill Frisell, Jesse Harris, Adam Levy, Tony Scherr, guitars; Sam Yahel, Hammond B-3; Rob Burger, pump organ, accordion; Jenny Scheinman, violin; Lee Alexander, bass; Brian Blade, Dan Rieser, Kenny Wollesen, drums


Performance 3 1/2

Sonic 3 1/2

If Norah Jones and her management play her cards right, she could be huge by year's end. That's the kind of remarkable talent she is—a singer-songwriter-pianist who melds jazz, country, blues, and folk into a category of its own, and who has an alluring voice reminiscent of Billie Holiday and Rickie Lee Jones but is mature enough to avoid committing forgeries. All the more impressive: Jones is 22, and has made her auspicious debut album, Come Away with Me, for Blue Note, a label best known for its legacy of jazz recordings.

The Brooklyn-born, Texas-raised Jones acquired a taste for country music by osmosis when she was young, but took the jazz route in high school and college, where she majored in jazz piano. But during a summer break in New York she fell into a camp of songwriters, found sympathetic bandleaders, and began exploring her voice. Instead of relying heavily on covers à la Diana Krall, Jones, guitarist Jesse Harris, and bassist Lee Alexander wrote their own songs and recorded a demo that found its way to Blue Note. Impressed, the label signed her, released the demo as a six-track EP, First Sessions (available on Jones's website and at her concerts), and scheduled studio time with Craig Street and Arif Mardin. Meanwhile, Blue Note roster mate Charlie Hunter was working on a vocal CD and invited Jones to sing two tunes: Bryan Ferry's "More Than This" and Nick Drake's "Day Is Done," both highlights of Hunter's Songs from the Analog Playground. Jones gigs weekly at Makor, and the New York buzz about her has lasted a year now. But with the release of Come Away with Me she deserves to be turning heads and opening ears across the nation. The CD is a strong career start: its strengths are the songs—mostly originals, with a sprinkling of superb covers—and Jones' voice, soft-edged, soothing, and bittersweet, with equal measures of wistfulness and reverie, fragility and invitation. She's a storyteller who recounts tales of empty rooms, cold hearts, and dreamy longing.

The production is stark yet subtly textured with National steel and slide guitar, accordion, Hammond B-3 organ (so low in the mix it's hardly discernible), and fiddle. Even volcanic drummer Brian Blade, who seems to burst from his kit in most sessions, is here hushed to brushes and percussive strokes. Jones' music is low-lights quiet, sultry, and mostly slow-paced.

The gently swaying opening track, "Don't Know Why," by Jesse Harris, is a melodic beauty, as is Jones' "Come Away With Me," a moving song that is both romantic and plaintive. Lee Alexander's gently loping "Lonesare" is country-flavored, and his collaboration with J.C. Hopkins, "Painter Song," has a jazzy cabaret feel. And Harris has a gem in the tango-tinged "I've Got to See You Again."

All three of the covers are noteworthy: the lifting take on Hank Williams' "Cold Cold Heart"; Hoagy Carmichael's "The Nearness of You," exquisitely sung by Jones in a near-whisper; and J.J.D. Loudermilk's "Turn Me On," which Jones sings with delectable slowness and a hint of bluesy grit. In fact, "Turn Me On" is one of the CD's major turn-ons, and made me wish that Jones would leave the velvet-soft zone more often to dig into other tunes with this sort of vocal urgency.

Come Away with Me also suffers from too-similar tempos. Jones is introspective and reflective, which makes for a beauty and integrity rare in pop music, but more shifts in speed wouldn't have

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Despite detracted from this—as her “Nightingale” proves by perking things up with its mid-tempo pace. Final request: more piano breaks (there are only a few brief solos), so that Jones can demonstrate that she’s more than just a pretty voice.

Critics aside, Come Away with Me is an important first step for an artist with a promising future.

—Dan Ouellette

**Record Reviews**

**VARIOUS ARTISTS**

**Nigeria 70: The Definitive Story of 1970's Funky Lagos**

Various Artists
Afro Strut (3 CDs). 2001. Quinton Scott, Tinku Bhattacharyya, project coordination; Duncan Cowell, mastering. AADV TT: 90226

Performance ****
Sonicity *** 1/2 to **** 1/2

In a continent rich in music, Nigeria may be the most musically varied country of them all. Since the 1920s it has birthed or indelibly affected such happy, upbeat genres as juju, highlife, Fuji, and Afrobeat, all of which continue in some form to this day.

Nigeria's history contains no decade more musically rich than the 1970s. It was a time when, after a disastrous civil war (1964-66), the country's two biggest stars, King Sunny Ade and Fela Kuti, were at the height of their powers nationally and internationally. It was also when the country's many musical genres were cross-pollinating not only with each other but with European and American influences. Much of the musical energy of that time was focused in the country's capital, Lagos.

This absolutely essential, bargain-priced, and widely available import compilation, with its subtitle of The Definitive Story of 1970's Funky Lagos, focuses on that heady time. Part dance-music compilation (think acid jazz) and part opined historical survey, Nigeria 70 works as both a fresh party-music disc and, if you peruse the accompanying booklet, a lesson in African music history. In theory, a third disc contains video and audio from the documentary for which the music serves as a soundtrack—mine didn't work.

Although they just scratch the surface of each particular style, let alone Nigeria's overall musical history, the 23 cuts here are a fascinating blend of influences both foreign and domestic. The Sahara All Stars Band Jos' "Enjoy Yourself" can be enjoyed purely for its scratching guitar, horns, and rudimentary English lyrics, while the more musically inclined can listen to it as a fascinating Igbo-influenced, northern Nigerian version of Afrobeat.

On Monomono's "Tire Loma Da Nghelbin," the flashy fuzz-guitar parts are an obvious echo of British psychedelic like Cream's "Sunshine of Your Love." Bio's "Chant to Mother Earth" opens with a Santana-like guitar growl under a vocal chant drenched in echo. Fela is known more for his politics than his dance music, but his "Jen Ko Ku (Chop 'N Quench)" is a horn-punchy bit of pure funk. And funk, propelled by rhythms of all kinds, is what binds all these stylistic hybrids together in this snapshot album of Lagos from 1970 to 1985.

If there's a problem here, it's the sound. Because the African record business is a maze of multinational major labels, many of which have repeatedly blown hot and cold, and traditionally less stable independent, many of the tracks on Nigeria 70 have been taken from 7" singles and LPs, the master tapes having long since disappeared. The sound varies from the very clear and multidimensional to the scratchy and distorted.

But anyone familiar with this music—one King Sunny Ade concert and you're hooked—will begin shaking their groove thing when they see the platform-heeled boots worn by Prince Nico (whose monster hit, "Sweet Mother," alas doesn't appear here) on this set's cover. For the uninitiated, Nigeria 70 is a beautiful and funky if limited primer—an ideal place to start.

—Robert Baird

**GEORGE WINSTON**

**Autumn: 20th Anniversary Edition**

Windham Hill 11610-2 (CD). 2001. William Ackerman, prod.; Ham Soper, Russell Bond, engs. AADV TT: 52.06

Performance ****
Sonicity ****

Music was when just the mention of poor, harmless new age music would make a room full of music lovers squirm and hiss like adders. Its slack musicianship, music-as-tranquilizer vibe, and everything-is-beautiful-but-show-me-the-money attitude were abhorrent to many. Always at the center of that long-passed storm was Will Ackerman's Windham Hill label, and most particularly this solo piano album, which has been reissued in celebration of the 20th anniversary of its release.

To some ears, the bearded, barefooted Winston's meandering piano compositions—which, in this edition's new liner notes, he attributes to influences by The Doors, John Coltrane, and Frank Zappa (go figure)—can still sound limp, lifeless, and hugely overrated. On the opposite side, cuts like "Colors/Dance" and "Woods" (the titles are new age incarnate) are stately, introspective, semiclassical weavings that I've found most useful as the soundtrack to a nap.

His music aside, Winston should be lauded for his record label, Dancing Cat, which has become a major source of Hawaiian slack-key guitar albums, not to mention a rare Professor Longhair session.

Close-miked to the point of making audible Winston's feet on the pedals, Autumn now includes new liner notes, a bonus track (a Winstonized version of Procol Harum's "Too Much Between Us"), and sheet music for one track—all of which add a modicum of value to this love-it-or-hate-it milestone.

—Robert Baird
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Stereophile, May 2002
Linn Komri
Editor:
Thanks for a most professional review [April 2002]. Yes, the Komri is a very difficult load. This is a side effect of the 4K array being operated as a four-way passive system. It requires a power amplifier capable of operating into a low impedance. The cabinet was engineered to be extremely dead, as measured, hence some of the weight. The upper bass driver has a first-order crossover so, as measured, it slightly overlaps the bass-system rolloff. Any more than a first-order high-pass on this driver introduces an excessive rate of phase change, and this slight overlap has been found to give the best overall response.

The measurements and conclusions about the response and dispersion through the midrange and treble regions are very astute. The Komri is obviously not a conventional loudspeaker, and the measurements therefore will not be the same as a conventional configuration would give, particularly around the mid/treble regions. After much listening and measuring, the Komri arrangement was optimized to give the most pitch-accurate, natural behavior in a real room. This, as explained in the text, is a combination of direct and indirect reflected signals. Only our ears can put all the pieces back together again.

The super tweeter rolls in at about 13kHz and extends to the ultrasonic. The above axis suckout is due to the slight overlap between the tweeter rolling off and the super tweeter rolling on. Using the super tweeter at a relatively low frequency gives its smooth dispersion and fast response through the top of the audioband, rather than reserving it just for ultrasonic! As suggested, the waterfall graph shows reflections, not resonances. Careful engineering eliminated resonances.

Brian Morris
PR manager, Linn Products

Dive Reich wanted to show what he could do when he allowed himself to pull out all the stops and not leave a meaningful idea on the cutting-room floor because of cost constraints. The innovative use of the huge power-supply choke is a good example. It is heavy and expensive, but it gives the zero-feedback amp the control that allows it to sing sweetly until some real bass comes through—and then to quickly and mercilessly kick the listener to the floor.

As Theta’s industrial designer, I’ve always pledged to make the products as interesting as I could without adding meaningfully to their cost—after all, it is the sound that’s important. This intrinsically more expensive product allowed me artistic freedom without sufficiently affecting the price. The Citadel is more than just another amp to us. It is an extension of Theta’s philosophy since our beginning: to bring back more of the emotion of the musical experience.

Neil Sinclair
President, Theta Digital

Manufacturers’ Comments

The Citadel
Editor:
Following a long and challenging design exercise, it’s gratifying when a Stereophile reviewer writes such a glowing testimony. Jonathan Scull’s review of our Citadel monos made us particularly proud, because of both who the reviewer is and the circumstances of the Citadel project. Reading the pronouncements of this consummate connoisseur, in my mind’s eye I couldn’t help but picture Jonathan with a glass of Haunt Briton raised after a first glowing sip.

Over the years, you could say that Stereophile and its sister publication have chronicled the history of Theta; from our Generation I, the first outboard D/A converter; to the Casablanca, the first modular surround processor; to the Dreadnaught, the first modular multichannel amplifier.

After 14 years of creating new categories of things, we welcomed the opportunity to take a fresh look at an existing type of product. The intention is like that of a singer-songwriter reinterpreting a standard when he feels that, through his experience, he can bring something new and of value to the song.

This is not a new concept—a number of companies have published out statement amplifiers before. We regard some of these amplifiers highly, but there hasn’t been anything released in at least four years that really gave us any new insights.

The analog side of our digital product designs has created a library of ideas, proven out by experimentation but not affordable or applicable in previous products. After 30 years of designing amplifiers for Dayton-Wright, Classé, and McCormack, we finally feel like we have a piece that can be put together and made more helpful to the listener.

Mike Pluta
President, Theta Digital

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Sometimes tweaks take on a life of their own. Take the one of using Armor All to keep speaker surrounds from drying out, which you can read all about in the November 2001 "Fine Tunes," No. 41 (available free at www.stereophile.com/showarchives.cgi?452). I recently got another e-mail on the subject from one Dan Mazza at Arizona Hi-Fi, who agrees with Mark Gdovin's objections to using Armor All. (Read Mark's comments on the entire issue in the readers' letters linked to "Fine Tunes" No. 41 by clicking on "Letters" at the bottom right of the page, or by going directly to www.stereophile.com/showarchives.cgi?452:1.)

Dan has been, he informs, a member of an auto-racing crew for more than 25 years (for which I salute him), and has done some racing himself. He seems very aware of the problems with Armor All so well explicated by Mark, and also points out that, as time goes on, Armor All emits a gas. (So do I, but that's another story.) One common result of this outgassing, he says, is the light milky coating you may have seen on the inside of your windshield (assuming you use Armor All on your dashboard).

Okay, damned again—but, Dan says, you can use a simple old auto-detailing trick for preventing speaker surrounds from drying out: vegetable oil! "A light application about every six months or so should do the trick." Seems right on the money. (Seems, okay? I'm not putting anything on my JMLab Utopias' driver surrounds!) You can find Dan at www.tubeaudio.com. "Keep up the good work!" he enthusiastically ended his missive. Thanks, Dan—with great pleasure.

Now for some more equipment-footnoting ideas to supplant the many "Fine Tunes" we've spent mulling over this ticklish problem. If you're not of a mind to pull out the scissors and tape and start doing things for yourself, I have a few commercial items that couldn't hurt.

First, hee thee to thy nearest full-service Bright Star dealer and ask him to fix you up with a set of IsoNodes. (Nothing to do with your nose, and I don't have a cold.) These are packs of small, black "high-tech polymer" half-spheres that "simultaneously act as a solid and a liquid to absorb harmful vibration," according to the Bright Star literature. And they're "Fine Tunes" cheap. Four of the larger size—a packet of which Barry Kohan, Mr. Bright Star, tossed me at CES—cost $19.95. Each is 1 ¼" in diameter by ⅜" tall, four of which are good for 42 lbs of equipment. The small IsoNodes are ⅜" by ⅝" tall and work fine for components weighing up to 30 lbs.

I tried the IsoNodes under the Rotel RCJ-971 CD player I sometimes use with my headphone system when writing reviews, and liked what they did. AudioPrism IsoBearings are better but cost a lot more. Feeding a HeadRoom BlockHead dual-mono headphone amp (review in the works), the Rotel sounded cleaner with the 'Nodes in place, with better-defined bass, a more pellucid midrange, and sweeter highs. (For the BlockHead review I'll be using the heavier and fully differential Balanced Audio Technology DSSE CD player.) In my book, IsoNodes are a no-brainer. Buy three packs and use three footers each under four components!

More inexpensive footers come to us from Uncle Jerry Raskin, aka The Needle Doctor. They're called Molly Toes, after his daughter, and they're a "Fine Tunes"-friendly 48 bucks for a blister pack of eight. The set Jerry gave me at CES had four in gold, four in a sort of gray, black, and white faux marble. They even come with little raw marble protectors for your fine fionicha.

I replaced the IsoNodes under the Rotel 971 with the Mollys and liked what they did, too. First, I noticed that the bass was a hair tighter than that produced with the 'Nodes. The midrange was perhaps a bit less lush, although I could have been hearing more of what was on the CD. And the highs, too, were perhaps a touch less sweet overall than with the 'Nodes. It all depends on your tastes and system, of course.

But the Molly Toe and IsoNode footers are relatively cheap, even for those starting out in the World of Tweakdom. At the worst, you can give them to your nephew—he'll probably wear them through his ears or navel.

Speaking of CD tweaks...The Needle Doctor sells Disc Guards at $9.99 for 10: "Improves CD/DVD/Media Quality! Stabilizes Disc in Player! Reduces Disc Vibration! Makes Handling Easier! Raises Disc Off Any Surface!" Jerry actually talks like that! Every statement ends in an exclamation point! Really!

The Disc Guard is a green band that you stretch around the outer perimeter of your CD or DVD—be sure to slip the disc into the Guard's inner notch and tap it down tight. I used something like this regularly in the early 1990s to defeat early digititus. Those bands, from Sumiko and Allsop, were black, but green is probably better—according to most tweakers, green better absorbs the stray laser light bouncing around inside a player.

I tried the Disc Guards, and they worked very well. I didn't use them with the super-expensive Accuphase DP-100 transport, but they certainly were worth it with the Rotel 971, especially at a buck each. The result was an added smoothness evident across the audible frequency range. And in some cases, ladies and germs, that's just what the "Fine Tunes" Doctor ordered.

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