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AMERICAN SOUND
from Joseph, Rogue, & Acoustic Zen

FROM JAPAN:
Final Laboratory AMPLIFIERS

Kirsty MacColl
& Will Kimbrough
ON DISK

MAGNEPAN’S
Jim Winey
PROFILED

INDEX TO VOLUME 25
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John Tchilinguirian, Chief Designer, Connoisseur Series Design Team
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urfing the Usenet newsgroups and the Web audio forums recently, it
struck me that the old wisdom is correct: If you keep your mouth shut, you
won't say anything with which anyone can disagree. A topic that seems to be of peren-
nial interest is how Stereophile chooses the products it reviews. Yet the more I have
explained how it's done, the greater the criticism that is heaped on the magazine.
A continuing complaint is that Stereophile favors products from established major com-
panies rather than opening its review pages to exciting, bleeding-edge components from
tiny entrepreneurial companies of whom no one has heard. A typical criticism was posted
last November by "Vinylly" on the Audio Asylum (www.audioasylum.com): "Have you
ever wondered how large the audio uni-
verse actually is? If you read all the popular audio magazines, they seem to pick a few
[brands] that are reviewed over and over again... If it wasn't for the ads placed by small,
independent companies, you wouldn't know they even existed... But what about the
small, independent companies that don't advertise? They don't get any reviews and they
don't advertise [so no one will know they exist]!" [My interpolation from a subsequent
darfication.—J.A.]

Vinylly's argument has some validity. Like all magazines, we have to restrict our review
coverage to what we have the space to review. I look with envy at our Primedia stablesmate
Motor Trend and Automobile, which have to cope with, at most, a mere 100 new models each year.
By contrast, literally thousands of new audio products come down the pike annu-
ally, and Stereophile's reviews can do no more than scratch the surface of what is
being offered its readers. Inevitably, some brands will be overlooked.

Where Stereophile differs from its peers is that,
instead of the criteria whereby products are chosen for review being concealed
behind closed doors, I make them public knowledge. Dating back to soon after I
took over the editorial reins of Stereophile in the 1980s, I imposed a rule that a manufac-
turer's product must be available through at least five US retail outlets before it qualifies
for a formal review. (I make exceptions for mail-order or Web-based companies.) This
is for four related reasons:

1) I strongly believe that a review maga-
azine's findings are not pronouncements
carved in stone but are opinions — admit-
tedly well-formed ones — that readers
should be able to test for themselves. If
readers can't audition the product, they
have to take what we say solely on trust,
and that makes me uncomfortable.
2) I don't want to recommend to our
readers that they buy equipment from a
company that has not yet demonstrated
any ability to design quality products, to
build them in quantity, or to stay around
long enough to service them. Stereophile's
review space is reserved for products from
decompanies that have taken at least the first
step on the road to becoming responsible
businesses. Even then, there are unavoid-
able casualties — see this issue's "Industry
Update" on p.15 for a sad example.
3) I want the products we review to be
real. Giving manufacturers a small com-
mercial hurdle to overcome — the first
person other than its designer to audition
a high-end product should not be a maga-
azine reviewer — goes a long way toward
ensuring that this will be the case. This is
also why all of a reviewer's experience with all samples of the product is reported
on in a Stereophile review.
4) I don't want Stereophile to become an
intrinsic part of a new company's marketing
effort — or, indeed, its only marketing
effort. If a company wants to crack the US
market, then they will first have to do the
legwork of setting up distribution and signing up dealers before their products
can be considered for a full Stereophile
review. In addition, dealers who stock a
new product only on the back of a positive
review will not be particularly committed to
it. They will therefore be likely to aban-
non it when the next component-of-the-
month comes along, which too often leaves a small company precariously in
debt, having borrowed heavily to finance
the purchase of parts to make products for
which demand has evaporated.

Once a company has five or more deal-
ers, that still doesn't mean their products are
automatically selected for review. The
second mechanism for winnowing down the
list of potential review candidates is the
enthusiasm of Stereophile's writing team.
They seek out what excites them mus-
ically — the products that get their
creative juices flowing. This automatically
means that the products that get ink
spilled on them tend to be the ones that
hold the most promise of sounding good.

I won't deny that there are downsides to
this process. First, and the one to which
"Vinylly" seemed to be referring, is that a
large, successful company has a greater
chance of getting its products reviewed
than a minuscule startup with no track rec-
ord. This is correct. In our defense, if we
were to base our choices of review equip-
ment solely on the brands that readers are
most likely to encounter in stores, we
would be reviewing Sony, B&W, Denon,
Boston Acoustics, Polk, and the Harman
brands, with perhaps some Paradigm occa-
sionally making an appearance. That such
brands don't dominate our pages shows that
we already do throw under-arm pitches to
the small guys. And the "Five Dealer Rule"
doesn't apply to the magazine's regular
columns, which is where Sam Tellig,
Michael Fremer, John Marks, and now Art
Dudley (see below) are free to shine the
light on whatever catches their ear.

Second, the policy tends to result in the
magazine reviewing expensive compo-
ents. I believe this is because the stakes of
a Stereophile review have become very high
for manufacturers. They understandably
try to maximize the chance of a positive re-
view by ensuring that we audition their
cost-no-object flagships, such as Canton's
admittedly very-fine-sounding Karat Ref-
reference 2 DC in this issue (p.72). And it is
also such models that whet our reviewers' appetites. Let's face it: If you were a review-
er, which Ford would you rather write about—a Taurus or an Aston Martin?

But I haven't lost sight of the fact that only a small number of people will be able
to afford the hi-tech dream machines com-
pared with those who settle for the bread-
' n-butter models more commonly found in
dealer showrooms. So we will try harder to
levy the review mix with products like
the Kirkaseter Silverline 60, which Brian
Damkroger reviews in this issue (p.91), and
which offers more music than you'd expect from its price.

Listening
As promised last November, erstwhile
Listener editor Art Dudley makes his
Stereophile debut in this issue, contributing
a review of three products from Final
Laboratory in Japan (p.97) as well as the
kickoff installment of a monthly column,
"Listening" (p.45). I've wanted to work
with Art for many years, and it's a shame
that it was the demise of his magazine that
has made that possible. But now many
more audiophiles will be able to appreci-
ate the sensitive ear, the observant eye, and
the keen wit with which Art informs his
writing. Now all I have to do is persuade
him that him being referred to as "AD"
does have an upside.

Stereophile, January 2003
Features

57  
Maggies Man  
Jim Winey, founder and president of Magneplanar speakers, speaks with David Lander.

65  
Where There's a Way, There's a Will  
Singer, songwriter, and guitarist extraordinaire Will Kimbrough is finding the balance between life as a frontman and a sideman. Robert Baird talks to this emerging musical presence.

Equipment Reports

72  Canton Karat Reference 2 DC loudspeaker (John Atkinson)
81  Kharma Midi-Grand Ceramique 1.0 loudspeaker (Michael Fremer)
91  Kirksaeter Silverline 60 loudspeaker (Brian Damkroger)
97  Final Laboratory Music-5 line preamplifier (Art Dudley)
97  Final Laboratory Music-6 power amplifier (Art Dudley)
109 Rogue Audio Magnum Ninety-Nine preamplifier (Chip Stern)
115 Acoustic Zen interconnects, speaker and AC cables (Paul Bolin)

Follow-Up

97  Final Laboratory Music-4 phono preamplifier (Art Dudley)
119 Joseph Audio RM33si Signature loudspeaker (Chip Stern)
Columns

5 As We See It
How do audio magazines choose the products they review? John Atkinson offers answers to this and other questions.

9 Letters
This month: Let's hear it for the girl! Put your money where the music is (like Robert Baird), readers' history of hi-fi, and Tosti's defense.

15 Industry Update
High-end news, including dealer-promoted seminars, plus: Dunlavy Audio Labs closes, retail from Avantgard Acoustic, good news for SACD and DVD-Audio fans, Kathy Gornick elected chair of CEA's Board of Directors and Executive Board for 2003, the latest in remote volume control, entry of engineer and recording great Tom Dowd, new LSO Live recording label, CD price-fixing suit settled, marketing study of music-buying trends, and continued success for Totsier Home Entertainment Group.

27 Sam's Space
Last September, at Milan's TOP Audio/Video Show, Sam Tellig spoke with Franco Serblin of Sonic Fisher about designing loudspeakers...here's what he had to say, along with Sam's impressions of the Sonic Fisher Cremona.

35 Analog Corner
This month our knowledgeable Mike Fremer, "the walking opinion," visits with Acoustic Sounds' Chad Kassem in Salina, Kansas and auditions three Pro-Ject 'tables.'

45 Listening
In his first monthly column, Art Dudley, Stereophile's new Editor at Large, laments the fact that there are no Massatis of the hi-fi world that could capture the unbridled affections of the audiophile junkie, let alone the wannabes...but then again, a great phono cartridge goes a long way toward conveying that "musical sound" through its very simplicity—Art feels the van den Hul DIT-2 Special fits the bill.

51 The Fifth Element
John Marks listens to the Brinkmann Integrated amplifier and the Dynaudio Special Twenty-Five loudspeaker.

123 Building a Library
Jason Cohen explores the recorded legacy of the late, great Kirsty MacColl.

129 Record Reviews
The first Recording of the Month in the new year is Steve Tibbetts' A Man About A Horse. In classical this month we have recent releases by Ryuchi Sakamoto, Michael Tilson Thomas, and Mariss Jansons. In Rock/Pop there are new discs by Solomon Burke, Johnny Cash, and Ben Kweller. Finally, in jazz, there's Charlie Haden and Diana Krall.

155 Manufacturers' Comments
Read manufacturers' responses to reviews of their products and each other's critiques. This month: Manley Laboratories, Grand Prix Audio, van den Hul, Brinkmann USA, and Acoustic Zen.

162 Aural Robert
Twenty-seven years after his Rolling Thunder tour, which has just seen its first official release, Bob Dylan still resounds in concert. Robert Baird listens to both.

Information

158 Audio Mart
149 Index to Vol.25
144 Manufacturers' Showcase
154 Dealers' Showcase
156 Advertiser Index
“... a serious high-end contender, and a formidable one ...”

- Robert Deutsch, Stereophile on the Studio/100
What's with Luke?

Editor:

What’s with Luke Manley of VTL and his totally unnecessary attack on Manley Labs (“Manufacturers’ Comments,” November 2002, p.193)? Seems like Mr. Manley can't take competition (especially from a woman), or is it just sour grapes because Manley won "Best Sound" at HE2002 and he didn’t? In any case, shame on you, Mr. Manley.

Christina Schick
Manassas, VA
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He's not going anywhere

Editor:

I always enjoy the “cancel my subscription”/“sign me up” letters you print each month. Doesn’t it seem strange that audiophiles—the sort of people who spend thousands of dollars on completely frivolous, self-indulgent purchases—balk at paying 20 bucks a year?

Sure, I sometimes find much of Stereophile off track. Some months, nothing in the magazine really catches my fancy. But for $20 a year? I’d bet most Stereophile readers spill more than that in a single month.

Every year, I ask myself whether it’s worth roughly the price of one CD including shipping, not only for my own enjoyment of Stereophile but also for the public service of helping to keep this thing around for others to experience, too. Every year, my answer’s the same. (But if Frenner ever leaves, I’ll cancel my subscription)

Fred Morganstern
fmorganstern@dynamicsdirect.com

Welcome home

Editor:

I recently sent you payment for a one-year subscription. I have been reading Stereophile for several years—I remember when it was digest-sized—subscribing on and off, and buying issues for full price at the newsstand whenever the mood struck me.

Well, many things have changed in my life, except for my love of music and the quality of how it’s played back. I’ll admit I have tried to read “other” magazines, but they just don’t seem to do it for me, and in the midst of all this I managed to let my subscription to Stereophile run out again.

This time, I’m sorry I did. While, like some folks, I can’t afford most of the equipment reviewed in Stereophile, I still enjoy reading the comments of others and learning about what’s new in the industry. I don’t think anyone does it better than your staff.

I’m not the type of person to write a letter to complain about Stereophile reviewing a $70k turntable. When will people realize that everyone has a different set of priorities, and that because of this there will always be a few people willing to explore the limits of audio equipment? I think a lot of knowledge is gained through the creativity and experience of individuals and companies willing to take that chance and attempt to create accurate-sounding high-quality equipment. Don’t you think some of this knowledge is “handed down” to the more realistically priced components that we buy? I think so. Sure, it all comes with a price—show me something that doesn’t.

So thanks for the wonderful magazine. I’ll look forward to my first issue—again.

Michael Sorbo
York, PA
m_sorbo@hotmail.com

Back to basics

Editor:

In the October 2002 Stereophile, you listed 700 recommended components and reviewed several other components. By contrast, in that same issue you reviewed five classical CDs and just one jazz CD. Furthermore, while you have reviewed SACD players from Accuphase to Sony in previous issues, I have yet to see any reviews of SACD’s in Stereophile.

If we go back to the basics, all these amps, preamps, turntables, and CD players exist only so we can listen to the music. What is the point of reviewing so many components and writing about the advantages of high-resolution formats if you don’t review the software?

Cyns Eln
CEln77@aol.com

Escape the cocoon, Mr. Baird

Editor:

Even though I understand Stereophile’s approach in selecting the music that appears in its “Record Reviews” section, I agree with those who are unsatisfied with it. I believe music editor Robert Baird’s very personal taste is the main and perhaps only influence on this section. When was the last time a Latin Jazz, Alternative Rock, or R&B recording was reviewed in Stereophile’s pages?

If you want to stay away from mainstream releases, fine—there are plenty of low-profile, highly talented artists out there. But I suggest that Mr. Baird either get out of his blues/country/classic-jazz cocoon and listen to his audience, or that he pass the baron to a more open-minded editor.

Luis Alberto Torres
ltorres1962@yahoo.com

Bravo, Mr. Baird!

Editor:

Good lord! What has happened to my Stereophile?!! While I have always been impressed with your equipment reviews and editorial, you have rarely covered music that I love. All of a sudden, in your November 2002 issue, you mention Radiohead, My Bloody Valentine, Guided By Voices, the Pixies, Stone Roses, and the Smiths! Not to mention Nirvana, the Replacements, and Joy Division.

Bravo!

Irin Seabrook
Greenwich, NJ
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Sensible journalism

Editor:

Reading Stereophile’s 40th-anniversary issue (November 2002) made me reflect on my life as an audiophile. I realized the significance of this issue when I recalled that it was in October 1997 (when Stereophile was already 35 years old) that I bought my very first issue. Although I was an audio enthusiast before 1997, that date was when I started my life as a serious audiophile.

I cannot deny that you guys at Stereophile have greatly influenced my values as a music lover. All the equipment I own was reviewed by you guys, and I have
Letters

proven them to be worth the effort and the money, especially here in the Philippines, where the economic crisis gives terrible challenges to most people. I appreciate your professional approach of reviewing the articles, and the overall layout of the magazine. More power to all of you. I'm looking forward to many more years of responsible and sensible audio journalism!

Francisco S. Sengia, Jr.
audios@netcom.com

Shivers
Editor:
My first issue of Stereophile was in 1968, and in all the years since, I have never ever been dissatisfied! That is a great feat, and a tribute to J. Gordon Holt and to John Atkinson and his staff.
The November issue was just fantastic! I really liked JA's ranking of "The Hot 100" products. His No.48 pick, the KLH 9 electrostatic speaker, was right on the money. Hearing this speaker with Stan Marquis (of ESS speakers) back in Sacramento, California, on a Friday evening over a great bottle of 1970 ZD Pinot Noir, was an epiphany for me. As did JA, I still get shivers at the thought. Don't you just love high-end audio?

Thanks again for the memories!

Denny Thompson
Carefree, AZ
carefree-courhey@msn.com

Warm memories
Editor:
The ranking brought warm memories, but how could you forget to include the successful Leak Sandwich speaker of 1961, a trailblazer with a glorious misfortune? As if the aluminum-polystyrene-aluminum sandwich construction were not revolutionary enough, it also introduced bi-wiring wall-damping and rear-wall bracing via the woofer frame. I vividly remember the ad about Harold Leak standing on the metal woofer, as well as visiting the only high-end Venezuelan dealer at the time, Allum's, to hear the Leak easily beat the daylight out of all the ARs, James B. Lansings, and sand-filled Wharfedales.

There is an Internet site dedicated to Harold Leak: http://home.mira.net/~kie/wavy/leak.html.

Vladimir Dorta
val@dorta.com

Beautiful music
Editor:
I've never been compelled to write to a magazine before, but I just had to express my elation after reading in the November issue John Atkinson's No.3 pick for the 100 audio products he felt to have been the most important since 1962: the Vandersteen 2 loudspeaker.

I must first confess that my husband is the true "audiophile" in our household. It began, I thought, rather innocently. First, copies of Stereophile began appearing on tabletops, by our bedside nightstand; then I would witness him sitting hour upon hour online, researching various audiophile-related websites.

I should have become suspicious when my computer "wallpaper" went from "blue clouds" to "red amps." I've been married to him long enough to know something was up. Then his casual "How about going with me to check out these loudspeakers I've been reading about? I've always wanted a pair, since I first read about them when I was 17." (Never mind how old we are now.) "They're called Vandersteens..." He's a sly one. Last time he pulled this ploy, we ended up with Harleys.

We went to our local Vandersteen distributor in San Jose, Tailored Technology. I was expecting a typical showroom floor with the typical array of displays. I was surprised instead to find myself in an office with two demo rooms, both set up with various equipment. The common factor in both were Vandersteen speakers.
The owner didn't give us a sales pitch. He just asked which speaker we were interested in and wanted to hear. My husband said, "The 2Ce Signature." One listen was all I needed to become a bona fide audiophile. Our sickness grew. Further research resulted in our homemade, braided CAT-5 cable, silver wire for interconnects, marine fire-tray power cables... and I'll stop there.

I don't pretend to say I can understand all of Stereophile's technical articles and comments. What I do understand and can attest to is the incredible joy I experience every night when we relax in our music room, listening to the beautiful sound coming from those Vandersteen speakers.

Thank you, Stereophile, for your great magazine, and thank you, Mr. Vandersteen, for your great product.

Christina M. Ewing
San Jose, CA
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Toddlers?
Editor:
JA was close in November. It's Southwest Technical Products, not Services (p.77, No.32). Around 1973, I built a pair of SWTP's 60W mono Tigers (as well as the preamp), which used the then-brand-new Motorola power devices. They oscillated like a bastard. Toddlers.

Robert Young
gyoungr@m1.com

Complementary errors
Editor:
I really enjoyed "The Hot 100" in November. Everyone interested in audio who has been around that long will have a different list, but I certainly found a huge overlap between your list and mine.

I would like to address one error: The GAS Ampzilla (p.77, No.32) was far from the first solid-state amplifier to have fully complementary output transistors. The Marantz Model 16, and many others from the late 1960s, had them.

The first fully complementary amp (with the exception of a single differential input stage) was the JBL "T circuit," designed by Bart Locanthi back in 1966. This would be the first solid-state design on my list — it was 10 years ahead of its time, and many, if not most, of the great solid-state designs go straight back to it. James Bongiorno's SAE Mk.3 and the Dyna 400 had very a similar topology to the JBL. Mr. Bongiorno's Ampzilla was the first fully complementary-symmetry design from input to output, and boy, have a lot of amps "borrowed" from that baby!

Kevin Gray
North Hills, CA
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Timing errors
Editor:
In the redoubtable Sam Tellig's 40 years of favorite products ("Sam's Space," November 2002), he mentioned that the Edgar Villchur-designed AR turntable was introduced in the late 1960s, "with a miserable excuse for a tonearm." While there is no argument about who designed the 'table, or that the tonearm was, indeed, miserable — as was the horrid gray foam-plastic turntable mat, which not only stuck to the bottom of each and every record side from static electricity, but also shed plastic bits onto the record surface as it aged — in reality, the AR 'table was first introduced in late 1961 for the princely sum of $58. By 1963, the price had gone to $68, and by the time Sam had the company "introducing" it in the late '60s, AR had sold tens of thousands of them, many of which are still in use.

George Graves
gmgraves@padbell.net

A history lesson
Editor:
I've just spent the last hour thoroughly enjoying your almost sinfully delightful walk down stereo memory lane (November 2002, pp.66-81). What a generator of warm and fuzzy feelings about all things audio, and a reminder of why I took up this rewarding hobby nearly 30 years ago, as a teenager! I was fortunate enough to be exposed to nearly every product on your list during a career as an audio salesperson from the late 1970s until the late '90s, mostly courtesy of Hi-Fi Buys and Ovation A-V of Indianapolis. A better playground for exercising Audiophilia nervea a guy couldn't ask for. Several products listed struck especially strong chords for me. Take the wacky Advent 300, for instance. Like most who owned one, it first served duty as a receiver powering speakers (JR 14% for me), then morphed into an introduction to high-end preamps. I loved selling these, but only after incorporating into my sales pitch the concept that they would probably fail, and that the potential owners would
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>KS 2120 .75 Meter</td>
<td>$950.00*</td>
<td>Silver AES/EBU digital cable, silver plated XLR type connectors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KS 2020 .75 Meter</td>
<td>$650.00*</td>
<td>Silver S/PDIF digital cable, silver RCA type or BNC connectors</td>
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<td>ORCHID</td>
<td>$560.00</td>
<td>AES/EBU cable with silver plated XLR type connectors</td>
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<tr>
<td>AGDL-Bal</td>
<td>$240.00</td>
<td>Silver in tri-braid geometry, silver plated XLR type connectors</td>
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<tr>
<td>D-50</td>
<td>$290.00</td>
<td>Silver, twin, helically wound shields, BNC &amp; RCA type connectors</td>
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<tr>
<td>DV-75</td>
<td>$180.00</td>
<td>75 ohm coax, silver plated, &quot;F&quot;, BNC or RCA type connectors</td>
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<td>DV-30</td>
<td>$75.00</td>
<td>75 ohm coax, solid-core copper, &quot;F&quot;, BNC or RCA type connectors</td>
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<tr>
<td>OPT-1</td>
<td>$60.00</td>
<td>Uniquely polished high-quality optical/digital link</td>
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<tr>
<th>Phone</th>
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<tr>
<td>TAK Ag</td>
<td>$600.00</td>
<td>Silver with OGQ2™ braiding, termination options</td>
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<tr>
<td>TAK H</td>
<td>$400.00</td>
<td>Copper &amp; silver with OGQ2™ braiding, termination options</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TAK Cu</td>
<td>$250.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>KS 3035</td>
<td>$3,680.00</td>
<td>Hyper-pure copper and silver, WBT® bananas or spades</td>
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<tr>
<td>KS 3033</td>
<td>$1,680.00</td>
<td>Hyper-pure copper, WBT® bananas or spades available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BiFocal XL</td>
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<td>Internally bi-wired w/36 VariStrand™ copper, WBT® bananas or spades</td>
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<td>8TC</td>
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<tr>
<td>4TC</td>
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<tr>
<td>4VS</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>4PR</td>
<td>$84.80</td>
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<td>16 Hyper-pure, VariStrand™ copper, available by the foot or spool</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4TC</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>4VS</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>PK 10 PALLADIUM™</td>
<td>$1,060.00</td>
<td>10awg copper, SWR Damping, WATTGATE™ 350 IEC &amp; 330 wall connectors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PK 10 GOLD</td>
<td>$300.00</td>
<td>10awg copper, WATTGATE™ 350 IEC &amp; 330 wall connectors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PK 10</td>
<td>$180.00</td>
<td>10awg copper, WATTGATE™ 320 IEC &amp; Marinco® wall connectors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PK 14 PALLADIUM™</td>
<td>$930.00</td>
<td>14awg copper, SWR Damping, WATTGATE™ 350 IEC &amp; 330 wall connectors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PK 14 GOLD</td>
<td>$270.00</td>
<td>14awg copper, WATTGATE™ 350 IEC &amp; 330 wall connectors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PK 14</td>
<td>$150.00</td>
<td>14awg copper, WATTGATE™ 320 IEC &amp; Marinco® wall connectors</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Special services and options

- Y-cords and jumpers quickly manufactured from many of our models
- Unusual bi-wire or multi-wiring configurations are routinely manufactured

*KS 2120 & KS 2020 are priced at .75"
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likely be introduced to our service tech shortly. (This elicited some strange looks from buyers, but didn’t seem to hamper sales. Apparently, a little honesty went a long way.) Cold-solder connections were usually the culprit, but, once this was corrected, unit and customer were happily reunited for many moons of listening pleasure. Of course, the two red LEDs showing optimum FM tuning rarely stayed aligned for more than a few minutes, but it still sounded fine.

In closing, I must join every other Stereophile reader by casting a vote for a product you guys somehow left out: the Magneplanar MG-1, which launched countless aspiring tweaks on trips of audio enlightenment. Like many of the other classics mentioned, these speakers are readily available on the used market, despite their advanced years.

A final note: I think any audiophile under the age of 35 would do well to read this feature, as a better history lesson for understanding our hobby would be difficult to come by. Bravo, guys! Steve Greene

An insult?

Editor:
I read John Atkinson’s list of “The Hot 100” products of the past 40 years in your November 2002 issue with great interest. However, I was saddened to see that the United States of America, which is known as the mother of high fidelity, was not able to build anything in the last 40 years as good as the Linn Sondek LP12 or the Quad ESL-63, which were No.1 and No.2 on his list. Obviously, and as expected, both of them are from the United Kingdom!

The Linn Sondek LP12 was just a fine-tuned Thorens TD 124 or AR XA turntable. It was not an innovation in hi-fi history. Listing this turntable as No.1 was an insult to Frank McIntosh, Saul Marantz, Sid Smith, Paul Klipsch, Avery Fisher, and many other great names in the history of high fidelity.

How come a product like the revolutionary Marantz 10b (built from 1964 to 1968), which set a new standard for how a tuner is built, had no place in “The Hot 100”? The McIntosh C22 and MC275, which were masterpieces of amplifier design and were built until the late 1960s, were apparently not worth a mention, while the legendary Marantz 9, built until 1968, was also nowhere to be seen. At a lower level, brands like Fisher and Scott, which made it possible for millions to enjoy high fidelity, were also ignored.

I read on p.57 that in 1976 “John Atkinson abandons his career . . . as a bass guitarist and joins the English magazine Hi-Fi News & Record Review.” JA therefore had no opportunity to know all these products from the golden era of high fidelity. He may have not even have seen them. But at least for this anniversary issue, he should have done better homework and asked for help from people who do know the history of audio.

Chris Danesh
ELCYD@aol.com

Doing the right thing?

Editor:
That Stereophile can celebrate its 40th anniversary is proof that it is doing the right thing, that readers recognize your way as our way. Yes, I don’t like so many advertisements; yes, I don’t like issues with only 132 pages; yes, I’m missing some excellent writers; and finally, yes, I do not agree with everything you print.

But . . . you love the music, you are trying to find the best way possible to get as much as can be gotten from CDs and LPs, and you always listen to your own ears and teach us to do the same. Therefore, as long as you stay on the same path, I’m sure we’ll have more anniversaries to celebrate. Keep listening and writing.

Jasmin Croatia
jjasi@inet.hr

Doing the wrong thing?

Editor:
Congratulations are obviously due, but judging by the number of letters you publish complaining of one thing or another, I believe Stereophile needs to look long and hard at where it’s going after 40 years. I’m 55, and I’ve been reading the magazine almost since the beginning. I believe the biggest mistake ever made by the powers that be at Stereophile was to let J. Gordon Holt go. Whatever the politics, sometimes an asset has to be appreciated for what it is. No one, not Harry Pearson at The Absolute Sound, has had a greater influence over the development of home-entertainment equipment. What’s more, JGH was not interested so much in “absolutes” as he was in “real” sound, and there is a difference.

So-called “surround sound” is a natural progression of stereo reproduction, which has always been an attempt—remember, stereo was originally going to be three-channel—to represent a three-dimensional “sound image” of the original recording in the home. Gordon understood that. He should have been allowed to hang around Stereophile to help carry it into the 21st century.

I believe the issues facing you now are not the advertisements in the magazine, or whether it tests too many expensive or too many inexpensive items, but rather whether Stereophile and its writers maintain an integrity and a love for music that will sustain them in the future, and whether they will do that while keeping an open mind to the incredible developments available to us all today.

Jim Basquill
Halifax, Nova Scotia
jamesbasquill@lycos.com

Totem demonstrations

Editor:
In response to Eugene Mannacio’s letter in the October 2002 Stereophile (p.12), we [at Totem] were taken aback by his commentary that we played only a fixed musical regimen and cumulatively put in a generalized representative grouping of what “other” manufacturers did.

Totem Acoustic’s room at Home Entertainment 2002 in NYC had an overflow of attendees. Past commentary from visitors and press had been that they can hardly squeeze themselves in, and that the room is always too crammed to even approach. After careful thought, this brought us to make a sensible decision in playing two totally different yet affordable systems with a multitude of music, which we played—not as a fixed format, but varied to the visitors’ tastes.

As serious high-end manufacturers and not dealers, we aim to be as flexible and pertinent to these demands as possible. We certainly try to create a “true” impression of what our musical, high-quality, and affordable audio products have to offer to the dealers, consumers, and press who visit us. The “test-driving aspect” is one that we reserve for the dealers who obviously carry our wares and are professionally minded enough to correctly advise the consumer as to which path to take.

Nevertheless, we offered all consumers who absolutely wanted to hear their particular tracks or CDs time at the end of each show day to indulge as long and as much as they felt they needed. Did this go unnoticed? We respect and appreciate Stereophile for alluding to the difficulty facing the various exhibitors, especially manufacturers, but we deplore the fact that we were grouped “along with others” who had a predetermined fixed-format music-play plan, which we certainly did not adhere to.

Our jointss were very sorry from hundreds of innumerable trips to both CD players, changing tunes and music in order to give a fair impression and taste to the wonderful people who came by to visit. This is proof of the total dedication, effort, and commitment we have always shown to our beloved music lovers.

In order to musicality share with and please all, sometimes we are remiss in satisfying absolutely everyone. For this, we certainly do not begrudge Mr. Mannacio’s frustrations, and do apologize for his inconvenience at the show.

In conclusion, it is the generalized melting-pot “demo” category that was instigated that has become a wrongful representation of what Totem Acoustic offers and, most important, practices.

Lucy Lentini
VP Sales, Totem Acoustic
Only the precise balance of all individual aspects yields the highest quality of the whole. The culmination of twenty-five years of in-house research and development is now reflected in a modern audiophile masterpiece - the Dynaudio Special Twenty-Five. Dynaudio has incorporated its vast expertise into its finest compact loudspeaker creation. Hand-built in Denmark by master craftsmen and finished in an exclusive cross-grained birch veneer, the Special Twenty-Five upholds the Dynaudio tradition of offering the finest compact loudspeaker designs available. With drivers directly derived from Dynaudio’s Confidence and Evidence models, it delivers unbelievable depth, precision and realism in music reproduction. Celebrating the precedence set by this model, Dynaudio provides a singular twenty-five year limited warranty. The balance of perfection: The Dynaudio Special Twenty-Five.
US: COLORADO SPRINGS
John Atkinson
As this issue of Stereophile went to press, a notice appeared on Dunlavys Audio Labs website that the company had closed. We were able to get verbal confirmation of the closure but nothing on the record, unfortunately.

Dunlay had been sold by John and Joan Dunlay at the end of 2001 to Wybron, Inc., a manufacturer of professional lighting equipment, which had been founded by music-industry veteran Ken Whitrighet to produce a “scrolling color changer”—a box with which to automatically change the color of stage lights. Wybron was located next to the Dunlay Audio Labs facility in Colorado Springs, so it had seemed a good idea to Whitrigh to purchase the loudspeaker manufacturer when John Dunlay had expressed interest in retiring. JD stayed on as Chief Engineer after the acquisition, and Whitrigh had seemed bullish about Dunlay’s future when I spoke with him at the 2002 CEI/IA conference in Minneapolis. The company had just introduced an impressive MLS-based room-acoustics analyzer to help dealers get the best sound from the speakers they sold.

We’ll have more on this story next month.

US: NEW YORK CITY
Barry Willis
Fulfilling a promise made several months ago, German loudspeaker manufacturer Avantgarde Acoustic is moving into the retail realm. Stereophile’s Robert Deutsch was mightily impressed by Avantgarde’s Uno in the September 2000 and August 2002 issues, and the company’s horn speakers are the featured products at Avantgarde Music & Cinema, a new showroom at 27 West 24th Street, Suite 502, in Manhattan. The store is privately owned and operated by Bob Visintainer, who emphasized that while his business is “definitely Avantgarde-focused,” it also carries other brands of electronics and accessories.

The store’s grand opening, in November, featured the North American debut of Avantgarde’s new BassHorn, a powerful rapid-response, high-sensitivity, low-frequency system said to bring a new realism to reproduced music. With two 12” drivers and a built-in 350W amplifier, the BassHorn is a completely new creation by Mathias Ruff, and is rated at a hard-to-credit 102dB sensitivity.

The BassHorn is a modular design that allows music fans to assemble as many pairs of them as they wish. Each additional pair doubles the available power and adds 3dB to the sensitivity rating; four BassHorn modules offer 105dB sensitivity and 1400W. For the BassHorn, Avantgarde developed a new dynamic compensation circuit, Active Dynamic Radiation Impedance Compensation (ADRIC), which linearizes the bass response below the horn’s cutoff frequency and “dynamically compensates for small horn-mouth dimensions.” ADRIC allows the BassHorn to reach as low as 18Hz despite its relatively small horn-mouth area of only 0.85m² (9ft²), normally too small to achieve true low-bass reproduction. Avantgarde has applied for a patent on the design.

Avantgarde managing director Holger Fromme says the Trio Omega speaker system, augmented by BassHorn modules, sounds effortless and natural at all volume levels. “Transients are out of this world,” he says. “The sound is always amazing: very fast, very detailed, very powerful, very precise. Even tracks with no bass, such as acoustic guitar, benefit dramatically from this new bass quality. The energy content is gigantic.”

Avantgarde Music & Cinema can be reached by telephone at (212) 229-1842.

US: LOS ANGELES
Jon Iverson
Good news for the Super Audio CD (SACD): It’s not exactly a flood, but Universal Music Group, the world’s largest music company, finally made good on the promise it made at the 2002 Consumer Electronics Show (CES) announcing in October its first slate of SACD titles to be released in the US. Beginning October 29, Universal made a combination of “best-selling artists and core catalog titles” available on SACD in major markets around the world. A sub-

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

CALIFORNIA
• The Bay Area Audiophile Society (BAAS) schedules manufacturer and dealer demonstrations, fosters communication and camaraderie, operates a members e-mail network, and distributes High Note, an informative newsletter. For further information, please contact Dennis Davis at (415) 381-4228 or e-mail bluedeer3@attbi.com.

• The Greater South Bay Audiophile Society holds regular meetings every other month in Southern California. The GSBAS is dedicated to seeking out systems that get as close as possible to reproducing the original event. For details of upcoming meetings and membership information, call Steve Huber at (562) 422-1615 or e-mail...
stsal number of these releases were multichannel surround-sound discs.

UMG SACD titles slated for inclusion in the initial release were Diana Krall’s Look of Love, Andrea Bocelli’s Cielo di Toscan, works by Dvorak performed by Ivan Fischer and Budapest Festival Orchestra, Beethoven’s Symphony 9 by Herbert von Karajan and the Berlin Philharmonic, Natalie Cole’s Ask a Woman, the soundtracks to E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial: The 20th Anniversary Edition and A Beautiful Mind, Muddy Waters’ Folk Singer, Stan Getz and Joao Gilberto’s Getz & Gilberto, and Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong’s Ella and Louis.

In November, Universal planned to release on SACD Ryan Adams’ Gold, Bon Jovi’s Bounce, Diana Krall’s When I Look in Your Eyes, Al Jarreau’s All I Got, Quincy Jones’ Ultimate Collection, John Coltrane’s A Love Supreme, Steve Earle’s Guitar Town, and Beethoven’s complete violin sonatas, performed by Anne-Sophie Mutter. Artists slated for later release include Peter Gabriel, The Wallflowers, Steely Dan, Three Doors Down, The Police, Marvin Gaye, Shaggy, The Roots, and The Who.

Some possible good news for DVD-Audio fans was also revealed in October: The Digital Bits (http://www.thedigitalbits.com) reported that, according to Roger Water’s manager, Mark Fenwick, EMI will release Pink Floyd’s Dark Side of the Moon on DVD-A on the album’s 30th anniversary, March 3, 2003 (03/3/03).

One of the great things about the DVD-Audio format is the sheer flexibility built into the standard: two-channel or multichannel (mixed for four, five, or six speakers), multiple resolutions, multiple encode/decode choices (MLP, Dolby Digital, DTS, PCM), and an assortment of special features, including video. But as John Atkinson wrote in last October’s “As We See It,” that very panoply of playback options can easily confuse customers about what any specific disc might offer. Fans of DVD-Video discs know all too well that there is no labeling consistency concerning widescreen formatting, or even the type of surround sound encoded on a disc.

However, if DTS Entertainment has its way, DVD-A fans will not have to endure a similar fate. The licensor, producer, and marketer of DVD-Audio and 5.1 Music Discs has announced the debut of the first DVD-A discs sporting an Info Grid, intended to identify the special features included on a disc. The first DVD-A to feature the new labeling will be Sheila Nicholls’ Wake, which was slated for release November 5. In direct response to the growing demand for a simple way of determining which features and technical specifications a DVD-A possesses, DTS plans to print the Info Grid on the back cover of all future releases.

**US: WASHINGTON, DC**  
**Barry Willis**  
During the week of October 14, Thiel Audio Products president Kathy Gornik completed an unprecedented triple play. A longtime volunteer for the Consumer Electronics Association (CEA), Gornik was elected chair of the CEA’s Board of Directors and Executive Board for the coming year. Her election makes her the first woman, the first executive of a small manufacturing company, and the first representative of the high-end audio community to serve in that position.

“In addition to being the first female to serve as chair, Kathy will provide us with the point of view of a small-business executive,” said CEA president and CEO Gary Shapiro. Gornik will assume her new leadership roles on January 1, 2003.

Speaking from Thiel headquarters in Lexington, Kentucky, Gornik said she was “honored to be recognized by my colleagues” and pledged to use her new position to promote the interests of all CEA members. Gornik also recognizes that, by default, more attention may now be given to high-end audio as a category, a development she views very positively. “There is a certain natural leverage in my association with Thiel that may benefit the entire specialty audio industry,” she remarked, “but I will be working for the CEA as a whole.”

The organization has members from a diverse array of sub-industries, from makers of switches and subassemblies to companies producing computer, telecommunications, and television equipment, and, of course, audio gear. There are enormous benefits to CEA membership, Gornik believes. “High-end manufacturers should definitely consider joining CEA,” she said. “Now is a great time to join.”

A volunteer member of the CEA board for more than a decade, Gornik sees many immediate challenges and opportunities, among them “copyright issues, interoperability standards, the DTV tuner mandate, and non-tariff barriers.” The trade association was recently certified by the American National Standards Institute (ANSI), establishing as the default ANSI standard any elec-

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**Calendar**

GSBAS2001@yahoo.com.

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

**ILLINOIS**
- Red Rose Music, Mark Levinson’s vision of a return to quality and simplicity in audio and video, is pleased to announce the opening of its new Chicago store, located at 672 North Wells, Chicago, IL 60610. To schedule a private audition, please call (312) 266-8630, stop in, or contact us on the Web at rrmchicago@ameritech.net. You can get more information at www.redrose.com.

**LOUISIANA**
- New Orleans’ first and only high-end audio club holds monthly meetings to discuss topics of interest and listen to music. Join the fun by e-mailing zephrin@cox.net.

**MASSACHUSETTS**
- For details of upcoming monthly meetings of the Boston Audio Society, samples from their publication, The Speaker, or membership information, visit http://bostonaudiosociety.org, e-mail dby systems@attglobal.net, or call (603) 899-5121.

**MISSISSIPPI**
- If you are an audiophile living on the
“Halcro’s dm58: The Best Amplifier Ever!”

*Stereophile* Magazine, October 2002

How to improve upon perfection.

Halcro have now released the dm8 & dm10 preamplifiers.

Halcro is the world’s only super-fidelity power amplifier. The only power amplifier able to claim pure, unadulterated sound reproduction. Its sheer musicality redefines what you should expect from any power amplifier.

To maximise its performance, we have introduced the dm8 & dm10 preamplifiers. These units share the same proprietary circuitry as the power amplifier range and provide the best method to ensure your signal is kept as pure as possible. The dm10 includes a phono stage with variable capacitance and resistance adjustment, with infinite increments to extract the perfect signal from your turntable.

Glowing reviews and an ever-increasing list of awards mean you simply have to listen to Halcro. Contact us today.

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International: +61 8 8238 0807  Website: www.halcro.com
trical standard agreed to by the CEA, she said.

"The CEA is as vibrant as I have ever seen," she observed. "The membership is growing rapidly. My election is a very strong message about how inclusive the CEA is about serving our industry. It's also a strong validation of the growing power of women in the industry, and helps to legitimize an industry that is virtually invisible to the average American."

When asked if her new responsibilities would interfere with her duties at Thiel, Gornik remarked that she has long spent a "significant" portion of her time on CEA business, and that her company "has already made accommodations." Gornik mentioned several audio-industry veterans who, she said, have made huge contributions as members of the CEA's board, including Lew Johnson of Conrad-Johnson, Stephen Baker of Denon, Steve Caldero of Yamaha, Gary Warzin of Audiophile Systems (the US distributor of Arcam products), and Kathryn Garrett of Pioneer. They have all "worked tirelessly to advance the audio industry," she said.

In the same election, held during meetings in San Francisco and Half Moon Bay, a coastal town south of the city, Mitel Corporation chairman and CEO Lloyd Ivey was elected vice chair, and longtime consumer-electronics-industry executive Jerry Kalof, of Kay Associates, was re-elected as industry executive advisor, a liaison role between the board and the CEA's more than 80 staffers.

Gornik will replace chairman Ronald Stone, who will step down at the end of the year but will remain on the board. Stone is president of Pioneer Electronics Service, Inc. Other returning members include Peter Lesser, president and CEO of X-10 (USA), Inc., and Recoton chief Robert Borchardt. New board members include Audiovox Electronics Corp. president and CEO Patrick Lavell, and GE Interlogix VP of strategic marketing Duane Paulson, who is also chair of the CEA's TechHome Division.

"In total, we are blessed with an active, dedicated leadership comprised of top industry executives who join together to provide CEA with the vision and direction necessary to help us meet our mission of growing the CE industry," Shapiro said. The CEA announced its election results October 23.

Steve Guttenberg's interview with Kathy Gornik appeared in the October 2002 Stereophile (p.59).

**UNITED KINGDOM**

**Paul Messenger**

I began writing a piece about a new volume control that Rega had introduced in its Mira power amplifier and Cursa preamplifier. It's an interesting enough story in itself, but it soon became apparent that volume controls are part of a longer, more complex tale about the whole business of component supplies and the specialist audio marketplace.

Controlling a hi-fi system's volume used to be simple enough. Give or take a bit of variety from the odd slider, everyone controlled volume with rotary potentiometers (called "pots" by cognoscenti) eager to show off their insider knowledge.

The demand for remote control has changed everything, and created a number of new techniques for adjusting volume. Of course, these might well have evolved without such a stimulus, as part of the ongoing development of electronic integration and components and the long-term trend to replace mechanical devices with electronic. We'll never know. How things stand now is that the amplifier designer has a much wider palette of technologies with which to control volume.

Choosing the right control for a particular design is no trivial task: the costs of the components and their assembly requirements need to be balanced against their sound quality. When I reviewed Naim Audio's entry-level 5-series preamplifiers a few years back, I was delighted to find that the sensitivities of the different inputs could be individually set. This was possible because the 5 series used a resistor-ladder volume control (chosen partly to keep costs low; its extra functionality is a welcome bonus). When I reviewed the delectably high-end NAC 552 preamplifier a few months ago, however, I was disappointed to discover that it had no facility for adjusting input sensitivities.

The NAC 552 (and the new Naim Classic preamps) use a traditional motorized potentiometer to adjust volume because, in Naim's opinion, this technology still gives the best sound. Design engineer Roy George stressed that it's not simply a matter of the technique, but also how it's applied—the sonic superiority of the motorized pot has much to do with the elaborate and costly mounting technique that Naim employs.

Rega used a motorized pot in the Mk.2 versions of its Mira integrated amplifier and Cursa preamplifier. The Mk.3 updates of these components use a new approach from Scottish chipmaker Wolfson (www.wolfsonmicro.com), with which Rega has worked for some years, developing the DACs used in Rega's current CD players. When Wolfson asked Rega design engineer Terry Bateman whether he had any thoughts about other silicon engineering applications relevant to hi-fi, Bateman mentioned an idea for using a resistor matrix to adjust amplifier vol-

**Calendar**

Mississippi Gulf Coast and would like to participate in a high-end audio club, please e-mail stokjoc@hotmail.com.

**NEW JERSEY**

- The New Jersey Audio Society welcomes anyone interested in high-performance LP and CD playback systems to become members and participate in their monthly meetings. Annual dues are $30, and include a subscription to the society's newsletter, The Source. For more information, please e-mail your mailing address and telephone number to annalogg@aol.com or to Russell Prince at prince@sewikis.com, or call (973) 743-5450.

**NEW YORK**

- For information on the monthly meetings of the Long Island Music and Video Society, call Lee Grosberg at (516) 239-9004.
- For information on the monthly meetings of the Musicalaudiophile Society, the Audiophile Society, and the Gotham Audio Society, call David Nemzer at (718) 237-1094.
- The Audio Syndrome meets 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 now provide a quarterly newsletter—articles wanted. For more info, contact Charles at (718) 352-2178.

**WASHINGTON**

- The Pacific Northwest Audio Society
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Choosing a better surround-sound preamplifier isn't about having the latest software decoder. Although, with Rotel's new 7.1 system, even the most demanding audio/videophile will appreciate RSP-1066's advanced processor with Dolby Digital EX. It's designed to handle all of the home theater formats now available, including 5.1, 6.1 and the enhanced surround of 7.1. Further, its software can be upgraded to make your investment last well into the future.

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umc. A year later, Wolfson came back with its WM8816 chip, which seems to offer a number of audiophile advantages over the competition. For example, there's no built-in op-amp to "strangle the sound at birth"—the designer can add his own op-amp, as Rega does in the latest Mira, or go the more costly route of discrete components, as Rega does in the Cursa. (Naim's AV2 A/V processor also incorporates quite a few Wolfson WM8816 chips.)

Rega's new volume control is a digitally controlled, analog-switched resistor network controlled via a microprocessor driven by the digital volume encoder on the front panel or the remote handset. It has 80 steps of 1dB each, and a 4dB-calibrated 20-LED display around the front-panel knob. The left and right channels are matched to within 0.2dB. To optimize the gain for the best signal/noise ratio, the stepped resistive networks are placed in the feedback and input circuits of the preamp's line amp. The network is also configured to supply a constant input impedance at all volume settings, ensuring that source components always see a constant load and therefore avoiding possible changes in sound quality at different volumes.

Rega main man Roy Gandy invited me to listen to a comparison of the Mk.3 and Mk.2 Cursas. The change from a motorized volume pot to the new chip-based control is the only difference between the models, and the 3 showed a quite startling improvement. Its sound had noticeably more top-end projection, better textures, wider apparent dynamic range, and better propulsion and drive. It simply sounded more "real," though this was significantly more obvious with vinyl than with CD. I knew which preamp was being used; my partner did not, however, and had no trouble identifying the newer model.

When I told Roy Gregory, editor of the UK's Hi-Fi+, about Rega's approach, he asked if I'd heard about Creek's new volume control. I hadn't, and so telephoned Mike Creek. His new control uses yet another technology: precision laser-trimmed printed-film resistors, seven in series and seven in parallel, are controlled with microprocessors and switched with relays to give 79 steps of 1dB each. Creek's approach to achieving superior sound includes using the very best materials and ingredients; for example, the film resistors are mounted on a ceramic substrate with a silver-plated back plate.

Mike Creek pointed out that his device is not only less expensive than a motorized pot, but a lot more accurate, especially at low volume levels. The new control is currently used only in Creek's top-of-the-line P53 preamplifier; a less expensive version, using regular resistors instead of laser-trimmed films, is used in the company's cheaper amplifiers.

There are as many ways of remotely controlling volume as there are of skinning the proverbial cat, and I suspect that Roy George is correct when he says that the implementation is more important than the specific technology. But it does seem that, for those seeking top-quality performance, a solid-state, non-moving-parts approach might now be a realistic alternative to the motorized volume pot.

**US: FLORIDA**

**Barry Willis**

Tony Dowd, a recording engineer and producer who created some of the greatest pop, jazz, and rock recordings of the 1950s, '60s, and '70s, and who ushered in the era of multitrack tape recording and stereo playback, died Sunday, October 27, of emphysema at an assisted-living center in Aventura, Florida, near Miami. He was 77.

Trained as a multi-instrumental musician, Dowd was drawn to physics and engineering at an early age. He worked on the particle accelerator at Columbia University after graduating from Stuyvesant High School at the age of 16. Two years later, during World War II, he joined the US Army, which sent him back to Columbia to continue his work as part of the Manhattan Project, the United States' vast research drive to develop an atomic weapon.

Secrecy surrounding the project was enforced for many years after the war, preventing Dowd from pursuing a career in physics. That field's loss was the music world's gain, as Dowd combined his technical prowess, excellent ear, and natural rapport with musicians with some of the greatest studio advancements of the 20th century, to make some of the era's greatest recordings. Dowd worked with recording stars from many genres—pop acts such as Bobby Darin, Rod Stewart, and the Young Rascals; jazz giants Ornette Coleman, John Coltrane, Charles Mingus, and the Modern Jazz Quartet; soul stars Wilson Pickett, James Brown, Otis Redding, Dusty Springfield, and Aretha Franklin; the uncategorizable Ray Charles; guitar virtuoso Eric Clapton; and Southern rock icons the Allman Brothers and Lynyrd Skynyrd.

Dowd was responsible for teaming Clapton with Duane Allman in the studio group Derek and the Dominos, whose "Layla" became theme music for an entire generation in the early 1970s. Dowd later recorded another "anthem," as he put it: Lynyrd Skynyrd's "Free Bird." These monster hits were but two of hundreds of albums and singles that the Dowd touch helped reach gold or platinum. A sampling of his achievements includes Darin's "Mack the Knife," Franklin's "Respect," Coltrane's Giant Steps, Charles' "What'd I Say," Ben E. King's "Stand by Me," and Cream's groundbreaking Disraeli Gears. Dowd often said that the project he was most proud of was the Allman Brothers' classic Live at Fillmore East.

Dowd had the diplomatic skills necessary to get the most from any performer, and the technical ability to capture the result on tape. He came into the recording profession when most of his colleagues were still recording direct-to-disc using acetate masters and simple, primitive microphone techniques. Dowd was one of the first to experiment with close-miking drums and bass, which added an unprecedented fullness and dynamic range to recordings. He is widely credited with creating the first recording console with more than four inputs, with developing the first eight-track professional recording decks, and with creating stereo mixes long before there was a market for them. "There is no one who better epitomizes the ideal marriage of technical excellence and true creativity," said Ahmet Ertegun, chairman of Atlantic Records, where Dowd worked as an engineer for more than 20 years.

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1 A similar idea is used in Cirrus Logic's volume-control ICs, which have been available for a few years now.

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**Calendar**

meets the second Thursday of each month. Usual start time is 7:30pm at 4545 Island Crest Way, on Mercer Island. For more information, call Jerry at (206) 416-3669 or Earl at (206) 795-1970.

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Dowd left Atlantic in the mid-1960s, and in 1967 moved to Miami, working primarily out of Criteria Sound Studios—but he recorded wherever he was called, including Memphis, Muscle Shoals, New York, Los Angeles, London, and elsewhere. Mix magazine honored Dowd with a TEC (Technical Excellence & Creativity) Hall of Fame award in 1999, the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences awarded him a Lifetime Achievement Award in 2002. Joan Tarshis interviewed Dowd for Stereophile in May 1996 (Vol.18 No.5), while Blair Jackson’s insightful and entertaining interview with Dowd can be seen on the Mix website (http://mixonline.com/at/audio_tom_dowd_look/index.htm). A documentary film, Tom Dowd and the Language of Music, will appear later this year.

**UNITED KINGDOM**

**Paul Messenger**

I’ve long been a fan of live recordings. I love their immediacy and lack of artificiality, warts and all. Nowadays, when I go to a concert of any sort of music, I make a point of checking out the sales desk in the foyer during the interval. I’m not looking for posters, T-shirts, or other gewgaws. Rather, I’m hoping to find an audio souvenir—a CD of the concert I’ve just enjoyed. Increasingly, these days, I find one. (I’ve got a great double disc of an excellent Lambchop gig from mid-2002.) It won’t be of the actual concert I’ve just attended, of course, but it will probably be from earlier in the tour, and cover the same repertoire.

In one of the unexpected consequences of the popularity of the Compact Disc, classical musicians are beginning to take control of their recordings back from the established record companies. The new label LSO Live, for London Symphony Orchestra Live, should be of interest to Stereophile readers [see “Record Reviews” in this issue, p.131 — Ed.], I get the same sort of “live” buzz from the LSO Live releases I’ve heard that I get from the best live recordings—and the label’s recording quality is as impeccable as its business model is radical. (Check out www.lso.co.uk/lsolive for the detailed story.)

I first came across LSO Live in the Clâsé room at the recent Heathrow Hi-Fi Show, where Tony Faulkner, Britain’s top classical recording engineer (and a bit of a closet hi-fi enthusiast), was playing some of the DSD masters he’d made for LSO Live direct from his hard drive. The plan had been to play an SACD of the latest release, Rostropovich’s reading of Shostakovich’s Symphony 11, but there had been delays in getting small quantities of SACDs pressed. However, the hard drive was a more than acceptable substitute (it) — even the humble CD release is something very special, with great perspectives and startling realism.

One factor probably contributing to the great sound is that Faulkner has, controversially, ditched the antialiasing digital filter during the recording of the most recent LSO Live releases: “In my judgment, the energy above 20kHz is sufficiently low to produce aliasing below the noise floor of 16-bit dithered 44.1kHz, so I believe it is irrelevant in the context of how detrimental filters are to transparency of sound. I hate those filters—they make everything sound like it’s behind a thick blanket— and I believe their absence from high-density, high-sampling-rate systems is what gives high-definition digital audio its strong initial impression of quality.”

Each LSO Live CD costs only £4.99 in the UK (at $7.50). Furthermore, to quote the website, “Neither the conductors, soloists or the LSO’s players receive any fees for LSO Live recordings, above their normal concert fees. Instead they are all ‘shareholders’ in the recordings and receive royalties when each project breaks even.”

LSO Live has already picked up two Grammys. The four-CD set of Berlioz’s epic opera Les Troyens, conducted by Sir Colin Davis, was awarded Best Classical Recording and Best Opera Recording at the 44th Grammy Awards in Los Angeles. The label has released various other works, by Berlioz, Dvorák, Brahms, and Elgar, plus the abovementioned Shostakovich and a collaboration between the orchestra and Dave Brubeck. If you like your music natural, live, and inexpensive, check out the LSO Live catalog.

**US: YOUR LOCAL CD STORE**

**Barry Willis**

A “victory for consumers” may be a windfall for class-action attorneys and 41 states participating in a price-fixing case against the music industry. Some schools and public libraries may also benefit.

On September 30, five of the largest American distributors of recorded music — Bertelsmann Music Group, EMI Music Distribution, Warner-Elektra-Atlantic Corporation, Sony Music Entertainment, and Universal Music Group — and three large music retailers (Trans World Entertainment, Tower Records, and Musicland Stores, a unit of Best Buy Co.) agreed to settle a long-running price-fixing case, without admitting any wrongdoing. The value of the total settlement is estimated at $143 million.

The defendants agreed to distribute $673.3 million in cash to several states to compensate consumers who overpaid for CDs purchased during the period 1995–2000. They will also pay administrative costs and attorneys’ fees generated during the case, which was launched in US District Court in Manhattan in August 2000, and continued in a court in Portland, Maine.

The defendants were accused of breaking state and federal antitrust laws, “costing consumers millions of dollars,” according to the Associated Press. The suit charged that in attempting to combat “loss leader” CD pricing by some large discount retailers, the defendants conspired to establish minimum prices for CDs (so-called “MAP,” or minimum advertised prices) in violation of US “fair trade” law. This resulted in gradual increases in retail prices, prosecutors claimed.

Announcements will be made later to inform consumers how they can participate in collecting refunds from the settlement. Anyone who bought CDs between 1995 and 2000 will be able to file claims for part of the fund, prosecutors explained. Instructions will be provided for those who lack sales receipts for discs they purchased during the period, they said.

The settlement also specifies that the defendants distribute approximately 5.5 million CDs to “public entities and nonprofit organizations in each state to promote music programs.” The value of the discs to be donated is estimated at $75.7 million.

“This is a landmark settlement to address years of illegal price-fixing,” New York State Attorney General Eliot Spitzer stated. “Our agreement will provide consumers with substantial refunds and result in the distribution of a wide variety of recordings for use in our schools and communities.” The money and CDs will be distributed in proportion to the populations of the states involved.

**US: THE INTERNET**

**Jon Iverson**

The latest figures for the music industry are grim: Online sales of recorded music dropped significantly through the first half of 2002 compared with the same period in 2001 (see next story), losing ground faster than the overall US music market, which lost 7% during the same
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period, according to the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA). The trend is accelerating. The latest numbers show online sales down 25% in the third quarter over last year.

Given that consumers increasingly shun official online music sites, what distribution formula might better suit their needs? Another pertinent question: How would the elimination of peer-to-peer (P2P) file-sharing networks alter this formula? In an October 2002 study from Ipsos-Reid, those questions were put to music buyers from various age groups in an attempt to predict what the future might hold for record labels.

The new findings suggest that, overall, a “pay-per-download” model is more appealing to downloaders than are current subscription-based offerings. Results also reveal that close to a fifth (19%) of the American population aged 12 and over have downloaded music or MP3 files from an online file-sharing service such as Morpheus, Napster, or Audiogalaxy. Ipsos-Reid says this translates to more than 40 million file-sharers among the current US population.

The researchers say they presented a representative sample of downloaders with a simulated distribution environment, based on the services found in the real marketplace. These options included a traditional retail channel, a P2P file-sharing network, recently launched online subscription-based services, and a hypothetical pay-per-download service. Subscription-service scenarios included packages with various features and price structures. One such service offered permanent downloads; the others offered only streaming and tethered downloads.

Slightly more than 48% said they’d stick with their P2P option, while 27% indicated a preference for obtaining music through a fee-based online offering (19% preferred pay-per-download, 8% a subscription service), and 25% would still prefer getting their music from a traditional retailer. When no pay-per-download option was offered in the market scenario, the proportion of downloaders who would pay for online music dropped to 12%.

If the RIAA were to get its wish and all P2P options were to magically vanish from the market environment, findings suggest that 37% of downloaders would still shun subscription services and choose the pay-per-download option, when available. Only 14% would prefer the subscription option, while 49% would stick with traditional retail channels.

**UNITED KINGDOM**

**Barry Willis**

Sales of recorded music declined by 9.2% on a monetary basis and 11% on a unit basis worldwide during the first half of 2002, according to figures released in October by the International Federation of the Phonographic Industry (IFPI). The drop is a continuation of a long slump that began in the mid-1990s, blamed by many music-industry executives on the widespread use of CD burners and the popularity of downloading tunes via the Internet. Others acknowledge that increasing competition for consumers’ time and money — especially films on DVD — is eating into music-industry profits.

The London-based trade organization reported that sales of CD albums were down 7% during the first half of the year, with CD singles sales off 17%. Prerecorded cassette tapes are headed for obsolescence, with sales down 31%. Overall music sales were off 6.8% in the US, 7.5% in Western Europe, and approximately 16% in Asia. “The figures are disappointing but not unexpected,” said IFPI chairman Jay Berman. The trade group hopes for an upturn during the winter holiday shopping season. Sales for the first half of the year typically account for only 40% of the industry’s annual sales.

During the same week that IFPI released its figures, a consortium of entertainment-industry advocates launched an appeal to US colleges and universities, seeking their help in containing Internet-based piracy. The Songwriters Guild of America (SGA), the National Music Publishers’ Association (NMPA), the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA), and the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) sent a letter to more than 2300 educational institutions asking them to educate students against downloading music and movies over the broadband lines available on most campuses.

Some studies have demonstrated that college servers are “hubs” for massive file-sharing activity, with up to 75% of a university’s bandwidth consumed by frenzied downloaders. “Students need to know that just because everyone is doing it doesn’t make it right,” said MPAA president Jack Valenti of what he described as “Internet theft.” The signers of the letter asked the universities to impose penalties on violators. “Stealing is stealing, whether it’s done with sleight of hand by sticking something in a pocket or it’s done with the click of a mouse,” the letter said.

“Without copyright protections, the future of the arts is threatened,” said Songwriters Guild president Rick Carnes. “Copyright encourages the promotion of new arts in our culture.” The letter sent to universities coincided with deliberations by the US Supreme Court over the legality of the 1998 Sonny Bono Copyright Extension Act, which added 20 years to the previous term of copyright protection. At the behest of the entertainment industry, US copyright terms have been extended 11 times in the past 40 years.

The copyright wrangle got nastier in October, when musicians Bob Dylan, Billy Joel, and James Taylor filed a lawsuit in a Manhattan federal court against Vivendi Universal’s MP3.com, claiming that the music site unlawfully distributed copies of their songs on the Internet. The suit charges that MP3.com copied tracks from commercial CDs, then offered the music files to users. The plaintiffs seek $150,000 for each alleged infringement. MP3.com paid out $133 million to settle earlier copyright-infringement suits. Vivendi Universal declined to comment on the current litigation.

**US: MASSACHUSETTS**

**Jon Iverson**

Although the Tweeter Home Entertainment Group’s rate of expansion has slowed, it shows no sign of stopping. The Canton, Massachusetts, electronics retailer planned to open in November six new stores in the Philadelphia and Washington, DC areas, two stores in Nashville, and one each in Spartanburg and Charleston, South Carolina. Tweeter is also relocating its store within the Dallas, Texas Galleria, where it will emphasize custom-installation and system-design services.

Tweeter currently operates 168 stores across the US, variously flying the HiFi Buys, Hillcrest, Showcase, Sound Advice, and Tweeter banners. Sixteen new stores are scheduled to open in the current fiscal quarter, according to company merchandising.

Tweeter Group posted a sales increase of 310% for its fiscal fourth quarter, ended September 30. The astounding increase was attributed to new store openings and the continuing wave of consumer interest in home-theater equipment. Plasma and LCD flat-panel video displays accounted for about 10% of the company’s sales volume during the quarter, which also saw a 28% rise in sales of high-definition and “HD-ready” rear-projection sets.

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So said Franco Serblin, designer of the Sonus Faber loudspeakers, as we talked last fall at the TOP Audio/Video show in Milan. He continued:

"It is usual in hi-fi to say, "Ah, incredibly good sound, just like live." But no—my idea is different. My idea is that it is possible to invent new emotions in terms of sound reproduction.

"Sometimes it is possible—with a good speaker, careful setup, and a high-quality amplifier—to experience a different perception of a piece of music than you would have when listening live. With a Beethoven piano sonata, for instance, you might have a more intense emotional experience with a recording than a live performance. It is for this reason that I continue to believe in hi-fi."

Franco is not your usual speaker designer. He talks more about music than measurements, more about producing musical instruments than loudspeakers. His Homage series of speakers are named after the legendary Italian violin makers Guarneri, Amati, and Stradivari. The Strad will be a luxury model and will likely cost more than some luxury cars.

But wait—Franco has also launched a more affordable line of loudspeakers, named the Cremona series after the North Central Italian city where Guarneri, Amati, and Stradivari perfected the art of making stringed instruments. Franco probably has some secrets of his own. Sonus faber means "sound maker" in Latin—or, as Franco translates it, "hand-made sound." And, like those ancient fiddle firms, Sonus Faber is family-owned.

The nomenclature is confusing, however: The floorstanding Cremona speaker looks like a miniature Amati Homage. The Amati, reviewed by Michael Fremer in June 1999, retails for $22,000/pair, the Cremona for $7495/pair.

Like the Amati Homage and Guarneri Homage, the Cremona is shaped like a lute—inspired by Stradivari, according to Franco. The Cremona's curved sides are fashioned from 32 layers of maple; its top and bottom are solid blocks of the same wood. A light, medium-gloss finish is applied by hand. The appearance is exquisite. (A metallic-gray "Graphite" finish is also available.)

Like those of the Amati and Guarneri speakers, the Cremona's "grille" is a series of cords fastened to top and bottom plates. Insert the bottom plate into the base of the front baffle, stretch the cords, and insert the top plate into the top of the baffle. Easiest You have a sonically transparent grille.

But the Cremona looks beautiful without its grille. The front baffle is padded and covered with leather—not for looks, but to prevent backwaves from bouncing off a hard surface. Two metal crossbars screw into the base of each speaker. Threaded holes in the plinths accept the spikes. Sonus Faber recommends adjusting them so the back spikes are lower than the front ones, which tilts the speaker back by about 5° for better sound dispersion. Every detail received special attention, including the single pair of binding posts. Each nut on the binding post is shaped like a lever, so you can tighten it without resorting to tools.

The Cremona measures 41.5" high by 9" wide by 17.25" deep and weighs 75 lbs. Its sensitivity is stated as 90dB/W/m, its nominal impedance as 4 ohms. The frequency response is 32Hz–40kHz. Plus or minus how many dB? Sonus Faber and Franco Serblin don't specify.

Along with the main speaker, the Cremona line includes a center speaker, a powered subwoofer, and a stand-mounted monitor, the Cremona Auditor. The idea is to offer a complete Cremona array for multichannel sound. But, like the main speaker, the Auditor can be used in a two-channel, music-only system.

Franco himself seems none too keen on home theater. Speaking with me in Vicenza nearly two years ago, when I visited the factory, he told me that he found a center-channel speaker "destructive of..."
the stereo image”—the same objection voiced by Renaud de Vignette, of French manufacturer Triangle.

But some markets demand multi-channel. Franco said that in Spain, for instance, two-channel stereo has all but disappeared. The opposite seems to be true in Germany, he told me in Milan last fall. There, two-channel stereo appears to be flourishing, perhaps even enjoying a renaissance.

“At the last Frankfurt hi-fi show, I noticed that many young people were all into two-channel stereo—music, not home theater.” Home Theater is okay for people who like their sound in large quantity, Franco said, “but two-channel hi-fi, by contrast, is a small market. But this market will continue to exist, as it is impossible to remove music from our lives.”

If Franco Serblin doesn’t talk like most other speaker designers, Sonus Faber doesn’t act like most other speaker manufacturers. They don’t revise their product line every two years or so, replacing models so they always have something “new.” Sonus Faber products evolve. They follow, one from another, in a kind of logical sequence. And Sonus Faber speakers tend to stay in production, more or less unchanged, for a decade or more. The Minima FM2, for instance, was made from 1984 to 2001.

And the Guarneri, the first speaker in the Homage series, has been produced since 1993. If the past is any precedent, the Cremona won’t be replaced anytime soon, or updated in another year or two with a Mk.II version.

Sonus Faber established its reputation in the 1980s with a succession of stand-mounted monitors—the Parva, Minima, Electa Amator, and, in 1991, the Extrema. Knowing that the Minima’s days were numbered, I snagged a pair from one of the last production runs. It was the quintessential Sonus Faber mini-monitor, with superb focus and imaging. I found the sound sweet, forgiving, slightly rolled-off on top, and somewhat ripe in the mid- to upper bass. Not what most audiophiles demand today, perhaps, but a treat for sore ears.

With a 4" bass-midrange driver and a small cabinet, the Minima didn’t do deep bass. And, like many other mini-monitors of the 1980s, it was insensitive: 84dB/W/m. Low-powered single-ended triode amps were out of the question. Never mind — there was magic in the Minima. It remains one of Franco’s favorites and, for him, a reference.

Sonus Faber speakers tend to stay in production, more or less unchanged, for a decade or more.

“1 aim for simplicity,” he told me in Milan last fall. “With the Cremona, you’ll notice there is a single pair of speaker binding posts. I don’t believe in biwiring or biamping. It just introduces complications.”

The Guarneri Homage was Franco’s first speaker to use a cabinet “in the ancient shape of a lute designed by Antonio Stradivarius,” wrote Franco, in the company’s literature. Sonus Faber holds a patent on the shape. The speaker retails for $9995, including the integral stands. Some consider this Franco’s finest speaker to date.

I asked Franco about the shape—and the evolution of the Cremona—during our lunch at the TOP Audio/Video Show.

“The Cremona is the consequence of the Guarneri Homage speaker,” he told me. “The Guarneri was born 12 years ago. For me, this was a new idea in cabinet design. There was nothing else like it on the market. It was a simple idea: You remove one side of the cabinet and you control resonances.”

Eliminating parallel walls—especially the back wall—helps control or kill standing waves. The curved side walls make the cabinet rigid, and also help to control resonances. And the tapered form facilitates the transmission of back waves to the ports. The midrange driver “sees” its own separate chamber and is vented via a small port in the upper third of the cabinet. Backwaves from the bass drivers evacuate through the larger port below.

I first heard the Cremona in late spring 2001, when I visited the factory in Vicenza. My visit was impromptu. I was in town to visit amplifier manufacturer Pathos Acoustics—not realizing that the same city was home to Sonus Faber. Paolo Andriolo, of Pathos, called Franco on my behalf, and a factory visit was hastily arranged.

From Franco’s point of view, my visit may not have been well-timed. He was busy voicing the Cremona, working closely and intensely with Lars Goller, development manager of Vifa-ScanSpeak, of Denmark. From my point of view, however, Lars’s presence couldn’t have been better. I not only got a sneak preview of the Cremona, I also got to witness an afternoon’s listening and design session. Franco asked me to keep the Cremona a secret. And not to judge.

“It’s not finished yet,” he admonished. It took him another six months to tune every aspect of the drivers and the crossovers. “You know, Sam, if you change the value of just one resistor, you can change the sound entirely,” he said at the time.

This is hard work. By day’s end, Franco and Lars were clearly exhausted.

Working with Lars and the engineering team at Vifa-ScanSpeak, Franco requested a series of modifications to be made to the drive-units. Different generations of the drivers were compared—always with music rather than measurements as the guide.

To be sure, Franco uses computers to measure speaker performance. He also uses computers for quality control—to measure each speaker that comes off the production line, as I saw for myself at the factory. And ScanSpeak uses computers in designing their drivers.

But computers and software don’t drive Franco’s decisions. His ear, his experience, and his intuition do. While speakers today, on the whole, are better than ever, and while there’s much more consistency than in the past, it seems to me that there is a certain sameness about many loudspeakers today, combined with something approaching sterility.

Should a speaker be entirely neutral? Should it be a transducer—something that passes the signal and just gets out of the way? Is accuracy everything? Or is a loudspeaker something more? Is it a musical instrument?

I asked Franco if he’d ever considered making his own speaker drivers. He shook his head. Franco likes the freedom to choose among drivers from all manufacturers of what he calls the “Danish School”: Vifa, ScanSpeak, Peerless, Seas, Dynaudio. Danes have a way with drivers, just as Italians have a way with cabinets.

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Stereophile, January 2003
We predict that the most exciting place at this year’s CES will be Building 23 of the Alexis Park where Audiophile Systems has taken over the entire second floor to house exhibits from Arcam, dCS, Nagra, Acoustic Energy, Verity Audio, Nottingham Analogue, and eXpress.

dCS stunned the audio world by demonstrating “push ‘n play” software for their Verdi SACD/CD transport, Purcell Upsampler, and Elgar Ring DAC. Previously, operating the stack required the skills of a recording engineer and the button pushing dexterity of a concert pianist. Now just insert a disc (CD, SACD, or hybrid) and push play. The entire stack automatically reconfigures itself to provide optimum results. (And by “optimum” we mean the most incredibly realistic reproduction of music we have ever heard. The system even converts 44.1 CD audio to DSD, mimicking the performance of SACDs.)

While dCS was demonstrating SACD, Arcam was solidly in the DVD-Audio camp with two new DVD-A players featuring superb audio performance for about 1/10th the price of the dCS stack next door. Arcam was also showing their AV8 surround processor and P7 seven-channel power amp with dual 1.5 kilowatt toroidal transformers! For two-channel fans Arcam introduced a new FMJ (Full Metal Jacket) preamp featuring an upgrade path to surround music. Geoff, Arcam’s export sales manager, lost a bet and had to spend the entire show in a monkey suit.

Verity Audio, in an effort to piss off both Arcam and dCS, did a shootout between a dCS SACD player and an Arcam DVD-A player, showing that the key to getting good performance from either format was having a speaker system with phenomenal resolution - like Verity’s Parsifal Monitors. As a testament to the performance of their loudspeakers, Arcam chose Verity’s new Tamino surround music package (the first surround package we’ve heard that does justice to hi-res music formats) for their DVD-Audio demonstrations. Both dCS and Nagra also selected Verity speakers.

With many of the exhibitors feuding, only the Swiss appeared to remain technologically neutral. Nagra demonstrated their new state-of-the-art upsampling DAC through their highly acclaimed PL-P preamp and VPA power amp - both vacuum tube components! Sources in use in the Nagra suite included master tapes played on Nagra tape decks, CDs on a dCS transport, and LPs on a Nottingham turntable.

Acoustic Energy wins our award for the most schizophrenic display at CES. In one room we found one of the most affordable systems at the Alexis - AE Aegis Evo One speakers at $299 a pair, teamed up with an Arcam A65 Plus Integrated and CD62T CD Player. At under $1500, this simple system produced one of the best sounds at the show regardless of price. Their other room clearly expressed AE’s dual personality as we moved from the budget-beater Evo One to the handcrafted AE1 Series III. Based on AE’s famous AE1 near-field studio monitor, the new Series III pushes small-box performance to the limits.

Over the last three decades Nottingham Analogue has developed something of a cult following. While their new Horizon at $1,000 should finally make Nottingham turntables accessible to the masses, Tom Fletcher seems predisposed to limiting distribution to only those music lovers sufficiently motivated to seek out the company. At CES he followed his usual practice of requesting “the room farthest down the hall, preferably with no sign on the door.” Audiophile Systems obliged him by putting Nottingham in the back bedroom of the most remote suite. However, they lied to him and said that the fire marshal required signs on all doors.

Eichmann Technologies, Australian manufacture of eXpress cables and the fascinating Bullet Plug phono connector, spent a good part of the show explaining that eddy currents DO NOT flow in the opposite direction in the Southern Hemisphere. Dealers finally grasping that concept were treated to an overview of the eXpress line of high performance (but moderately priced) cables. The eXpress interconnects are fitted with the innovative Bullet Plug. All we can say is, if the Bullet Plug is right, all other connectors are wrong. And we think the Bullet Plug is right.
"The New THIEL CS1.6"

"THIEL has established a new benchmark for speaker performance," says The Absolute Sound's Tom Müller. "...this new THIEL possesses tonal, dynamic, spatial, and transient resolution comparable in most ways to the world's best speakers."

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"...the THIEL CS1.6 is an instant classic."
— Tom Müller
The Absolute Sound, April 2002

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SoundStage!, July 2002

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“Are the Cremona’s drivers custom-made?”

“Customized, certainly. But each driver is based on an already-established unit. In the past, I was interested in having totally new drive-units designed. But now, with experience, I realize that that isn’t such a good idea, because it is so difficult to design a good driver.

“Each manufacturer of drive-units has models which are superior. I choose from the market the best that is available and spend time adjusting the crossover and making whatever modifications are necessary.”

I remembered something Franco had told me during my factory visit to Vicenza. He had a speaker that used a certain bass-midrange driver and wanted to make a larger speaker. (He didn’t specify which model, but it might have been the MiniMA FM2.) He asked the driver manufacturer for a larger version based on the same design principles—but anything larger lacked the magic of the original driver.

A mass-market speaker manufacturer might not care. He might simply take the larger driver and use it to make a speaker, filling out a product line or meeting a price point. In other words, marketing considerations rather than musical considerations drive the design. If you want to know why so many speakers are ho-hum—not bad, not great—this is one of the reasons. If you want to know why some speakers in a manufacturer’s line might be standout performers and others mediocre, well, here you have it.

The Cremona’s drive-units all come from ScanSpeak, and I can attest that Lars Goller and his team worked really hard to give Franco just what he wanted. The 1” fabric-dome tweeter employs a “ring radiator” design. A metal phase plug sits in the center, surrounded by a ring of fabric into which is tucked the voice-coil former.

I asked John Hunter, of Sumiko Audio, Sonus Faber’s US distributor, to elaborate:

“The [ring radiator] extends out to approximately 42kHz, and only the outer ring, or donut, emits sound. The approach brings two benefits. First, you reduce the moving mass, resulting in that fabulous high-frequency extension and air. Second, you improve the dispersion, especially lateral. Because of the neodymium magnet, the tweeter is highly sensitive and can play very loud.”

I quizzed John about the crossovers.

“The paper isn’t plain paper,” he explained. “Various high-tech materials have been mixed into the pulp fiber—materials like carbon fiber and titanium dust.” ScanSpeak and Sonus Faber do not supply a list of ingredients.

“When you hand-throw paper, that’s what you do. You have a perforated screen that’s maybe 4’ by 8’. You throw the pulp fiber at the screen, it sticks, you let it dry for a while, then you throw some more, in fairly random form. You keep doing this over the course of two or three days, letting each layer dry.”

“Sounds like fun.”

“No, it’s hard work, and takes considerable skill. At the end of three or four days, you have maybe 40 or 50 layers built up. The material is incredibly rigid, random, and internally self-quieting. You don’t have common-mode resonances building up.”

“What are those lacerations I see on the cones?”

“They’re razor cuts applied to the cone at oblique angles.”

“Why would you slash a speaker cone with a razor?”

“After hand-throwing the paper, you still have some vibrational standing waves emanating in a radial fashion from the voice-coil toward the rim, much like the waves rippling outward from a pebble dropped into a calm pool of water. These standing waves form a dominant sonic ‘signature’ in untreated drivers.

“So what they do at the factory is take a razor and actually slash the cone at oblique angles to the center. This breaks up the surface tension of the cone membrane. Any axial resonance runs into one of these razor cuts and is broken up. You can think of these razor cuts as an acoustical breakwater.”

A polymer adhesive is then applied to heal the wounds, as it were, and keep the cone from shredding. The adhesive is said to be stronger than the cone material itself.

My review pair of Cremonas finally arrived—more than a year after my visit to Vicenza, and a few weeks before last fall’s TOP Audio/Video Show. I was going to set up the Cremonas in my cluttered listening room—but when I saw them, I knew I’d have to listen in our living room. When my wife, Marina, came home, she flipped. Wife Acceptance Factor: 100%.

Our living room measures about 13’ by 21’. I set up the speakers about 4’

Each [customized] driver is based on an already-established unit.

—Franco Serblin

Specs are sparse with Sonus Faber designs.

“The tweeter is gently phased out starting at about 5–6kHz and is down 3dB at 3kHz,” said John, after checking with Franco. “The woofer begins gently rolling off slightly below 100Hz and is 3dB down at about 300Hz. As with all of Franco’s recent designs, the crossovers are first-order, with phase optimization involving minor corrective circuitry placed in parallel with the drivers. In this way, the fewest number of additional components are placed in series.

“Essentially, for all the sonic that the human voice and most instruments produce, you are listening to that single 5” midrange driver. The tweeter replicates the upper-level harmonics, while the twin 6” bass drivers act almost like subwoofers.”

The cones of the midrange and bass drivers are made from “hand-throw” paper, John added, knowing that would pique my interest.

“Hand-throw paper?”
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Transparency is what all great speakers aspire to. Pure recorded sound is all you want to hear - and with the new Reference Series, that's what you get. No more; no less.

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Audition the inaudible.
from the back, short wall and just under 3' from the side walls — my usual position for speakers in that room.

I thought the soundstage was excellent, and listened contentedly for several weeks, using the Musical Fidelity NuVista 3D CD player and the Unison Research Unico integrated amplifier. I also tried the YBA Passion Intégré which proved a perfect match. Ditto the Musical Fidelity A3.2CR pre- and power-amp separates that I wrote about last month, two more good choices. My listening-room system went largely unused.

Then Giovanni Cacciatore (that's how Franco Serbini refers to John Hunter) arrived from Sumiko, along with his associate, Patrick Butler, or Pasquale Maggiordomo. Giovanni was equipped with the Duets CD by electric bass player Rob Wasserman. They put vocalist Jennifer Warnes' "Ballad of the Runaway Horse" on endless repeat. For more than an hour, I listened patiently as Ms. Warnes sang breathlessly about a "galloping steed." Finally, I could take no more and hoofed it up to my office.

"Call me when the woman stops pouting after the runaway horse," I said.

Half an hour later, Giovanni and Pasquale were done. Finito! All that work to move the speakers a matter of mere inches! Now they were about 3 1/2' from the back wall and 2 1/2' from the side walls.

There may have been something to that "galloping steed" song — the speakers kept their superb imaging and center fill, but now I heard a much stronger, more extended bass response. Srs. Cacciatore and Maggiordomo had also adjusted the spikes so the speakers tilted back at maybe a 3° angle.

"Franco wouldn't approve," said John.

I didn't either. After several weeks, I readjusted the spikes for a 5° backward tilt, and what I thought was a better tonal balance — more highs. But I left the speakers where Giovanni and Pasquale had placed them.

Taking my cue from Franco, I didn't rush things. If he could give the Cremona three years, I could give it three months. I listened to all manner of material with the speakers — but no more galloping steeds.

I tried various 1920s, '30s, and '40s pop and jazz recordings, including Duke Ellington and tons of Count Basie. Historic classical recordings from the 1930s and '40s, including Jascha Heifetz reissues on Naxos. Lots of late-night chamber music. I even listened to some blues recordings that I bought last October at the Fifth Annual Blues Masters at the Crossroads concerts, at Chad Kassen's Blue Heaven Studios, in Salina, Kansas.

The Cremona was the finest speaker that I — or we — have had in our living room. It was also the best-looking, but sound is what counts. The midrange and treble had the expected Sonus Faber magic: sweet, smooth, completely free of grain, with not a hint of hardness. Bing Crosby, recorded in the late 1930s, was right in the room. His baritone voice was clear and pure, without boominess or chesty coloration. Bing's pipes are difficult to get right.

The Cremona
was the finest speaker
that we have had in
our living room.

The treble was well extended — so much as I can hear in my approaching geezerhood. There was more top-end extension, more sparkle than I'd noted with the Minima FM2, which preceded the Cremona in our living room. The sound was clear and pure — crisply articulated without being overetched. Do you have a bad case of high-tech, metal-dome tweeteritis? Sonus Faber offers a cure. In the midrange and treble, the Cremona reminded me of a Sonus Faber minimonitor.

The bass was surprisingly extended, given the size of the cabinet and the 6" diameter of the twin bass drivers. This is what a minimonitor can't do: go down to 32Hz. The bass extension and authority sometimes caught me by surprise. Bass was there when needed and, even more important, absent when not. I asked Franco how he'd achieved such low-end performance. Was it the lute-shaped cabinet?

"Honestly, it's the fantastic realization of the bass drive-units. The ScanSpeak bass driver delivers unprecedented performance for its size."

I substituted the Audio Analogue Maestro integrated amplifier for the Unico. The Maestro is rated at 150Wpc into 8 ohms, which allowed me to crank up the volume a little and still not clip. At this point, I borrowed a Sony XA-777ES SACD player. (I have enough SACDs now to think about actually buying an SACD player.) I played mostly large-scale orchestral works. The tonal balance was excellent. The bass was extended — more so than with regular "Red Book" CDs — yet controlled.

"What's that slight buzzing sound coming from my speakers?" Marina wanted to know. "Is something wrong?"

"No, that's the sound of the rosin on the bows."

I played the Scriabin Etudes on a Lang Lang disc that also contains Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto 3 (Telarc SACD-60582). The Etude Op.8 No.12 almost lifted me off my seat with its dynamic range and tight bottom end. I love tight bottom ends.

Even at moderately loud listening levels, the 80Wpc Unison Research Unico integrated didn't break a sweat. What a combination. And fitting, perhaps — like the Cremona, the Unico comes from Vicenza.

During our talk in Milan, Franco emphasized that amplifier quality is more important than amplifier quantity. In most rooms, the Cremona will not require the most powerful amp — or, necessarily, the most expensive. Depending on your room and preferred listening levels, you might get by quite nicely with a modestly priced integrated amp like the Unico or YBA's original Integre, or the Musical Fidelity A3.2CR pre- and power-amp combination.

I couldn't resist going retro.

After listening to the Cremona for several months, I put the Minima FM2 back into the system. It was a trip down memory lane, back to the mid-1980s, when the Minima was introduced. The top end was rolled-off. The mid- to upper bass was overripe, as I said earlier. The Minima was less resolving, less transparent than the Cremona. The Minima's focus, however, was superb. So was the Cremona's. Now I know why Franco keeps a pair of Minimas on hand as a reference.

The Sonus Faber Cremona is the finest cabinet-built speaker I have heard for under $10,000/pair — not that I've heard everything. On looks alone, the Cremona probably creams its competition. It represents Franco Serbini's finest achievement yet in terms of value for money — a mini Amati Homage for about a third the price.

Like other Sonus Faber models that I've heard, the Cremona had a quality that's impossible to quantify. Perhaps the best analogy is with watches. Many loudspeakers these days are like quartz watches: accurate, practical, soulless. A Sonus Faber speaker, on the other hand, is like a mechanical watch. It has a heart.

Bravissimo, Franco. Molto, molto bene.
“High-end speakers from Polk? You can’t be serious.”

Matt Polk, Speaker Specialist

Actually, we are. My partners and I started Polk Audio because we love music and audio, and wanted to provide excellent-sounding speakers at reasonable prices. We’ve been very successful, and have become one of the largest speaker manufacturers in the world. You might think that that kind of success would dull our passion for good sound. But it hasn’t. We’re just as passionate about high-end audio today as we were over 30 years ago.

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“The LSi15 sounds balanced and natural, and it’s more accurate than many ‘exotic’ speakers that cost a whole lot more.”

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“...The new Polk LSi series provides exceptional value for the money...”

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Doug Schneider, SoundStage.com

“...[They] outperform most speakers costing more than twice as much.”

Anthony Cordesman, The Absolute Sound

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For complete product information about the new LSi Series and full text reviews, call 800-377-7655 extension 163 or visit www.polkspeakers.com/new2.
Back in the mid-1980s, how many guys do you figure were hauling milk crates full of used LPs around America, from record fair to record fair? Hundreds? Thousands? How many are still doing it now?

That's how and when Acoustic Sounds' Chad Kassem got started—in, of all places, Salina, Kansas. In the early '80s, Kassem had gotten himself in more than a little trouble in Lafayette, Louisiana and was given his marching orders by a local judge.

"Leave Lafayette, Louisiana and don't come back until you make something of yourself," a judge told Kassem, and he has. But he ended up staying in Salina—a three-hour drive from Kansas City, Missouri—where he now runs Acoustic Sounds, Analogue Productions, and Blue Heaven Studios, the last located in a deconsecrated church.

I paid my first visit to Salina this fall, for Kassem's fifth annual Blues at the Crossroads music festival. I traveled from KC with poor, put-upon Sam Tellig, who had to endure my driving, my sometimes paranoid political rants (this was before the second politically "convenient" plane crash), my "Mustapha the Terrorist" character—not to mention my vocal impressions of many audio journalists, whose bylines (if not their voices) are familiar to many of you. ST is probably still recovering from four days of my intense brand of mayhem. An old friend once described me as "a giant walking opinion." To which ol' Sam would probably say "Amen!" Or maybe "Never again!"

Chad Kassem is on a mission to preserve, in sight and audiophile sound, the remaining authentic blues greats. Based on what I observed at Blues at the Crossroads, he stands a good chance of being recognized as the Alan Lomax of our time. I predict that his work will eventually grace the Smithsonian. [The Blues Foundation, which has worked since 1980 to promote and preserve the blues worldwide, awarded Kassem its 2002 Keeping the Blues Alive Award last March.—Ed]

The former church that is Blue Heaven has been outfitted with a state-of-the-art analog-and-digital recording studio and world-class video facilities. Along with his APO Records roster of elder statesmen of the blues, Kassem has been recording the annual fall concerts. If what I heard and saw those two nights is indicative of what's already in the vaults, there's a Fort Knox of musical treasures awaiting release in Salina.

This year's concerts were performed before more than 500 hardcore blues fans, some of whom came to Salina from overseas, and was recorded by renowned engineer David Baker to two-track analog and DSD, as well as to video. The evenings were filled with memorable moments, straying from classic blues to New Orleans funk with the original Ex-Cello label's house rhythm section—the guys who played on Slim Harpo's "Scratch My Back." But for me, the trip was worth taking just to experience the great Robert Lockwood, Jr., who, at 87, is probably the most vital living link to the original Delta blues scene. No musty relic, Lockwood played and sang with the vitality and musical complexity of a much younger man, though no youngster—even one capable of playing the identical notes—could possibly deliver the goods the way Lockwood did.

Lockwood's performance was mesmerizing and transporting. Salina's cool fall night seemed to become as warm and humid as the Mississippi Delta; the stage, the church walls, and the technology arrayed around the old man seemed to fade away, transporting the audience to another time and place. It was one of the most transcendent musical experiences of my life. When and if it's issued on LP, CD, SACD, and/or DVI, you'll get a glimpse of that evening's magic.

Despite his somewhat improbable success, Chad Kassem remains the wide-eyed, down-home Cajun boy I first encountered almost 15 years ago, during his milk-crate-hauling days. He clearly loves this music and these veteran musicians, few of whom have been treated with such care and respect. They feel the same about him.

Three Pro-Ject Turntables

More than 15,000 Pro-Ject turntables were sold in the UK in 2001. Most were the inexpensive, bottom-of-the-line Debut, which American importer Sumiko is not particularly keen on and doesn't import. The Debut is several notches below the Pro-Ject 12, which Sumiko retails for $319, complete with Oyster cartridge. The 12 appears similar to Music Hall's $299 MMF-2, which comes with the excellent sounding Goldring Elan cartridge. However, the

Analog Corner

Michael Fremer
Now you can have both...

Introducing the EMB-1000, the world’s most powerful small subwoofer that sounds as good, if not better, than the super large ones. How is this possible? Because of our breakthrough technology: Energy Multiplied Bandpass. Curious? To locate your nearest James dealer, visit our website at www.jamesloulspeaker.com. After just one audition you’ll agree, size no longer matters…performance does.
MMF-2's platter is stamped ferrous and the 12's is a more massive balanced aluminum and includes a higher quality arm. Both offer different enticements at a similar price.

No doubt Sumiko is not happy about a second importer of turntables made at Pro-Ject's Litovel, Czech Republic factory, but that's neither my problem nor yours. While Music Hall's tables are not identical to those marketed under the Pro-Ject logo, they do share a few identical components. I chose to review three Pro-Ject models: the RM-4 ($495), the Perspective ($895), and the RM-9 ($1495).

While not identical, the arms included with the 12 and MMF-2 are adequate in terms of adjustability and bearing friction, I wouldn't recommend using either one with an expensive high-resolution cartridge. All three of these 'tables (and the most expensive Music Hall, the MMF-7) include Pro-Ject's premium 9" arm—a far more rugged and sophisticated design using superior-quality Swiss bearings and tempered-steel gimbal assemblies. The RM-9's arm is further upgraded with even greater precision bearings. One thing I don't like about these arms is the lack of a proper arm lock. The arm press-fits into a holder, but if you bump it with sufficient force, it pops out and goes its own way. Use with extreme care, especially when installing a cartridge.

The tonearm used with the RM-4 and Perspective features a one-piece aluminum arm tube that's stamped flat at the end to form the headshell. The back end of the tube is press-fitted into a cylinder suspended by the vertical and horizontal bearings. The RM-9 uses a variant of this arm fitted with a carbon-fiber tube, to which is attached a stamped headshell. Otherwise, each 'table is a mix and match of Pro-Ject parts, a few of which will be familiar to owners of Music Hall turntables.

All three 'tables were auditioned on and off a relatively inexpensive but effective Townshend Scissic Sink—the original version, not the new and improved 3D ($400 and up, depending on platform size). The Sink uses an air bladder sandwiched between two constrained-layer-damped metal plates. The trick is not to overfill the bladder and keep the resonant frequency of the system low. A 10dB/octave rolloff will occur above.

All three Pro-Ject 'tables delivered "the essence of analog."

resonance, so a resonant frequency under 10Hz is optimal. If the bladder is overinflated so that the resonant frequency of the system moves up to, say, 100Hz, rolling off at 10dB/octave below 100Hz does not isolate in the critical bass frequencies. It's not enough to have "air" as a suspension since air acts as a spring just as a spring acts as a spring. The key is the resonant frequency of the spring system, or air support.

Sumiko's latest high-output (2.5mV) $249 moving magnet (MC) Blue Point II, designed to track at 17.5gm, was the reference cartridge (though I tried a Transfiguration Spirit as well), driving the built-in moving-magnet (MM) stage of Musical Fidelity's new Tri-Vista integrated amplifier (used only as a preamp). A wide variety of music I used to enjoy was played over and over on each turntable until I never wanted to listen to any of it again. How sad.

I made 24-bit/96kHz recordings of "Bluesville," from Analogue Productions' excellent 180gm reissue of Count Basie's 88 Basie Street (Pablo 2310-901); and "Let Me Touch You for Awhile," from Diverse Record's superb-sounding 180gm issue of Alison Krauss and Union Station's New Favorite (Diverse DVF01LP). The Basic record, recorded by Allen Sides at Ocean Way in 1983, demonstrates large- and small-scale dynamic contrasts, bass control and extension, and the timbral accuracy of a wide variety of instruments. The Krauss, recorded to DSD and cut from the DSD master, highlights the female voice, bass tonality and dynamics, soundstaging, resolution of low-level detail, and transient speed. At the end of the auditions, I was able to play back each turntable's performance on those tracks almost in real time.

Just for the fun of it, I inserted the same tracks played on my reference front end: Simon Yorke turntable, Immedia RPM2/Manley Steelhead/Lyra Titan front end. (So Bob Graham doesn't read this and jump out a window: I have the mono Helikon on his 2.2 tonearm.) Was my at $27000 reference rig that much better than these low-priced front ends? You'd better believe it. But all three Pro-Ject 'tables delivered "the essence of analog," and performed at comfortably competent levels.

Pro-Ject RM-4: $495 gets you a thick, lightweight plinth of sculpted MDF; a wallwart-powered AC motor suspended by an elastomer band, an HDF platter riding on a hard plastic subplatter/threaded-bearing spindle as-
Ayre’s signature sound combines breathtaking transparency with beguiling musicality. That’s no accident – Ayre components are zero-feedback and fully balanced from input to output to produce inherently pure sound. The fully upgraded V-5x power amplifier and innovative new K-5x preamplifier offer stunning performance, superb ergonomics, and breakthrough value.
assembly driven by a flat belt. A felt mat, threaded record clamp, and a set of gold-plated RCA plugged interconnects are included, along with a dustcover. I was tempted to use a better interconnect, but decided to use what was supplied. The overall fit'n'finish of the tables coming from the Czech factory has improved in the last five years or so, and the entire package was very well presented and put together.

Buyers too anxious to spin LPs to read the instruction manual will no doubt miss where it says to please remove the two shipping screws securing the suspended motor, so the motor can hang by its rubber suspension instead of being locked down to the plinth. This design can do a decent job of isolating motor vibration, but it can’t be great for speed stability—the motor movement caused by the vibration will continually vary the pulley to platter distance and thus the speed of rotation. Granted, the speed changes will be on the microcosmic level, but considering the size of the wavelengths etched into the grooves, that’s where the action is.

Setting up the arm was straightforward, though I found the cartridge-pin connectors way too loose on my sample; I had to carefully tighten them using miniature needle-nosed pliers and a toothpick insert (to avoid overdoing it and collapsing the connectors). Analog virgins unaware of the ramifications of loose connectors might end up with serious hum or no sound at all from one or both channels. Speaking of serious, the instructions describe setting azimuth as “VTA Adjustment.” What’s that about? Hasn’t Pro-Ject been doing this long enough to know the difference? Can you imagine the potential confusion caused by that mislabeled procedure, especially among analog first-timers?

You can adjust VTA by raising or lowering the mounting tube after loosening a pair of locking screws; azimuth is set by rotating the armtube within its rear mount after loosening a set screw that’s somewhat tricky to access. Stylus pressure is adjusted by first rotating the decoupled counterweight until the arm balances, then setting the desired pressure by turning the weight inward toward the pivot, using the calibrated inner ring. Pro-Ject doesn’t bother with decimal points; “15” means “1.5gm.” And don’t trust the built-in gauge—it’s a rough estimate. The $15 or so you’ll spend for Shure’s fulcrum-style gauge will be well worth the more accurate results.

If you can buy the Pro-Ject Perspective, at twice the price of the RM-4, you’ll get more than twice your money’s worth.

A soft elastomer insert makes it feel as if the counterweight really is decoupled (its resonant frequency is below the audio band) and not “spring-loaded,” like Rega’s self-defeating O-ring mount. Antiskating is set with a weight suspended by a nylon thread, which drapes over a thin looped support bracket. Project specifies the distance between the loop and the horizontal pivot point, which you should double-check before engaging the antiskating, as its position affects the accuracy of the setting. Still, you have only three antiskating choices which the instructions inconveniently reference to stylus pressure in millinewtons (mN) instead of in grams.

Using the RM-4 was straightforward: As per the manual, clamp a record to the felt mat, flip the On/Off rocker switch, and you’re ready to rock. My sample ran about 0.5% fast, or well within acceptable limits (1000Hz was approximately 1004Hz). The RM-4 is a decent place to start an analog journey, but you won’t want to stay there too long once you get hooked on the format. It committed no gross errors, ran impressively quiet and smooth, and its arm could do justice to any reasonably priced cartridge you might consider using (and so will preserve your valuable vinyl).

But the RM-4 was limited in its ability to carve out instruments in three-dimensional space, its dynamic capabilities were somewhat stunted, and it did only a so-so job of resolving low-level details. Transients were somewhat softened, and bass, while impressively extended, was robbed of articulation and rhythmic drive. On the plus side, the RM-4 avoided the hard, metallic, hollow sound of some budget ‘tables. Soft and warm is definitely preferable.

Switching between the RM-4’s rendition of the Basic track and what the more expensive ‘tables offered easily demonstrated the RM-4’s limitations. There’s a bass vamp that, when rendered properly, can feel like mountain-climbing. Through the RM-4, it simply spurted sideways. Basic’s piano can sound harmonically rich, woody, and percussively complex with the finer turntables, or monochromatic and indistinct, as it did through the RM-4 and some other modestly priced ‘tables.

I’m being tough on the RM-4 only because, while it made pleasant music and its sins were almost all of omission, there’s so much more information in the grooves to be retrieved. If you can buy the Pro-Ject Perspective, at twice the price, you’ll get more than twice your money’s worth. However, if $495 is your limit, don’t be discouraged: the RM-4 will deliver analog’s expressive-ness as no CD player at any price can, and, if set up correctly, the turnarm will
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preserve your vinyl until you're able to move up to something better.

I'm no fan of felt mats: they attract dust, and they can cling to a record, lifting off with it to easily slide off and lunch your stylus. I tried the $90 Ringmat XLR in place of the RM-4's felt mat/clamp combo, and it improved the sound by seeming to tighten up the bass and render the sound with somewhat greater clarity. But how many people spending $500 on a turntable are going to spend another $90 for a piece of paper with some cork rings on it, good as it is? Still, the Ringmat is a worthwhile addition. And try the supplied felt mat without the clamp—you might be surprised to find you prefer the sound to using the clamp. Sumiko does and so do I.

Pro-Ject Perspective: The Perspective ($995) features the same tonearm as the RM-4, and a similar but not identical main bearing and subplatter. A Teflon thrust plate replaces the RM-4's sapphire one. Both of these main bearings are skinny affairs compared to the industrial-strength bearings you find in far costlier 'tables, but that's one of the significant upgrades you get when you spend more.

The Perspective's biggest improvement over the RM-4 is its ingenious silicone-damped, suspended subchassis. Both the main bearing and tonearm are affixed to a ¼"-thick aluminum plate that sits on three springs housed in cups attached to a ¼"-thick acrylic base. Damping is applied by a threaded rod fitted through the plate into a cup of silicone attached to the base. The further the screw protrudes into the cup, the greater the damping. Another small spring, attached to the base and connected at the other end to the main bearing housing under the plate, limits horizontal movement.

The heavy cast-alloy/vinyl sandwich platter (the vinyl is said to come from recycled LPs) is individually balanced and driven by a flat belt around its circumference. There are two wall wart-driven AC motor modules: one each for 33 ⅓ and 45rpm. Both feature precision-machined aluminum pulleys. Changing modules is relatively painless, though somewhat more difficult and time-consuming than simply moving the belt to an adjacent pulley: you have to reach under the acrylic base and unscrew a threaded retainer. Pop in the desired module, secure it with the retainer, affix the belt, and you're ready to play.

Setup was straightforward: First, level the base using the three threaded feet, then level the subchassis, if necessary, via the three spring mounts. There's a built-in spirit bubble on the subchassis, but for greater accuracy you're better off using a separate bubble level placed on the platter along the stylus path. How much damping you apply via the threaded rod will depend mostly on the springiness of your floor and the amount of stylus bounce you get from foot traffic, though it can have an effect on the overall sound as well.

Properly set-up, 'tables with suspend ed chassis can sound great. Too often, however, the result is soft, diffuse, and rhythmically weak musical reproduction. It's important for the subchassis to behave pistonically when deflected, and not rock back and forth. The Perspective's subchassis behaved well, helped in part, I'm sure, by the cup of damping silicone. You can knock yourself out and tweak the three spring towers to achieve perfection in this, but I didn't. Pro-Ject supplies the same interconnects and clamp as with the RM-4, plus a hinged dustcover.

The Perspective took a giant step past the RM-4 in every way. Music emerged from a far blacker background to achieve

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In Heavy Rotation

1) Nora Jones, *Come Away With Me*, Classic Quixx SV-P 200gm LP
2) Sigur Ros, (*), Fat Cat/MCA CD
3) Linda Thompson, *Fashionably Late*, DBK Works 180gm LP
4) Bill Evans Trio, *Waltz for Debby*, Analogue Productions 45rpm 180gm LPs (2)
5) Jefferson Airplane, *Surrealistic Pillow*, Sundazed 180gm mono LP
6) Eden Artwood, *The Boss Nova Session*, Groove Note 180gm LP
8) Johnny Griffin, *Chicago Calling*, Classic Quixx SV-P 200gm mono LP
9) Wilco, *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot*, Sundazed 180gm LPs (2)
10) Bob Dylan, *Blonde on Blonde*, Sundazed 180gm mono LP

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Please hear us at our demo room at the T.H.E. show in Las Vegas in early January. San Remo Hotel.
The RM-9 is for those who prefer a slightly faster, punchier, and rhythmically taut ride than the Perspective gives.

compares with Music Hall’s MMF-7, which features a split plinth, inboard/outboard motor, and acrylic platter, I can’t say—but for the same price as the Perspective Music Hall supplies a high-output Goldring Eroica cartridge, which, with its Gyger Fineline stylus, is hardly an afterthought.

The Pro-Ject Perspective in many ways would almost satisfy the sonic needs of the most picky analog devotee. You give up significant performance at the frequency extremes, there’s a bit of mush in the upper midband, and the overall sound is down a few pegs from the top guns, especially in terms of weight and solidity. But sit most tweaks—those who love music—down to listen without showing them what’s playing, and I think they’ll just enjoy the music and forget about the hardware.

Again, I preferred the sound of an unclamped record with the Ringmat to a clamped record on the vinyl/aluminum platter, but you might not. The Pro-Ject Perspective is a great place to begin one’s analog journey.

Pro-Ject RM-9: Costing $500 more than the Perspective, the $1495 Pro-Ject RM-9 seems to offer less. There’s no suspension, and the MDF plinth is the diameter of the acrylic platter, with just enough of a “bumpout” to mount the arm on. The outboard motor sits on a platform that raises it to the proper height, and the platter is driven via a square belt around its circumference.

The RM-9’s big news is its inverted thrust bearing with integral Teflon ball, which fits in a brass boss (sleeve) affixed to the bottom of the platter. This puts the turntable’s center of gravity well below the bearing contact point, for greater speed stability. The more rigid carbon-fiber variant of the Pro-Ject arm is fitted with higher-quality bearings and so can better handle more sophisticated, low-compliance MC cartridges. A heavy nonclamping record weight is included, along with a set of the interconnects provided with the other tables reviewed here. A dustcover costs $100 extra.

The plinth sits on three elastomer-damped, height-adjustable feet, but depending on where you place the RM-9, you might need an additional isolation device, such as a Townshend Seismic Sink, to prevent skipping or feedback.

The RM-9 is for those who prefer a slightly faster, punchier, and rhythmically taut ride than the Perspective gives. While the outboard motor should theoretically offer lower background noise, that didn’t translate into anything I was able to hear, whether playing a silent grooved record or normal program material. The improvement in speed stability was noticeable in better transients and greater musical drive and excitement.

The RM-9 ran slightly slow, no matter the distance between motor and plinth. (A useful template is supplied to help you set that distance, but when I varied it to see if the speed error could be corrected, it couldn’t.)

Overall, I admired the RM-9’s clarity and drive, and its ability to more precisely define images in space compared to the Perspective, but I’m not sure it’s worth the extra $500, especially when you could put that money into a better cartridge (and never mind that you might also need an isolation device). Not everyone will agree with me on this, but few $500 cartridges sound “rich”; the Perspective, whether because of its suspension or something else, added a pleasant “richness” to the sound that the Pro-Ject RM-9 did not.

Next Time: Three more turntables— the Rega P3, the SOTA Comet, and the Nottingham Analogue Horizon—plus Graham Engineering’s Rega-compatible Robin tonearm.
1967: REVOLUTION

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Even poor people fly. You see them getting on and off planes with their NASCAR hats and their poor friends and their poor relatives waving to them at the gate. Flying is what everybody does nowadays, but it used to be just for the rich. It’s hard to remember a time when the phrase jet set was charged with something other than irony.

Then again, even rich people have cheap, junky hi-fi — that, or no hi-fi at all. I’ve met some very well-to-do people and visited homes where the rarity and grandeur and sheer costliness of the furnishings have left me breathless — and the best “music system” I’ve seen in the vast majority of those settings was a Bose Wave Radio.

What happened?

When I was in high school, my friends and I liked to look at Playboy — not just for the obvious reasons, but because it gave us a glimpse of what we considered the good life. The Playboy Man wore a turtleneck under his double-breasted blazer, drove a British Leyland car, snoked the right cigarettes, drank the right liqueurs — and had a great hi-fi. The latter always included an open-reel tape deck, and the speakers were usually of the New England bookshelf variety, invariably sited among real books. The system was used primarily to play jazz and classical music, although Edith Piaf or early Bob Dylan might’ve qualified, too.

No one wears turtlenecks with blazers anymore. No one drinks Galliano or that horrid cherry liqueur from Scandinavia anymore. And no one has a good hi-fi just because they think it’s essential to their way of living anymore. In 30 years, hi-fi has gone from being an accepted, even encouraged lifestyle choice to a fringe hobby. Hi-fi has been marginalized — today, you’ll find more people to talk to at wedding receptions and parties and the barber shop if your hobby is paintball, cigars, bow-hunting, baseball cards, body piercing, or breeding anoles.

The point has been made that, as a hobby or a lifestyle, hi-fi has simply been undersold. I used to believe that, but I’m not so sure anymore. I think the answer is more complex, and a portion of it has to do with the fact that certain other things in life — computer games, video recorders, and recreational vehicles, to name just three — have been and continue to be oversold.

Another part of the answer has to do with our choices as consumers. If you want to travel from one part of the US to another, your alternatives to flying are the train and the bus — which is to say, your alternatives are “slow” and “slow and ghastly,” respectively. If you want to enjoy recorded music, your alternatives to owning a good hi-fi are the boombox, the cheap home stereo, the cheap car stereo, the expensive car stereo, the personal stereo, the computer, the Bose Wave…

For people with limited traveling time — which is to say, almost all modern people — the alternatives to flying are unacceptable. But for most modern people, the alternatives to owning a good hi-fi are perfectly acceptable. In fact, they’re fine and dandy.

Of course, money has a lot to do with it. Not only has the cost of air travel not kept up with inflation over the past 30 years, it’s gone in the other direction. In 1970, even off-season, you couldn’t fly from Portland, Oregon to London, England for less than $1000. Today you can do it for half that — in trim, trim 2002 dollars.

In those same 30 years, hi-fi prices haven’t done too badly. When I sold stereos in the early 1970s, the average system price was about $600: $200 for a receiver, $200-plus for a pair of speakers, $150 or so for a turntable, and a little extra for a cartridge. You’d have a hard time convincing most people to spend even that much on a music system today. Every one of the (mostly retired, mostly upper-middle-class, mostly male) people I’ve net who own a Bose Wave as their primary home music source describe the purchase as a major expense. They even brag a little when they say it.

And what have they got to brag about? Based on cumulative yearly inflation rates in the US, themselves based on the consumer price index, the system that cost $500 in 1970 ought to cost $1300 or so today. And that’s being kind, seeing as how, in the past 30 years, the prices of other consumables — houses and automobiles, to name two — have increased at much higher rates.

Can you imagine convincing half of your co-workers to spend $1300 on a music system today? How about just one of your co-workers? Nope? I didn’t think so. That’s probably because they’re satisfied with what they have.

Yes, we have no Maseratis

I’m thinking about all this during a recent visit to my local automobile superstore, as I wait for Janet’s Subaru Forester to be serviced. Once again, I’m wasting Valuable Time sauntering around the showroom, opening and closing the doors of cars I could never afford, wiggling my eyebrows at the prices in a manner calculated to suggest that my opinions on the subject hold some significance, which even I know they don’t.

Here’s a Maserati Spyder Corso (I live in Saratoga Springs, remember), total sticker price $100,150. This irrationally pretty thing is finished in vibrant blue with a rust-red leather interior, a color scheme not unlike that of the Eastern Bluebird. The heated interior is an $1100 option, and another $3000 or so of the final price is accounted for by the gas-guzzler tax this 11 mpg beauty commands. I catch a glimpse through slotted wheels of brake calipers painted bright red, an option that alone adds more than $400 to the price.

Do I need this car? Of course I do. Well, probably not. My ’93 Saab still runs alright, notwithstanding 127000 miles on the odometer that weren’t there 10 years ago and some rust at the bottoms of the doors. I tend not to drive it out of town — that’s for the Subaru Forester, which is having its crankcase overfilled with motor oil as I write this. Given the driving that I do, which is limited mostly to preschool and the post office, my car is sufficient. I suppose.

Here’s a different question: Even though I don’t need a Maserati Spyder Corso, would owning it improve the quality of my life?

Certainly, I would get more enjoyment out of driving, thus I would raise
the quality not only of my own life but also of those friends and neighbors whom I would take on their errands, daily if not hourly. I would be inspired to travel farther, adding breadth and color to my impoverished worldview. I might also be safer (new airbags, etc.), and there’s a chance I’d make some new friends. In short, I would have a better time. Anyone can see that.

Now here’s the big question: Where are the Maseratis of hi-fi? Where are the products whose performance and craftsmanship can be appreciated by virtually anyone? Where are the products that are so staggeringly well-designed and well-built that to say “I need it” seems almost reasonable?

Hmmm... My own very short list would include the Linn Sondek CD112 CD player, the Audio Note Onagaku amplifier, and maybe one or two other things. But what characterizes those sorts of products—and the reason I like them and covet them—is that they play music better than the things I already have. Musical ability is different from deep bass or holographic imaging or the other sorts of things that can impress almost anyone just a few seconds into the first song. Music is easy to miss for the listener who thinks his job is to concentrate on the sound.

That Maserati goes faster, handles better, stops more efficiently, looks nicer, and in general does a superior job of attracting young women as compared with more affordable automobiles—and it does all that to a degree that is not subtle or difficult to appreciate. You don’t have to think, and, just as important, you don’t have to work at not thinking: You just drive and wave and smile at the people in the next lane.

This is why, when it comes to home audio, people are satisfied with what they have. Most people think it would be hard to go back to their Ford Escorts and Honda Accords after driving something like that Maserati Spyder Corso—and I’m sure they’re right. But most people don’t feel the same way about the different between a world-class hi-fi and a Sony Walkman, and that’s the problem. In a world where overtly bad sound has mostly been banished, selling hi-fi is tough, because what we’re down to now is selling music—and no one seems to know how.

**No bad cartridges!**

At the end of the day, it doesn’t matter how many Maseratis we have, because as far as hi-fi is concerned, I’m more interested in things that are a little lower on the price ladder—not because I’m altruistic (although I am), but because 17 years of writing about audio have left me believing that most ultra-expensive turntables, amps, speakers, and even cables are junk. Even the ones that sound good are usually incapable of doing what I expect from a hi-fi: elicit a string of notes and beats convincing enough that I can mistake it for music.

Notice that I left phono cartridges off the list. Although they all sound a little different from one another, I like most of the cartridges I hear these days, even the very expensive ones.

Why are there no truly awful ultra-high-end phono cartridges, while there are scads of uninsaltable megabuck amps? Because a cartridge, by its nature, must be made small and simple. The poor thing has to fit at the end of a tone-arm, and it can’t weigh much more than 10g—or meaning there’s no room for designer parts or a laser-etched faceplate or electrical connectors that were intended for a nuclear-powered MIG-welder. Thus, in the constrained world of phono-pickup design, money can either go toward something worthwhile (silver wire, radical stylus tip, hand-turning, etc.) or toward nothing at all. Forgive my cynicism, but I’d rather see $9000 of a $10,000 product go straight into its designer’s pocket: There, at least, it can do no harm to the product itself.

In 1975, I spent $45 bucks on a phono cartridge for my entry-level Thorens turntable. It was an Audio-Technica AT: something. It was purple, and it had a Shibata-profile stylus, which impressed me. Using the financial model described above, something of similar quality should cost in the neighborhood of $177 today. But notwithstanding my altruistic views, there aren’t any $117 phono cartridges out there that would satisfy me. I’ve come to think of almost any phono cartridge that sells for less than $1000 as “affordable”—this from the owner of a rusty Saab with a Greenpeace sticker. God help me.

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Balanced Audio Technology is pleased to introduce the VK-6200 multi-channel home theater and surround music amplifier. This stunningly beautiful design can be configured with two to six channels of amplification. Each channel is a true monoblock, zero-feedback circuit that features a dedicated power transformer. More importantly, the VK-6200 yields the open free-breathing sound that has garnered BAT worldwide recognition. Outstanding for music! Superb for home theater! The VK-6200 is yet another masterpiece from Balanced Audio Technology.
Special is my idea of a great affordable phono cartridge.¹

First, let’s get the model designation out of the way: If it were up to me, I would never name a phono cartridge after an insecticide, let alone one that has been banned in all civilized nations, even the US, for being more or less an everythingicide. Then again, I wouldn’t have included “Gritty” in my company name if I sold record cleaners, or the word “broken” in the name of my high-end amplifier company — so perhaps my opinion on the subject carries less weight than I think.

As it turns out, DDT stands for “depth, detail, and timbre”; “II” signifies a revision or refinement; and “Special” means it’s, well, special. I’ve never heard a DDT-I, but I’m here to tell you that the DDT-II is special indeed, and a damn good buy to boot.

This is a medium-output (0.65mV) moving-coil cartridge with silver coils, a boron cantilever, and, of course, the famous van den Hul line-contact stylus profile. The threaded body makes for easy, nutless installation (Naim Aro owners will be pleased to know that the vdH’s styli-to-mounting-hole distance is correct for that arm), and the medium-to-medium/high compliance suggests compatibility with a variety of good tonearms. Its maker, Dutch audio-writer-turned-engineer A.J. van den Hul, says a load impedance ranging between 100 ohms and 47k ohms is okay, 200 ohms being optimal. I use a step-up transformer for phono gain, which changes the game somewhat and results in those numbers being less than directly applicable. In any event, I heard no shortcomings that I would relate to problems of electrical damping or other issues du load.

I heard no real shortcomings at all. The DDT-II is bettered only inasmuch as certain more expensive cartridges can be counted on to provide more music — but that was it. The vdH is richly but realistically textured and colorful, and its stylus is supremely quiet in the groove, even more so than the last vdH cartridge I heard, some four years ago.

The DDT-II is also a very modern-sounding cartridge. There was a time when I might have followed that with “for better and for worse,” but lately, and notwithstanding my abiding fondness for the sounds of some old things, modern cartridges mostly just sound better to me. The old Supex 900 Super is a great cartridge, with its warm, textured midrange and enormous bass. But, like most moving-coil cartridges of its time, it also has a treble peak that imbues vocal sibilants and hi-hat cymbals with unnatural tizz — and which stands out from the rest of the range like a sore thumb. Modern MCs, like the vdH DDT-II Special, have much less of a peak, and their overall sound is so open and explicit and clear that top-end peaks, if any, seem less obtrusive.

The vdH surprised me by being wonderfully dynamic. I used to think that the only way to make my records sound dramatic and involving was to use a good old-fashioned low-compliance cartridge in a big, massive tonearm: High-compliance cartridges, I thought, were capable of sounding supple and pretty, but not much else. I now realize that that point of view is similar to that of motoring enthusiasts who think that only a front-engine/rear-wheel-drive car can exhibit the kind of neutral and/or predictable handling that makes for fun driving. Both are opinions that might have had some legitimacy 20 or even 10 years ago, but we’ve since come further than that. The van den Hul DDT-II Special is like a really good Audi: I can’t imagine the person it wouldn’t please.

It even makes as much bass as my Supex, albeit with a great deal more in the way of control. On Leonard Cohen’s “Who By Fire,” for instance (from the lighthearted collection New Skin for the Old Ceremony), the beautifully recorded electric bass has superb attack, followed by a rich sustain and realistic die-away. This is no wimpy cartridge, even if it does track really well!

Yesterday, I used the vdH to listen to: Elgar’s In the South, with Barenboim and the LPO (horrid recording, surprisingly good performance); Elgar’s Symphony 1, with Barbirolli and the Philharmonia; Elgar’s Symphony 2, with Barbirolli and the Hallé; part of Elgar’s Symphony 2 with Boult and the LPO; Richard Strauss’s Four Last Songs, with Schwarzkopf, Szhell, and the Berlin RSO; and Porcelli’s Music for the Funeral of Queen Mary, with John Eliot Gardiner. (It’s been raining here — can you tell?) They all sounded so moving and memorable that I’m going to keep the van den Hul DDT-II Special in my system for one more day and play every one of them again this afternoon. I can think of no higher praise for a phono cartridge, especially an “affordable” one such as this.

¹ Manufactured by A.J. van den Hul B.V., Holland, www.vandenhul.com, distributed by Stadaub Audio Imports, P.O. Box 671, Hadhaman, N.Y. 12806, Tel: (518) 843-3070, Fax: (518) 843-8882. Serial number of unit reviewed: 1926.
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T
he word chancellor derives, believe
it or not, from the Italian word for
wooden latticework, ameli. In the
church architecture of sixth-century
Rome, a latticework screen demarcated
an area near the altar where deacons or
priests would stand, waiting to assist the
principal celebrant as needed. In English,
this area became known as the chancel. In
consequence, a trusted assistant came to
be known as a chancellor. In
the High Middle Ages, that title was given to the
cleric who would corre-
respond on behalf of and
maintain the archives for
an important churchman,
such as a bishop.
After the fall of Rome, in the West, literacy was
almost lost. In Charle-
magne’s time, it was said
that Alcuin (d. 804) knew
personally or through corre-
respondence everyone in
Europe who could read
and write. Nearly all literate people
were clerics. Therefore it is little sur-
prise that, as government and politics
regained complexity, the office of royal
confidant and secretary also became
known as chancellor.
For many years, the chancellor was
always a cleric. Sir Thomas More (d. 1535)
was the first royal chancellor of
England who was not a priest. Today in
the United States, a chancellor is usually
a big shot in university affairs, but in
England, the office of Lord Chancellor
is still concerned with the administra-
tion of the court system.
I was mulling over how to convey
how impressed I have been by the
Brinkmann Integrated integrated amplifier
(www.brinkmann-usa.com), when I recalled the story of a Lord
Chancellor who tersely rebuked a ver-
bosque advocate with an eternal truth:
“Thirsty folk want beer, not ex-
planations.” Guided by that maxim, I
will start by telling you how the Inte-
grated sounds, and then try to cobble
up an explanation. The beer is your
department.
In much the same way that the
Unison Research, yet was reluctant
to declare either “the better.” “They’re
just different,” he mused.
As I mentioned in November, the
Unison S2K might err here and there
on the side of euphony and soft focus.
The Brinkmann Integrated is nearly as
tonally luscious, but also has dynamic
and bass capabilities greater than one
might expect from its rated 75Wpc, and
more definition than the S2K in space
and articulation. Christophe Mantoux,
playing organ works of Jehan Alain
(Vox Humana SM 12 216.1), made those
points quickly.
I don’t want to fall into the trap
of comparing pieces of gear to each
other rather than trying to describe
how each presents good recordings.
But I don’t think it would be far off
the mark to say that, in terms of tim-
bral character at least, the Brinkmann
pretty much splits the difference be-
tween two of the best integrated amps
out there, Plinius’ 8200 Mk.II and the
Jeff Rowland Design Group’s Con-
centra II. And you are shocked — just
shocked — to learn that it costs more
than one and less than the other.
The Unison S2K costs $2000. Plinius’
8200 Mk.II costs $2950. In its basic
form, the Brinkmann costs $3500; an
optional internal DAC ($750) raises the
price to $4250. Jeff Rowland’s
Concentra II is $6500. A steepening
curve, indeed. The optimal point on
that curve will vary from listener to lis-
tener, but it bears emphasizing that,
both in sound quality and value for
money, the Brinkmann is firmly on the
curve of first-rank inte-
grated amplifiers, not off
somewhere among the
answers to questions no-
body is asking.
I think of the Plinius
“house sound” as being a
bit pepperminty — a mat-
ter of slight flavoring
rather than of coloration.
Make no mistake: I like the Plinius house sound
very much. Dynamics are,
well, dynamic, while the
treble seems to have a lit-
tle bit of extra efferves-
cence that can bring lifelike sparkle
back to the music in the right system,
but in the wrong system can get fatigu-
ing. Jeff Rowland’s “house sound,”
in contrast, embodies stately elegance that
does not call attention to itself. In
the right system, it draws you in by relaxing
your defenses against grit and glare, but
in the wrong system, one might develop
a disquieting sense that something is
missing. I have often ruminated that the
ideal solid-state integrated amplifier
would split the difference in tonal quali-
ity between the Plinius and the Rowland,
and, except for the disparity in power ratings (75 vs 150Wpc), the
Brinkmann may be the closest thing yet.
Back to our apples and oranges of
low-powered tubes vs mid-powered
solid-state. The Brinkmann has greater
clarity and gives a more vibrant sense of
immediacy than the Unison S2K —
the music has more solidity — but also costs
about twice as much. Sigh.
I can’t tell you whether the
Brinkmann is “twice as good,” much
less worth it, because that determination
can be made only with respect to the
demands your listening will put on
either amp. If you listen to a fair amount

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of Mahler and Shostakovich, the incremental expenditure on the Brinkmann should be relatively easy to justify. If you listen mostly to acoustic folk music, I would think perhaps not. Neither to be ignored is the consideration that, with less-than-optimal associated equipment and recordings, the Unison Research will certainly be more “forgiving.”

In addition to its aforementioned virtues, the Brinkmann is a very quiet amplifier, in terms of both lack of transistor rush at idle and retrieval of low-level musical detail. That is as good a place as any to start an investigation of its technical individualities.

In theory, designing an integrated amplifier rather than separate pre- and power amplifiers allows the designer freedom to dictate all the relevant parameters of the interaction between the line stage and the power amplifier. However, in practice, the result is often not much different than if the designer had merely smoothed a preamp—one that must be able to make its own way in the wide world—into the same case with a power amp that could be expected to see all manner of inputs.

Designer Helmut Brinkmann takes a different approach. One might be tempted to call the Integrated a “clean sheet of paper” design, but that might be an understatement. A “long, quiet walk in the woods” design, perhaps.

The Integrated’s power-amplifier section works as a fully complementary dual-differential power amplifier. Rather than having hot and ground as its outputs, the Brinkmann has phase and antiphase terminals. The speaker terminals are wonderful: thick, ergonomically shaped plastic grips that discourage the use of tools that might lead to overtightening, and beefy posts that accommodate hefty spades or banana plugs with no fuss and no Euro-nanny-ism. The only caveat to a truly balanced power amplifier output is that any kind of outboard speaker-switching device that has a common ground connection is a big no-no, because the Brinkmann’s black terminals are not grounded.

Advocates of balanced circuit topography claim for it two principal sonic advantages: rejection of signals that are common to both phases (and therefore more likely to be noise of external origin), and isolation of the signal path from the unit’s connection to ground. The concern about grounding is that in connecting, for example, a single-ended digital source to a single-ended preamplifier, and on to a single-ended power amplifier, each unit’s chassis may have a slightly different ground potential, which will result in current flow along the differential. Half the signal is carried along the ground legs of the interconnects, so the added chassis-ground current should be expected to add noise.

The Brinkmann is a very quiet amplifier, in terms of both lack of transistor rush at idle and retrieval of low-level musical detail.

Well then, you may ask, if balanced design is so great, why doesn’t everyone use it? First, not everyone agrees that it’s the optimum solution. Second, having two active signal paths nearly doubles the parts count and cost. And third, implementing a balanced amplifi-

1 Skeptics may question the utility of balanced design within an entirely self-contained power-amplifier chassis, given the robustness of voltages delivered to the speakers, and that there is only one ground potential.

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to conclude that I didn't find the Brinkmann additively or subtractively colored to any noticeable degree. It just sounded good.

But Brinkmann's recipe is nonetheless unique, as far as I know. All its analog inputs are single-ended. Its line stage is passive. It is there that Brinkmann takes advantage of the freedom that controlling both sides of that interface confers. He can tailor the gain of the power amplifier, knowing in advance that the line stage is passive. The line stage also incorporates the transformer that accomplishes the signal split and inverts one leg for balanced amplification. As far as I know, Brinkmann's Integrated is the only integrated amplifier that combines a passive input stage with transformer-coupled balanced operation.

I think the sonic results speak for themselves, but it's reassuring to look back at the design brief and be able to nod sagely and say, "Yes, of course. Short signal paths, high gain, and transformer coupling to keep extraneous noise from being amplified. Case closed."

In a sense, in another sense, the case is always open, in that Brinkmann uses a piece of tempered glass as the top panel of the Integrated's case. This allows indicator lights to be placed next to that which they indicate. (It also shows off the high quality of the components and construction.) The input selector legends are under the glass as well, on the part of the selector knob barrel that passes through the faceplate. Operational functions are controlled by microprocessors, and the volume control is optically coupled.

The case is another new departure. The selector and volume knobs are on the front panel, which is approximately one standard rack-unit in height. Also on the front panel are the headphone jack and a single button that disables the speaker outputs while enabling the headphone amplifier.

The amplifier is two rack-units high, though the only internal component that is fully that tall is the toroidal power transformer. Brinkmann's idio-synchronous solution is to surround the power transformer with its own circular enclosure, which extends through the bottom of the case and acts as the integrated's front support. Two small, decoupled cones at the rear corners provide balance. From across the room, the amplifier appears to be floating. Heatsinks with vertical fins run front to back on either side of the amplifier.

The rear panel is the same height as the front panel, and includes two RCA digital input jacks for the optional DAC, four RCA analog input pairs, buffered tape outputs, and the pairs of speaker terminals for single-wiring. The Integrated is designed to be left on all the time, so there is no power switch. The attached power cord goes directly into the bottom of the case, near the power transformer. Remote control of volume and muting is standard with a machined aluminum hand held unit. The instruction manual is slightly self-laudatory, but the shipping carton is exemplary.

For those who want to take system simplification one step beyond, Brinkmann offers an optional DAC card that is dual-differential in the digital domain, yet uses a very small (the size of an AAA battery) dual-triode tube in its analog stage. A relay arrangement powers up the DAC when a digital input is active, even if not selected. Using the onboard DAC rather than the analog CD outputs from the Marantz SA-8260, and driving the ASA Baby speakers, I found the sound of the Brinkmann's DAC to be very slightly leaner and more detailed, but I preferred the Marantz's opulent warmth. Whether the DAC card makes sense for you will depend on how much money you have tied up in your digital source and how happy you are with it.

To sum up: If you're looking for a medium-powered one-box solution that combines extremely engaging sound quality with high-quality construction and very distinctive design, Brinkmann's Integrated should be on your audition list.

Other than the aforementioned Plinius and Rowland units, you might also want to investigate Perreaux's new integrated amplifier. Magnum Dyna-lab's MD 208 FM receiver is truly a one-box solution, although its distinctly mellow sound counsels care in speaker selection. And for those whose patience is exceeded only by their liquidity, Halcro keeps promising to come out with an integrated amplifier.

Having such a capable new amplifier in-house, I couldn't resist lining up a new speaker to hear. Dynaudio may seem an eternal fixture in the audio firmament, but they're currently celebrating only their 25th anniversary (www.dynaudiosa.com). For quite a few years, raw drivers from Dynaudio seemed to be the nearly exclusive choice for designers challenging the state of the art, as in the original Duntech 2001. Although that success has brought out more competitors, Dynaudio's drivers—tweeters in particular—are still used in many well-respected designs, such as Merlin's VSM and Silverline's La Folia.

Dynaudio's top tweeter is the legendary Esotar, now apparently in "2" form and used in Dynaudio's own Confidence C4 speaker, which impressed so many people at Home Entertainment 2002 last May. Some of that new technology (and technology from the Evidence as well) trickles down to Dynaudio's more affordable ($4800 is $16,000) Special Twenty-Five monitor loudspeaker.

The Special Twenty-Five is a medium-sized, rear-ported box measuring 17" high by 9" wide by 13" deep, with an 8" woofer/mid with a claimed (and credible) bass extension of -3dB at 35Hz. As befits an important anniversary, particular care was taken in aesthetic design, my pair being clad in birch-burl veneer.

How do they sound? Fabulous. No excuses needed on organ music, or on Brahms' Ein deutsches Requiem. Female vocals are just beguiling, string quartets riveting. But with high-quality parts, conservative (first-order crossover) design, and flawless execution, what's not to like? (Well, okay—the Euro-nanny speaker terminals are not to like.) $4800/pair is admittedly rather stiff, but the audible family resemblance to the Evidence and Confidence goes a long way in justifying that. The Brinkmann, the Dynaudios, and a Marantz SA-14 SACD player will top out at $11,200, but they make for a "buy it once and buy it right" ticket off the merry-go-round.

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he Pennsylvania Gazette documented an early connection between music and an American named Winey when, in 1759, it listed for sale as part of an estate "a middle sized organ, having eight stops." Interested parties were directed to one Jacob Winey, a Philadelphia merchant.

It's not known whether there's a familial link between the aforementioned Jacob, who appears to have been childless, and James Melton Winey, who, two centuries later, invented the Magneplanar speaker. (Family research indicates that Jim Winey's roots lead directly back to another Pennsylvania Jacob Winey, born in 1764.) Nevertheless, Magnepan's founder and president finds the old newspaper notice intriguing, since he's certain he inherited a family affinity for music so pronounced that it led his parents to name him after the popular radio tenor James Melton, who went on to sing at the Metropolitan Opera and in movies.

Music's pull was so strong that, by the time he entered his teens, Jim Winey insisted on experiencing it viscerally. "I was probably 13, 14 years old," he recalls. "I'd come home from school for lunch, and there was a program on every day that had classical music on it. After I had my lunch, I would sit with this portable radio of my sister's in my lap, kind of pressed to my body so I could feel it as well as hear it."

By the time Jim Winey was born, on April 18, 1934, his branch of the family had migrated westward. For the first 13 years of Jim's life, his father, Eldridge, was employed as a cat skinner—a heavy equipment operator—and helped build roads and airfields. Eldridge Winey eventually tired of the job's nomadic nature, which in
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one year alone resulted in Jim's attending six different schools, so he brought his wife, Virgil, their two sons, and their two daughters back home to Deloit, in western Iowa, and worked with his father on the 300-acre family farm, raising corn, soybeans, feeder cattle, and hogs.

During his early teens, Jim Winey spent substantial time there as well, both working and playing. "Two rivers ran through," he remembers. "My brother, Kay, and I spent a lot of time building dams and fishing. Later, I trapped muskrat and mink and sold the pelts. The rule of thumb on a mink in those days was about a dollar per inch, so if you caught a mink that measured 36 inches on the stretching frame, that was a lot of money." The reward for catching a skunk, he recounts from experience, was getting sent home from school for deodorization.

Winey played basketball and baseball at Deloit High School, and he was valedictorian of the class of 1953, which he readily admits included just seven people. He then enlisted in the army and, at his request, was assigned to Korea. Fortunately, the conflict there was winding down, and he never saw combat. There followed study at Iowa State University, where he earned an engineering degree in 1960, and a subsequent job at John Deere in Des Moines. In the fall of 1961, Winey accepted a position at Minnesota Mining & Manufacturing, aka 3M, and moved to Minnesota with his wife, Karen, a nurse, and their first child. Jim and Karen Winey have lived there ever since.

**David Lander:** You've been building things since you were a teenager back in western Iowa, haven't you?

**Jim Winey:** I've never had a problem with ideas, ways to do things. They say necessity is the mother of invention, and that's very pertinent to farming. You've got to be innovative. My grandfather built his own first tractor with an old Ford engine, and he found a way to build an improved corn-picking machine. He applied for a patent on it. My father and my uncle — my uncle, George Newcom, had the first Ford franchise in Crawford County — claimed to have invented the hydraulic brake. We had a real nice machine shop with all the equipment, the forge and the drills, everything. I grew up around that, and I started messing around. Photography's always been a hobby of mine, and I built my own first flash attachment. A friend and I built our own first enlarger out of an old Eastman Kodak bellows camera.

**Lander:** You studied industrial engineering in college. What did that prepare you for?

**Winey:** Generally, people think of industrial engineering as time study, setting standards, stuff like that. I never did any of that; I didn't like it. At John Deere, I immediately became what they called a methods engineer. I just had a very good knack of coming up with the best ways of doing something. I was not a nuts-and-bolts designer. I did the conceptual development.

**Lander:** You've said one of your biggest 3M projects involved designing a machine for assembling a chrome door shell that consisted of two cans, one on top of the other. First the cans had to be rotated to align their labels, and then they were taped together.

**Winey:** One of those machines replaced six people — and worked far more accurately. It would do 200 sets of cans per minute. 3M was it for the tape; it was a big tape application, 13 inches of tape per set of those cans. We'd do the conceptual design, sell it to whoever the customer was — the first one was La Choy — then go to this machine builder in St. Paul and say, "Okay, this is what we've sold them on." It turned out to be a very lucrative business for the machine builder. I think the first machine cost around $150,000.

**Lander:** For the tape supplier, too, I'm sure.

**Winey:** That machine used tape so fast! About the most you could get on a roll of tape was 120 yards, so one of the guys in the tape lab — he was a fisherman, obviously — said, "Let's see if we can level-wind it on a spool like line on a casting reel." They came up with these huge spools with 6000 yards of tape. On one spool.

**Lander:** Like a lot of hi-fi hobbyists of your generation, you were a fan of electrostatics. You originally owned a pair of Janszen Z-600s, which you bought at the Minneapolis audio store then owned by Bill Johnson, who went on to found Audio Research and who also became your first distributor. You later traded them for KLH Nines, which you still own. Then, one day, you had an epiphany at Bill's store. You heard a whole wall of prototype electrostatic panels built by Ron Toews [pronounced Tyrus], co-founder of RTR.

**Winey:** Bill played them for me, and my God! It was the closest thing to a live performance. I had ever heard. I flipped. It put the seed in my mind, and I decided to apply myself to electrostatics. I started acquiring all the literature and patents.

**Lander:** How did you get the idea for your planar magnetic speaker?

**Winey:** At 3M, I happened to be working on an application that involved laminating tape to flexible magnets. I must have been sitting there, thinking about the project as well as my electrostatic project. I looked up and saw some perforated ceiling tiles, and the light bulb went on. It's as simple as that.

**Lander:** Did the tiles remind you of speaker grilles?

**Winey:** What they reminded me of was acoustic transparency. Somehow, that thought must have combined with the flexible magnetic strips I had been working with. Anyway, the light bulb went on, and I saw it. I went home that night. I had a single piece of this magnetic material about 2' long, just enough to make a kind of voice-coil that consisted of a piece of tape, adhesive side up, strung over a couple of pencils mounted on each end of a board — like frets on the neck of a guitar. Then I laid copper wire on the tape adhesive to form a voice-coil. I hooked that up to one channel of my Dyna 75 amp, and it played music. Three o'clock in the morning, I had my wife come down to the basement to hear it. It had

"I'VE NEVER HAD A PROBLEM WITH IDEAS, WAYS TO DO THINGS."

Jim Winey: the light bulb went on.
no bass, but I recognized a purity of sound. So I dropped the electrostatic thing then and there.

Lander: It sounds as if you were back on the farm, working with the materials you happened to have on hand. In fact, you've pointed out that the flexible magnet material you employed at the time was so commonplace it was used to make refrigerator-door gaskets. How much time did you spend on your speaker then?

Winey: I worked on and off—elevens, weekends, vacations, whenever I could—from about 1966. Finally, in 1968, I reached a point where I had to do something with it.

Lander: You might have had it manufactured by 3M—the company was interested in it.

Winey: Two or three of the big wheels came out to our little old home in White Bear Lake, with our old broken-down furniture, to hear these things. One of the prototypes, after it had gotten along quite a ways, ended up going into their fancy anechoic chamber and being analyzed by their physicists. There was this one who was their speaker expert who said, "It can't work."

Lander: But once they determined how well it did work, they wanted it.

Winey: They wanted it, and I was willing to let them have it, but I would not let them have it without a royalty. I was adamant. I decided, if they would sign an agreement, I'd be the project manager and spend the rest of my life trying to get this thing going. It went all the way to the top, and finally the president of 3M said, "No, we can't do it. Every guy over in research we're paying to develop stuff for us is going to turn around and try to sell it to us." It was a precedent problem.

Lander: Given a previous experience with a tabletop game you had patented earlier on and had wanted to produce, you felt weight in a bind. You've explained that 3M had agreed you could produce your game but, because you happened to be an employee when you developed it—albeit on your own time—they retained the rights to make it and sell it themselves as well. How, with your speaker, did you get past that paradox?

Winey: I fortunately had somebody sympathetic to my cause: the executive vice president of R&D, a wonderful man. Walton was his name. He called me over to his office in the big skyscraper one day and said, "Well, the executive committee says we can't do this thing and give you a royalty, but we will give you a release." I brought up the one they had given me on this game, and he apologized for it. He had already had a letter there correcting it. And he had one on the speaker, too, that was far more lenient. So I said, "Well, I have no alternative but to do it myself." And he said, "Godspeed," and parted me on the back. He was almost like a father to me.

Lander: So you left 3M in June 1969 with a product and investors to back it.

Winey: You know, the easiest part of this whole thing was raising money. The only problem was, I should have raised more than I did.

Lander: How much did you raise?

Winey: $50,000. I had to live on that, plus buy equipment, build a laboratory. I figured it had to last me for almost two years, and it did.

Lander: Had your four children all been born by then?

Winey: Yeah. Fortunately, my wife worked for our doctor in his office, so we pretty much got our medical things free.

Lander: When did you feel your product was about ready for market?

Winey: By early 1971, I had a single panel almost as wide as the KLH Nine mounted between spring-tension poles that ran from floor to ceiling, like the old lamps used.

Lander: You've said someone at the store that Bill Johnson had previously owned asked you to leave them there overnight, apparently because he wanted to play them for Bill.

Winey: I got a phone call right away from Bill, in the morning. He said, "Jim, I've just been over to the store and heard your speakers. I want to talk." So we got together. There was one flaw. This was a single, full-range speaker. There was no separate tweeter, and it was quite directive, and I knew it. I had some crossovers, and I was going to work on a smaller line source for the high frequencies. Bill picked up on that real quick, too, and he encouraged me to do it. Then I had to figure out what kind of package to put it in. Well, I had spotted this three-panel folding screen that you buy in furniture stores, and I had the idea of putting bass drivers in two of the panels and a narrow high-frequency unit in the other one, so I did that.

Lander: And that became the Tympani, which originally sold for $995/pair. Audio Research distributed the three-panel series for several years, but the Tympani was the only one Bill Johnson handled for you, wasn't it?

Winey: He knew that what I planned on doing was eventually coming out with the single-panel model through my own dealers. In 1973, I came out with the first MG II. I then started setting up my own dealer network.

Lander: Your patented ribbon tweeter was a major leap forward for Magnapop. How did that come about?

Winey: We had known for some time that the top end of our speaker was the weak link. Actually, Wendell [Diller, longtime Magnapop sales and marketing manager] and I had been out to Lyric [the New York City audio store], and we got to see this pair of Tympaups sitting there with this Sequerra tweeter. It made me get serious. I got to thinking on the airplane on the way back, and another light bulb went on. I sketched it out on the airplane and came back and was able to put one together. It was direct-driven—no transformers. It was a line source. It was dipole to go with the rest of our speakers, and it just fit like a glove to what we were doing. The first one went into the Tympani IV, which by that time, 1978, we were marketing ourselves.

RAISING MONEY.

THE ONLY PROBLEM WAS, I SHOULD HAVE RAISED MORE THAN I DID."

Lander: The only Magnapop product that hasn't been a speaker was the Unitrac tonearm. Why a tonearm?

Winey: Because I'd come to feel it was the weak link in the whole system. I had an idea: a unipivot with no damping. One of the problems I've always had with tonearms was their damping. It's a catch-22 situation because, if you have a turntable that's on a surface that does some vibrating, damping probably helps. But it's a Band-Aid; you're better off without it if you don't have to use it. The dynamics are far better, and the tracing of that groove is more accurate.

Lander: How long did it take you to develop the Unitrac?

Winey: I started thinking about it in the late '70s, but it took five years to get into production—a real big job, let me tell you. We had local machine builders build parts, and we assembled them. One of the things I felt was a problem with most tonearms was inertia, which I got around by placing the pivot point approximately a quarter of an inch from the counterweight's center of gravity. It had a very simple means
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of adjusting anti-skate, and it had a vertical-tracking adjustment. The price was right; it was only $325. It went over very well. We sold almost 10,000 of them in four, five years. But by the time we got it into production, the CD was coming down the railroad track.

**Lander:** When it pulled into the station and you got to hear it, what did you think of the Compact Disc?

**Winey:** I've come to realize the big problem was hardware. The first CDs I had were horrible. A few years later, I pulled some of those out and couldn't believe how much better they sounded. I have a highly tweaked Wadia system on my MG 201s, and I'm telling you, the sound is incredible.

**Lander:** Do you, then, see a pressing need for SACD or some other format that takes us beyond the "Red Book" CD standard?

**Winey:** Hey, we're full steam ahead on SACD. I've found that even the "Red Book" layer on these hybrid discs is benefiting from Direct-Stream Digital.

**Lander:** Magnepan staged a multichannel demonstration at the 1985 Consumer Electronics Show that seemed to put you in the surround-sound vanguard. For a while afterward, though, your efforts in that area seemed to slow down.

**Winey:** I think one of the things that maybe made us slow a little is that this added dimension was inevitably associated with a lowering of intrinsic quality. When you go to four channels, as they did with four-channel sound, then five, to make it anywhere near affordable it's got to be cheapened. That grated on some of us. We didn't like that. And I don't think the surround technology was ready. I think you could draw an analogy between what was happening and what we had back in the early days of stereo: Ping-Pong. There was too much of that going on. But Dolby Digital was a big step forward. It prompted us to work harder at developing speakers for the surround format.

**Lander:** A five-speaker set of your newest surround-sound models, four MGMC 1s and a center-channel MGCC 2, sells for $2400. Some people would argue that, because Magnepans deliver so much sound quality per dollar, the need for more speakers puts you in an enviable position.

**Winey:** There's no doubt. The other thing we have going for us is that you can fold our speakers back against the wall. Decorators hate to deal with speakers; it's one of the biggest problems they have. And you can angle them easily to make adjustments for room effects—and to tailor them for a given individual's taste.

**Lander:** Magnepan is family-owned, and two other family members, both your sons, work there now. How do they fit into the company picture?

**Winey:** Mark is an electrical engineer. He's been here now about four years. He's 42. He worked for NOAA, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, for several years. Steven has been in and around Magnepan since he was in high school. He's 38, and he probably knows more about the technology than anyone other than myself. He knows manufacturing. He's run the service department.

**Lander:** So it sounds like succession is assured.

**Winey:** Oh, there's no doubt. They will do well.

**Lander:** You had an unfortunate accident in 1993. You fell backward on some stairs, injured your spine, and had to undergo complex surgery. Now you walk with the aid of braces or use a wheelchair. Has that slowed you down much?

**Winey:** It did for a couple of years, but I'm fine. I still consider myself one of the luckiest people in the world—to spend my life and earn my livelihood doing something I love as much as I love doing this. A lot of the guys I worked with at 3M couldn't wait to take an early out at 55. I'm 68, and I still go to work most days.
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- Wes Phillips, Stereophile

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In the past few years, guitarist Will Kimbrough has felt a little like Sybil, the woman with 16 personalities. One half of his musicality has been involved in an agonizingly slow build toward a solo career. In 2000 he released *This*, an album that was both his first solo effort and the first disc released by his own label, Waxy Silver Records. Often described as “smart” or “intelligent” rock, *This*’s rich textures came from Kimbrough's wide-ranging musical vision, which incorporates everything from Randy Newman to John Lennon to The Left Banke.

Part sideman and part solo artist, guitarist WILL KIMBROUGH finds his way(s) forward.
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In September 2002, Kimbrough released his second album, *Home Away*, an even richer, more nuanced collection of folk-pop-rock tunes with echoes of the Beatles, the uniquely southern strain of power pop played by such bands as the dB's, and the old-fashioned storytelling that informs all great folk music. Through it all is Kimbrough’s guitar, equally compelling whether electric or acoustic, and his voice, which draws ever more frequent comparisons to that of ex-Crowded House frontman Neil Finn.

While a solo career may be Kimbrough’s future, the present is filled with his ever-growing, increasingly requested skills as a sideman. He’s the kind of guitarist whose tone is both unmistakably his own and just the kind of accent many solo artists need to make their music come alive onstage. The downside to being a sideman is that even extraordinary players, guitarists like James Burton or Marc Ribot for example, tend to disappear when they back another artist.

“It’s funny about how the music business works,” he says, in one of the understatements of the 21st century. “If the phone rings enough and you just stay busy with something, it’s really hard to break away. I have friends who are really talented artists who ended up being session people because the phone never stopped ringing.”

And ring it has. Over the past several years Kimbrough has played live or on record with an ever-growing list of artists, including Josh Rouse, Amy Rigby, Allison Moorer, Todd Snider, Matthew Ryan, Kim Richey, and Rodney Crowell. Last year, Kimbrough became the first guitarist to record with Billy Joe Shaver since the death of Shaver’s son, guitarist Eddie Shaver, when he played on Billy Joe’s *Freedom’s Child*. In February, the Alabama-born Kimbrough will again be prominently featured, this time on Rodney Crowell’s long-awaited, as yet unannounced album, to be released on T Bone Burnett’s DMZ label.

During the course of an hour-long phone conversation with Kimbrough — who was home in Nashville babysitting his young daughters, Emma and Sadie — it became clear that he’s struggling with the old tug o’ war between the instant money a successful sideman can make nightly, and the satisfaction and long-term payoff that a solo career and publishing deal might bring. He’s not the first to wrestle with this dilemma.

“Rodney [Crowell] asked me one day, ‘Why are you playing guitar for me? You’re only going to get paid by the show or the week and (unlike publishing royalties) you’re not going to get a check a year later.’ I said, ‘Yeah, I’m well aware of that.’ He said that, for the long run, you really need to do your thing, and I know that, but the long run consists of lots of short runs.’

Kimbrough’s latest gig in the direction of his own thing, *Home Away*, proves that he has the instrumental talent, the songwriting chops, and the voice to be a successful solo artist. Now if he can just get the records to sell, and the tours to support it to sell out.

“I have to look in the mirror every day and say, ‘You are starting over.’ Now that I have a second record out, it’s like I never had anything out.”

Kimbrough is nearing 40, and his journey to this point has been fairly typical of musicians ca 2002. He picked up the guitar at age 12 and began the usual slog up through a succession of bands. Being a southern boy with a guitar, he passed through the inevitable Duane Allman obsession and learned to play slide guitar early on, a skill that still adds an unusual flavor to his playing.

Kimbrough’s first group, The Henry Gwin Band, was named for a neighbor of Kimbrough’s in Mobile, Alabama, who complained about the guitarist and his bandmates practicing so loudly. This is another southern rock tradition, one attributed to Lynyrd Skynyrd, whose name was a corruption of the name of a hated gym teacher.

Will and the Bushmen, the band for which Kimbrough is most famous, began in Mobile in 1985 as the Inverted Oros — by his description, “a bunch of white guys playing with a black frontman. We played simple, groovy jazz — stuff off [Miles Davis’] *Kind of Blue*. Echoes of this can be heard on *Home Away* via the trumpet accents on “War of Words.”

Eventually, Arthur left, band members were added, and the Bushmen were born.

“We had a bass player who had some anthropology book about Bushmen and how they were free and unfettered, blah blah blah. At the time, we were living out in the woods in this sort of semi band commune.”

In 1988 the Bushmen moved to Nashville, which at the time had a small but thriving rock scene that would eventually come to be known as the so-called “Nashville Underground.” Signed to SIRK/EMI Records in what Kimbrough now calls “a typical music-industry bad dream come true,” the band released two albums, *Will and the Bushmen* (1989) and *Blunderbus* (1991). Although the band played to a devoted following at home, they failed to make a dent nationally, and, like so many rock
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acts before and after, the Bushmen died a quiet death.

"I don't think they got the band, and we didn't get what was going to happen. Our producer... I think what he was hired to do, without really knowing us, was not what we were about. I was 23, and I thought this is what we needed to do to get going. It was a mistake, but whatever. I mean, there are people who love that record.

"We were NRBQ meets the Replacements over at R.E.M.'s House, and it was a hard sell in 1989. Somebody needed to figure out how — not to capture the live energy, because I really don't think that is doable — but make a record that worked with what we did. It needed to be a little more sorts sprawling than it was.

"But to have a band like that for 10 years and live off it was an amazing thing. Most people have a band for six months and then they go back to college."

But after the Bushmen had decided to call it quits, it took two more years for the band to work off its debts. They stayed together long after the thrill, so to speak, was gone.

"It tore it up and it messed up our friendships a little bit. I mean, we still talk, but it's not like it was. And it's kinda sad. But if you have a business go bad, that's the way it goes. You can't just blame it on music, you blame it on business."

To cheer him up, three friends — guitarist Tommy Womack, bassist Scott Grimes, and drummer Tommy Meyer — invited Kimbrough to what became a series of jam sessions that turned into something more serious, and Kimbrough was soon in a new band: The Bis-Quits, a "supergroup" of sorts that, thanks to its 1993, self-titled debut on Oh Boy Records, suddenly became the object of much music-industry hope and speculation.

"It started on Monday nights at [the Nashville club] 12th and Porter and eventually moved to the weekends there. It was more of a rock 'n' roll cabaret. Sort of performance art — or just performance. I don't know about the art."

"It was all over the map. We were just a rock 'n' roll band, but we had all these touches of all this different stuff. And it really swing, sorts like an NRBQ. Little Feat, some Stones, just that sort of swinging rock thing that you don't get that much anymore. Like the Faces. And we could also go into this complicated proggy stuff with a sense of humor, like a Fishbone. And then there was this whole Replacementsy, drunk-rock, who-gives-a-shit kind of thing."

Offered two major-label developmental deals, which they turned down, the band opted for Oh Boy, a Nashville indie best known as John Prine's label. In 1993, their much-anticipated debut album, The Bis-Quits, was released.

"Once it became quote-unquote serious and we had to take it out of town, away from the shelter of 'We can do anything we want to so let's just do it,' it became something different."

In 1994, just after a successful appearance at Austin's South By Southwest music and media conference, and prior to hiring a manager (Nine Inch Nails' manager was reportedly interested), the Bis-Quits came apart. All of its members have stayed in the business, with Womack and now Kimbrough having the most success as solo artists.

Since the Bis-Quits' demise, Kimbrough has naturally pondered the effect of the band's short, mercurial trajectory on his own career.

"I might still have a publishing deal in Nashville if I had been friendly to the industry. But if you're happy where you are now, then the path that led you there is what was supposed to be."

That path has led to Kimbrough's current split personality of half frontman, half sideman. The dichotomy began soon after the Bis-Quits quit: Pop-rock singer-songwriter Todd Snider called, needing a guitarist for his backing band, The Nervous Wrecks. Hurting for cash, Kimbrough took the gig, never dreaming that he'd spend the next four years on the road with Snider, who in that time released three albums on Jimmy Buffet's Margaritaville label.

"The Todd thing was great. It was refreshing. It took me away from staring at my navel. His actual career went up while the industry saw it go down. The last tour we did, down the middle of the country — which everybody knows the industry doesn't really pay any attention to — sold out every night. And we got home and he'd been dropped. The last day of the tour, we got the call."

Since his time with Snider (who has since signed with Oh Boy), Kimbrough has spent an equal amount of time playing solo and adding his guitar tones to other artists' projects. In 2000 he formed Waxy Silver and released This, an album recorded on vintage analog gear in a studio borrowed from EMI Publishing. Last summer he turned down a lucrative touring offer from a major country artist (he won't say who) to stay home in Nashville with his family, work whatever sideman gigs he deems worthy, and try to get his solo career off the ground. Although he vowed that this time out he'd
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**StereoHiE, January 2003**
make a record quickly, in two weeks, Home Away took nearly a year to complete. Finished in January 2002 and mastered that March, it was released in September 2002 on Waxysilver (it's available in Europe on the BMG imprint Gravity Records).

"I have to admit that often, when I have the time to write, it just means I'm unemployed. I either don't have tours of my own to do or the phone's not ringing for anybody else. It's an odd thing. I mean, this record was definitely written that way. I didn't have any work, so the nature of the songs was, well... if (having no work) doesn't make conflict in your personal life..."

Waxysilver has given Kimbrough yet another hat to wear; that of label owner. Besides his own pair of records, in 2001 Waxysilver released singer-songwriter (and Kimbrough pal) Matthew Ryan's Concussion. The guitarist says he's also contemplating re-releasing the first Bushmen album, Gawk. Owning even a tiny label like Waxysilver adds a whole new layer of music-business problems and pressures.

"The good sides of it are the real important things. You get to have control. You get to put the songs that you want on the record. You get to make the record sound how you want it to sound. You get to make the cover art look like you want it to look. You get to try to present yourself in a way that you want to be presented. For better or worse. Obviously, the downside is the finances."

While he plans to tour till he drops in support of Home Away, Kimbrough will continue to find both money and artistic satisfaction in working with others. Perhaps the most revelatory sideman tale the articulate singer-songwriter guitarist told me was of his recent experience recording with Billy Joe Shaver, who lost his wife to cancer and his son to suicide in less than two years.

"Billy Joe is very religious in a cool way. Had a lot of tragedy. Lost his wife and Eddie, and that was his whole family. My imagination goes to what if that happened to me, and it's just unthinkable."

"Just playing on a Billy Joe Shaver record is a lesson in how to write a song and how to have soul. We did one song about the death of his son, the death of his wife. It was told in this parable story about how love lives on after people are gone. And it keeps getting stronger. It was really heavy, and it was just the two of us playing it. I had to play this old Martin 12-string that had been sitting around the studio that they had picked for me. It was hard to play, the action was about two inches off the neck. And we played it over and over again. I was really trying not to encumber the moment with mistakes. My fingers were bloody by the end of it."

"I have to admit that often, when I have the time to write, it just means I'm unemployed."
Despite my 26 years in audio journalism, the amount of stuff I need to know seems to increase faster than I can cope with it. Thus it didn’t come as too much of a surprise for me to learn that speaker manufacturer Canton, the Teutonic equivalent of England’s B&W, a) was 30 years old in 2002, and b) claims the dominant market share of the German market. Yes, I’d been peripherally aware of Canton through the years, but for various reasons had never auditioned any of their models. I was amenable, therefore, when Canton USA’s Paul Madsen suggested to me last May, at Home Entertainment 2002 in New York City, that I review their flagship speaker.

The Karat Reference 2 DC — yes, that name will never trip off the tongue — was introduced to celebrate Canton’s 30th anniversary and is the result of the company’s design team, headed by Frank Göbl, in effect being given free rein to design both the drive-units and the system that would use them.

With its metallic-silver lacquer finish (alder and beech veneers are also available), the Reference 2 DC is a handsome speaker standing some 4’ tall. Despite its mass and bulk, it doesn’t visually dominate a room, because only the upper-frequency drivers are mounted on the enclosure’s narrow face. The 12” woofer and Auxiliary Bass Radiator (ABR) are mounted opposite each other on the large sidewalls. I first saw this idea on the Acoustic Research AR9 from two decades ago, and it resurfaced in the early 1990s on the AudioPhylic Virgo. Not only does it allow the speaker to have a slim frontal profile, which benefits upper-frequency dispersion; it also ensures that the cabinet’s largest panels, whose vibrations are the most difficult to control but which couple most efficiently to the air, are facing away from the listener.

Even so, the Karat Reference’s trapezoidal enclosure has been heavily braced and reinforced to minimize panel vibrations, and is constructed from a laminate of two different particleboards with different densities. To minimize the effects of internal space resonances, there are no parallel internal surfaces, and the interior is divided into several differently-sized “vaults,” according to Canton’s White Paper on the design.

The 2 DCs’ drive-units have been designed with the latest in finite-element analysis and magnetic-circuit simulation programs, to maximize linearity at large diaphragm excursions and minimize the prevalence of unwanted diaphragm breakup modes. The 1” metal-dome tweeter handles frequencies above 3.2kHz. Its low-mass dome and coil form are formed in one piece from what is specified as “aluminum-manganese” — I wondered if they meant “magnesium” — and uses a powerful neodymium magnet with a vented polepiece to achieve the necessary high sensitivity.

The twin 7” midrange units are constructed on diecast polycarbonate chassis and arranged above and below the tweeter. Canton calls this array “D’Appolito,” but this is not strictly true: the crossover’s acoustic slopes are described as fourth-order, with 24dB/octave slopes. To the best of my understanding, the benefits regarding vertical dispersion that accrue from Joe D’Appolito’s array arise when odd-order filter slopes are used.

The midrange units also use a neodymium magnet and an “aluminum-manganese” diaphragm, this time in the shape of a cone but with a dustcap of the same material continuing the profile to result in a dish shape. This smoothly extends the unit’s response an octave above the crossover frequency. The maximum linear excursion of the 4.75” diaphragm is said to be an astonishingly large 0.8”, but below a 110dB level the excursion doesn’t exceed 0.12”, which should result in low distortion.

The 12” woofer is constructed on a diecast magnesium chassis and features a pulp cone doped with graphite fibers, this terminated with a rubber half-roll surround to give good linearity and high excursion capability. The ABR uses a flat diaphragm, again terminated with a large rubber half-roll surround. Despite a moving mass of only 50z, the ABR is claimed to have a resonant frequency below 10Hz, to optimize its reflex behavior. The “DC” in the Karat Reference 2 DCs’ name refers to Canton’s Displacement Control circuitry, which reduces the level of infrasonic signals both to maximize low-frequency dynamic range and to minimize the production of midbass muddiness.

The 16-lb crossover is mounted in its own sealed, decoupled subenclosure behind the upper-frequency drivers. It uses hand-wound coils and ICW capacitors. Electrical connection is via two pairs of sturdy binding posts at the base of the rear panel.

**Description**: Three-way, ABR-loaded, magnetically shielded, floorstanding loudspeaker. Drive-units: 1” (25mm) aluminum-manganese dome tweeter, two 7” (180mm) aluminum-manganese midrange cones, 12” (310mm) graphite-loaded paper-cone woofer, 12” (310mm) flat-diaphragm Auxiliary Bass Radiator (ABR). Crossover frequencies: 150Hz and 3.2kHz, 24dB/octave acoustic slopes. Frequency range: 18Hz–30kHz. Sensitivity: 89dB/2.83V/m. Nominal impedance: 8 ohms (4 ohms minimum). Recommended power: up to 350Wpc.

**Dimensions**: 47.2” (1200mm) H by 11.8” (300mm) W by 20.9” (530mm) D. Weight: 139 lbs (63kg) each.

**Finishes**: Alder or beech veneers, or silver lacquer, with black fabric grilles.

**Serial numbers of units reviewed**: L 100024, R 100024.

**Price**: $10,000/pair. Approximate number of dealers: 350.

**Manufacturer**: Canton Electronic GmbH, 61276 Weilrod/Niederlauken, Germany. Web: www.canton.de. US distributor: Canton USA, 1723 Adams Street NE, Minneapolis, MN 55413. Tel: (612) 706-9250. Fax: (612) 706-9253.
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System & Setup

Vinyl was played on my Linn Sondek/Cirkus/Trampolin/Lingo/Ekos/Arkiv LP player sitting on a Sound Organisation table and amplified by a Linn Linto. CD's were played on a Musical Fidelity Nu-Vista 3D CD player and a Mark Levinson No.31.5 CD transport driving a Mark Levinson No.306 D/A processor via a Kimber Illuminations Orchid AES/EBU datalink. I also used an Accuphase DP-85 SACD player, a Technics DVD-A10 DVD-Audio player, and a Z-Systems rdP-1 digital equalizer.

A Mark Levinson No.380S preamp fed Mark Levinson No.331 H monoblocks via balanced Madrigal CZ Gel-1 interconnects. DiMarzio unbalanced interconnects were used for the Musical Fidelity and Technics players. Speaker cables were AudioQuest Gibraltar, AC cables Synergistic Research Designers' Reference² & PS Audio Lab Cable. A PS Audio Power Plant 300 running at 90Hz supplied power to the preamp and digital players. AC power comes from two dedicated 20A circuits; each just G from the breaker box. A No.33H was plugged into each.

Sound

After some experimentation, the Karat Reference 2s were set up in pretty much the positions in my dedicated listening room where the Wilson Sophias had worked so well last July: 30" (left) and 72" (right) from the side walls and 54" from the wall behind them (all distances measured from the woofer dustcaps). The woofers were on the speakers' inner sides, the passive radiators facing the sidewalls. The Cantons were not toed in all the way to the '10'-distant listening seat; my ears were level with the 37'-high tweeters.

Measurements

The big Canton was significantly more sensitive than average, at an estimated 92dB(1)/2.83V/m. However, as shown by its plot of impedance magnitude and electrical phase against frequency (fig.1), it actually draws more like 2W from the amplifier to achieve this rating. With a true 1W drive, its sensitivity will be exactly to specification at 89dB/W/m.

The impedance stays within tight 3 and 6 ohm limits from 70Hz to 40kHz, meaning that there will be only small modification of its response when used with a tube amplifier having a higher-than-average source impedance. However, the phase angle does become large in the midbass, with a combination of 5 ohms magnitude and -45° phase, implying that the partnering amplifier should have good current delivery. The rise in impedance below 20Hz suggests the presence of large capacitors in series with the woofer which limit excursion when it is unloaded at subsonic frequencies.

Two discontinuities are apparent in the fig.1 magnitude trace. The one above the audioband, at 22kHz, is due to the ubiquitous metal-dome tweeter resonance and will be benign. However, the one between 100 and 200Hz suggests the presence of one or more vibrational resonances in the 2 DC's enclosure. Fig.2, a cumulative spectral-decay plot calculated from the output of a simple PVDF accelerometer fastened to the back panel level with the woofer and ABR, indicates two quite well-defined resonances—the higher-frequency mode could be detected on all surfaces. All things being equal, I would have thought these low enough in level not to mess with the speaker's sound quality. But I could hear them with the Test CD 3 warble tones, and I suspect they added to the extra warmth heard in Joni Mitchell's voice and in the double bass.

The saddle at 35Hz in the fig.1 impedance magnitude trace suggests that this is the tuning frequency of the big ABR. However, the minimum-position point in the woofer's nearfield output (fig.3, blue trace) lies a little lower than this, at 30Hz, while the ABR's output (green trace) peaks a little higher in frequency, at 40Hz. Note that both the woofer and ABR roll off below resonance with twice the usual reflex slope—24dB/octave rather than 12dB/octave—due to Canton's Displacement Control technology. This results in a very steep
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Since I picked up our April 2000 "Recording of the Month," Joni Mitchell’s Both Sides Now (Reprise 47620-2), then on the Bob Ludwig-mastered DVD-A (47620-9), I’ve been listening to a lot of the Canadian singer. Recorded at Air Lyndhurst in North London, Both Sides Now presents Mitchell working through a collection of standards in lushly orchestrated arrangements that sounded suitably rich via the Cantons. Her sexy, smoky voice—the huskiness indeed courtesy of her years of smoking—sounded a little smokier than I remembered from the Mission Pilatus.

I reviewed last month, but the Karat Reference 2 DCs shared with that English speaker the ability to hold separate and keep distinguishable low-level instruments in the mix, even when others are playing loudly.

For Joni Mitchell to explore the jazz vocal repertoire so successfully should come as no surprise to anyone who appreciated her reading of “Summertime” on Herbice Hancock’s 1998 George Gershwin tribute (Verve 314 557 707-2). Again, her voice on this cut sounded smoky through the Karat References, but it also sounded superbly articulate, as did Stevie Wonder’s harmonica solo. The Cantons reproduced Ira Coleman’s double bass not only with plenty of weight, but also with an excellent uniformity, notes neither jumping forward nor sounding recessed.

Of course, Joni Mitchell was also taking her listeners into improvisational voyages almost a quarter century ago, on Mingus, her tribute to Charles Mingus (Asylum K53091, LP), which in turn reminded me that it had been too long.

**Measurements**

rolloff for the combined output of the units (black trace). The crossover between the woofer (blue) and midrange units (red) appears to lie at 150Hz, as specified, but with asymmetrical filter slopes. The midranges roll off at 24dB/octave below 100Hz, the woofer at 12dB/octave above the same frequency.

Fig.4 splices the black low-frequency trace from fig.3 to the Karat Reference 2 DC’s farfield response, averaged across a 30° horizontal window on the tweeter axis. There is a notable absence of peaks and dips in the response. While the upper bass is humped up by 5dB or so, this will be due at least in part to the fact that this is a nearfield measurement, which assumes a 2pi (hemispherical) environment. The tweeter seems to be balanced a couple of dB hot, but as the top octaves only occasionally sounded lifted up, I suspect that the listener identifies the relative lack of energy through the upper midrange as “politeness” rather than the treble as being excessive.

The Canton’s midrange units get a little directional at the top of their passband (fig.5), but the corresponding flare at the bottom of the tweeter’s passband doesn’t extend as high in frequency as is usually seen, the driver also starting to get directional above 5kHz. All things being equal, this might tend to work against the on-axis energy excess in rooms with typically absorptive furnishing. The radiation pattern in the vertical plane (fig.6) reveals that the listener’s ears need to be at a level between the cen-

![Fig.5 Canton Karat Reference 2 DC, lateral response family at 50°, normalized to response on tweeter axis, from back to front: differences in response 90°–5° off-axis, reference response, differences in response 5°–90° off-axis.](image)

![Fig.6 Canton Karat Reference 2 DC, vertical response family at 50°, normalized to response on tweeter axis, from back to front: differences in response 20°–5° above axis, reference response, differences in response 5°–10° below axis.](image)
Canton Karat Reference 2 DC

since ‘I’d played 1980’s Shadows and Light (Asylum HJCD 704-2). What a band she put together for this set: Michael Brecker on tenor sax, Pat Metheny on guitar, Lyle Mays on keyboards, Don Alias on drums and percussion, and the incomparable Jaco Pastorius on fretless Fender Jazz Bass. “Goodbye Pork Pie Hat” is included, of course, but what a joy the jamming is on “The Dry Cleaner from Des Moines.” Joni scats and spirals the vocal line over initially brushed drums and a walking bebop bass line in which Jaco uses every technique in his immense arsenal to explore the song’s changes. Toward the end of Brecker’s Coltraneish solo, with Alias switching to sticks, Jaco boogies up the 13-flat scale in 10ths, adding so much to the tension that, after a couple of choruses and a brief coda, there is nowhere for the music to go other than to stop. Which it does.

This was musical magic. The Karats’ effortless dynamics—both macro and micro—superb clarity, and generous but well-defined presentation of the kick drum and Jaco’s bass all helped raise the music’s emotional temperature, and allowed me to join in the involvement shared by the musicians. However, this track did reveal a touch of excess treble energy in the Cantons’ balance, the tenor sax and snare drum sounding a little too fierce and cymbals a bit too hissy.

Jaco also appeared on Mitchell’s Don Juan’s Restless Daughter (Asylum HJCD 701-2), his awesomely detuned C (32Hz) announcing the transition from the “Overture” to “Cotton Avenue.” The Cantons reproduced Jaco’s bass in full measure, with the evenness of tone I noted above. But again, Joni’s voice occasionally sounded a bit thinned on top, with slightly more lower-midrange formant apparent than I’m used to.

Of course, these are old recordings, and it’s perhaps unfair to demand that a speaker cover up what might well have been a slightly heavy hand on the treble EQ. And the Karat’s high frequencies were superbly free from grain. Despite my feeling that the top two octaves were balanced somewhat on the generous side—as I said, cymbals could sound slightly too hissy, with less of a burnished sheen than is ideal—violins did not sound wiry.

With recordings that had been made with audiophile sensitivities in mind, the Karat’s lack of high-frequency grain allowed instrumental tonal qualities to come over in an extremely convincing manner. Yuri Naumov’s nine-string guitar on “Sneaky Blues,” from his self-recorded Guitar Stories CD (2001, YN03, available from www.russianblues.com), was recorded with the very neutral-sounding Earthworks microphones and sounded about as uncolored through the Cantons as I have experienced. (Well, no, I have not heard any other nine-string guitars, but there are commonalities shared by all acoustic guitars.)

Of the Canton’s midrange I have nothing to say, other than to note that it shares the treble’s effortless clarity without being disturbed by discontinuities.

**Measurements**

For the two midrange units—33°—41° if the low treble is not to sound recessed. This vertical-plane behavior contributes to the in-room balance (fig.7), meaning that it pretty much corresponds to the on-axis response, with the low treble somewhat lower in level than the upper octaves.

In the time domain, the step response (fig.8) indicates that the tweeter and midrange units are connected in inverted acoustic polarity, while the woofer is connected in positive polarity. Because of the speaker’s mass, I couldn’t lift it off the ground for the measurements, which means that an early reflection from the floor can be seen at the far right of this graph. I windowed this reflection out before performing any FFT-derived responses, and also to generate the farfield cumulative spectral-decay plot (fig.9). This is overall quite smooth and clean, though a very slight amount of delayed energy can be seen at 5.5kHz, the frequency of a small step in the on-axis response.

These measurements indicate a well-engineered design that, while not being completely neutral, will offer excellent sound in all but small, lively rooms.

—John Atkinson

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**Fig.7 Canton Karat Reference 2 DC, spatially averaged, by-octave, freefield response in JA’s listening room.**

**Fig.8 Canton Karat Reference 2 DC, step response on tweeter axis at 50° (5ms time window, 30kHz bandwidth).**

**Fig.9 Canton Karat Reference 2 DC, cumulative spectral-decay plot at 50° (0.15ms risetime).**
and colorations. It could sound a little polite, however.

The low frequencies were extended and powerful, the warble tones on Stereophile's Test CD 3 being reproduced in full measure down to 32Hz. Useful energy was still apparent at 25Hz, but there was nothing to be heard at 20Hz. The 2 DC did not boom, but there was plenty of energy present in the upper bass — music's "power region." When there were low frequencies present — as in the excerpt from Elgar's Dream of Gerontius on Test CD 3, where the bass pedals of Ely Cathedral's organ are used to underpin and reinforce the harmonies at the grand climax — it spoke with authority.

The Karat References produced a big sweep of sound on well-recorded orchestral recordings. Our "Recording of the Month" for June 1998, Elgar's Enigma Variations and In the South overture with the Bournemouth Symphony under George Hurst (Naxos 8.553564), was reproduced with the appropriate majesty and with a clear window into the inner voices, the latter so important to Elgar's scoring. And when the melodies are restated by the brass, the Cantons accurately reproduced the "blatty brassiness" of the trombones, as Stereophile founder J. Gordon Holt refers to the instrument's characteristically spiky and asymmetrical waveform, which needs both treble bite and plentiful energy in the lower midrange to sound correct.

However, the bass drum and double bass in the Elgar did tend to "woof" a little more than they did with the similarly priced Wilson Sophia, which actually put out more low-frequency energy. This appeared to be associated with narrowband cabinet resonances between 150Hz and 200Hz.

**Conclusion**

When I asked what a pair of the well-engineered Canton Karat Reference 2 DC costs, I expected to hear considerably more than "$10,000." The Canton's smooth but somewhat treble-forward balance will work better in larger, well-damped rooms than in small, sparsely furnished spaces. The speaker will also benefit from being used with high-quality source components and electronics. When those conditions are met, the result should be very satisfying music. With its powerful-sounding low frequencies, clean and grain-free highs, coloration-free midrange, high sensitivity and dynamic range, and stable, precise stereo imaging, the Karat Reference 2 DC easily justifies its flagship position in Canton's range.
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Kharma Midi-Grand Ceramique 1.0 loudspeaker

Not for nothing did I name the Kharma-Lamm room at Home Entertainment 2002 the “Best Sound in Show.” Show attendees slotted it 17th best [see September 2002, p.59 — Ed], behind other rooms to which I also gave high marks — mostly larger rooms featuring far bigger loudspeakers — but to me, the sound emanating from the Kharma Ceramique 3.2 ($19,000/pair), driven by Lamm electronics, possessed a sublime balance of sonic qualities heard in few other rooms.

While the 3.2’s bottom didn’t extend as deeply as some other speakers’, the Kharma delivered rhythmic clarity and outstanding bass definition down to what sounded like the low 40Hz area. From there up, the presentation was seamless, creamy-rich, and packed with detail. For a relatively small speaker in a small room, dynamics were impressive at both ends of the scale, and transparency was first-rate.

I figured it was high time I reviewed a pair of Kharmas — specifically, the 3.2s that had so impressed me at HE2002. But importer Bill Parish, of GTT Audio and Video (Kharma is based in the Netherlands), had other ideas. He wanted to give me an exclusive on the new $32,500/pair Midi-Grand Ceramique GRCE-M-1.0, a model intended, according to designer Charles van Oosterum, to close the gap in the Ceramique line between the top-of-the-line Grand-Ceramique and the Ceramique 1.1.

Though fairly large, the Midi-Grand-


**Dimensions:** 45” H by 20” W by 16” D. Weight: 170 lbs.

**Finishes:** Piano Black, Aubergine, Bronze.

**Serial numbers of units reviewed:** GRCE-M-1.0-US-03 & 04.

**Price:** $32,500/pair. Approximate number of dealers: 6. Warranty: 5 years parts & labor.

**Manufacturer:** O.L.S. Audiotechnolo, Kalshoven 7, 4825 AL, Breda, Netherlands. Distributed by GTT Audio and Video, 356 Naughton Road, Long Valley, NJ 07853. Tel: (908) 850-3092. Fax: (908) 850-5955. Web: www.gttgroup.com.
pound; so is the woofer, though with a different compound, AVT-RC-01, claimed by Kharma to be particularly effective at transforming vibrations into heat (which is the job of all damping materials, of course).

As with the Rockport Antares, the key to the Midi-Grand's performance is in the execution and attention to detail — no "breakthrough" technology or revolutionary design is claimed. Designer van Oosterum says that the "specific shape of the mid/hi section of the Ceramique series is very important to the sound, allowing the acoustic energy to move freely around the cabinet and give the listener the experience of an acoustical event rather than sound emanating from two points in space." Based on what I heard, and the fact that many other successful designs use similarly shaped mid/hi cabinets, I have no reason to argue the point.

According to van Oosterum, the Midi-Grand is essentially a two-way system in its own enclosure, atop a subwoofer. The cast mid/hi section, made from a special polymer obtained from UK-based Spectra-Dynamics, is claimed to have optimum energy absorption in the lower midrange. The bass enclosure is made from 38mm Isorel MDF and lined with a patented acoustic absorption foam. The two enclosures are acoustically treated with AVT-RC-01.

How the enclosures are mated to each other was not specified.

Charles van Oosterum says he's come up with a "seamless" crossover technique (they all say that) that he calls a "subtractive crossover technology" and

**Measurements**

At 87.5dB/2.83V/m, my estimate of the Kharma Midi-Grand Ceramique 1.0's voltage sensitivity was somewhat lower than the manufacturer's specification of 91dB. Partly this will be explained by the speaker's mid-treble frequency response (see later). Its impedance (fig.1) doesn't drop below 3.5 ohms and is almost always above 4 ohms, which, in combination with the generally mild phase angle, will reduce the stress on the partnering amplifier. As indicated by the saddle in the magnitude trace in fig.1, the tuning of the large rear-facing port lies at 23Hz, implying good bass extension.

The traces in fig.1 are free from the small discontinuities that would hint at the presence of panel resonances. The bell-like ringing MF noted in his auditioning and that I heard for myself will probably be too high in frequency and in Q to have a subjective effect. However, investigating the behavior of the Kharma's enclosure with a simple accelerometer did reveal a very strong resonant mode at 387Hz (fig.2), which, all things being equal, should have had audible consequences.

Mikey Fremer had a problem with the Midi-Grand Ceramique's low frequencies, finding that "the bass lacked solidity, punch, and definition. Extension measured strong below 30Hz, but it didn't sound strong." Fig.3 shows what's happening below 1kHz with the Midi-Grand's midrange (red trace), woofer (blue), and port (green). The midrange appears to extend extraordinarily low in frequency, not crossing over to the woofer until 90Hz or so, and with fairly slow, 12dB/octave high- and low-pass filter slopes. The woofer's minimum-motion point coincides, as expected, with the peak in the port's output between 20Hz and 30Hz, and neither has any unexpected peaks in its output above its passband. However, with the level of the port's response scaled to the woofer's in proportion to their radiating diameters, the port's output does appear to be rather lower than is required to fully extend the speaker's response.

The result is that the overall sum of the three drivers' outputs (black trace, which takes into account acoustic phase and the physical separation of the radiators) starts to roll off a little early — below 60Hz — though the rolloff slope is closer to 12dB/octave than to the 24dB/octave typical of a ported design. Note also that all the
uses in the midrange/tweeter handoff. He claims “absolute unity performance,” meaning that adding the high- and mid-frequency energies totals “exactly one,” ie, unity gain, instead of there being an excess of energy in the crossover region.

The notes van Oosterum sent me go into detail about other aspects of the crossover circuit that I’m not sure are critical to this review, though he stresses that the crossover is “tailored to correct acoustic phase above 20Hz.” And that when DC is applied from a battery to the speaker terminals, the Midi-Grand’s woofer will travel in one direction and the midrange in the other. However, van Oosterum also claims that when AC musical signals are applied, “the actual acoustic phase of the units match in the transition region.” [See the measurements sidebar — Ed.]

All internal wiring is of Kharma’s latest cable technology; all solid silver and gold, handmade at the factory using carbon “holding isolation” (dielectric?). Particular attention is paid to minimizing wire lengths and numbers of joints, and all connections are made with high-quality silver solder. AVT compound is used to minimize the effects of vibration on the crossover. Kharma machines the bi-wirable binding-post terminal from a solid block of aluminum and fits it with double pairs of deluxe WBT five-way posts. Upgrades include a diamond tweeter and Kharma’s Enigma crossover, cryogenically frozen to (Kharma claims) lower the noise floor of the entire system.

Setup
While the Kharma Midi-Grand Ceramics are hefty at 170 lbs each, after the 400-lb traces in fig.3 feature an approximate 3dB low-frequency boost due to the nearfield measurement technique. Overall, it appears that the Midi-Grand Ceramique’s low-frequency nailing has been optimized for the speaker to be used close to the wall behind it. Moving the Kharma out into the room will therefore, as MF found, make it sound too lean.

This nearfield 3dB rise at low frequencies can also be seen in fig.4, which spllices the complex sum of the individual drive-units (fig.3, black trace) to the farfield response averaged across a 30° horizontal window on the tweeter axis. The Kharma’s output is basically flat throughout the midrange and treble, broken only by a large suckout centered on 5kHz. As mentioned above, the lack of on-axis presence-region energy downrates the Midi’s measured voltage sensitivity. In addition, considered by itself, such a suckout will render the Kharma’s balance rather distant and uninviting, with greater than usual soundstage depth. However, a speaker’s on-axis anechoic response should never be considered by itself: in all but extremely large rooms, its dispersion will also have a strong influence on the perceived balance.

Fig.5 shows the Midi-Grand’s lateral radiation pattern. It’s hard to interpret, but does show a good uniform spacing of the contour lines, which correlates with the stable, well-defined stereo imaging MF and I heard. Fig.6 simplifies the picture by subtracting the on-axis behavior from each of the off-axis responses. Again, the even spacing of the contour lines can be seen, along with a
Mid-Grand offered impressively seamless sound, with a rich, almost creamy, but expressively detailed “no-fault” midrange free of obvious unwanted artifacts or colorations. Instrumental touch and textures were rendered with palpable presence and smoothness, which is one reason these speakers so easily disappeared. It’s what I heard in that room at HE2002, and what helped that system get my vote for “Best Sound in Show.”

The transition to the focal tweeter was subjectively seamless, the smooth-sounding high frequencies resolving layer after layer of information without etch, glare, or strain. Having heard this drive-unit sound thin and tizzy in so many other applications, I was pleasantly surprised by its effective yet unobtrusive performance here.

I wonder what van Oosterum feels he gains by removing the titanium tweeter’s ceramic coating. Lowering its mass would allow the dome to move more quickly, which should add resolving power— and, sure enough, the Mid-Grand tweeter’s overall transparency, and ability to delineate hall reflections and place them properly in space, were second to no speaker I’ve heard. That was one of the Mid-Grand’s most impressive feats; it seemed to reveal small bits of significant musical and spatial detail on every well-recorded disc I played, without imparting mechanical or metallic artifacts.

When you remove such a coating—placed there by the manufacturer to damp the dome’s resonant frequency—you risk exciting the resonance the coating was intended to suppress. However, I heard no evidence of hardness, brightness, grain, or etch—quite the opposite, in fact. This led me to believe that van Oosterum has dealt with suppressing the tweeter’s first breakup mode by gently rolling off the upper limits of its response. For while the Mid-Grand’s top end was delicately drawn, highly resolving, and ultratransparent, it wasn’t as airy and extended as some other tweeters I’ve auditioned. Tape hiss noticeable on some familiar recordings seemed suppressed, and recordings I know to be excruciatingly bright were tolerable—the brightness was sort of “intellectually” but not “viscerally” present. Because of that, I wouldn’t want to use the Kharma Mid-Grand as a reviewing tool, even though it was otherwise ultradetailed and revealing in the critical midband.

When I ran my (admittedly primitive) frequency-response test on the Mid-Grands using the ½-octave bands on the old Sound Check test CI) [gold, SPDC 15], produced by Alan Parsons, I was only somewhat surprised by what I found. Outside the frequency extremes, the overall response was impressively flat and free of peaks or dips. The response was ±2dB from 500Hz to 10kHz, except for a +4dB reading at 3.15kHz. That’s probably the flattest response I’ve measured over that wide a bandwidth.

From 500Hz down to 20Hz there were the usual lumps and bumps related to room interactions, with a +4dB rise at 400Hz, +3dB at 315Hz, +2dB from 250Hz down to 100Hz, a +6dB rise at 80Hz, and +4dB at 50Hz, 40Hz, and 31.5Hz. I probably could have improved the low-frequency smoothness by moving the speakers farther out in the room, but the sound would then have sounded subjectively thin. The in-room response was +2dB at 25Hz, and while I heard the warmth suggested by the low/mid-bass response rise, I never would have expected such a strong response at 25Hz based on listening to music.

No wonder the Mid-Grand was so smooth, detailed, resolving, and yet easy on the ears. It was subjectively free of nasty peaks and resonances throughout the critical midband, and my primitive measurements confirmed what I heard during the two-month audition period. A bit of warmth in the midbass was also predictable, along with a gradual rolloff in the extreme highs.

Two Months of Sonic Bliss
Now that I’ve taken the poor thing apart, I’ll put the Kharma Mid-Grand back together and try to explain that it’s a brilliantly balanced, superb-sounding loudspeaker that’s not for every taste.

Take tracks like “Join the Band” and “Fat Man in the Bathtub,” from Little Feat’s live album Waiting for Columbia (LPs, Mobile Fidelity MFSL-2-013), “Join the Band” begins in an echoic stairwell of Washington, DC’s Lisner Auditorium, the band then walking toward the entrance to the stage. A stereo microphone setup picks them up in the distance and follows their movements. They warm up singing a cappella, take a few hits on a joint, and enter the hall as the muffled crowd noise explodes into full-range fury. The musicians poke at their instruments in a quick warmup—including drummer Richie Hayward hitting his kick drums a few times and bassist Kenny Gradney plucking a few ultra-low notes—while an announcer exhorts the crowd to welcome the band. “Fat Man in the Bathtub begins with various handheld percussion instruments, including a cowbell struck by a drumstick, plus the drum kit. Then the rest of the band kicks in, including a juicy analog synthesizer, an electric piano, and Lowell George’s Rickenbacker Stratocaster and vocal. There are some explosive cymbal crashes and some very deep electric bass riffs on this track, and while the nuking is fairly close, the recording does a great

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**Associated Equipment**

**Analog sources:** Simon Yorke, Nottingham Audio Analogue turntables; Graham 2.2, Innmedia RPM2 tonearms; Lyra Helikon SL, Helikon mono, Transfiguration Temper Supreme Lyra Titan (prototype), Audio Tekne MC-6310 cartridges.

**Digital sources:** Musical Fidelity Nu-Vista 3D CD player and Tri-Vista SACD player.

**Preamplification:** Hovland HP-100 preamplifier, Musical Fidelity Tri-Vista 300 integrated amplifier (preamp section only), Manley Steelhead & Lamm LP2 phono preamps.

**Power amplifiers:** Musical Fidelity Nu-Vista 300, Music Reference RM-200, Halo by Parasound JC1, Dynaco Stereo 70.


**Accessories:** PS Audio Power Plant P300, Shunyata Research Hydra AC conditioners; Sounds of Silence Vibraplane active isolation platform; Symposium Rollerblocks (Tungsten, Grade 3 superbball); Finite Elemente amp & Pagode stands; Audiodharma Cable Cooker 2.0; Walker motor drive; ART Q dampers, Walker Valid Points, ASC Tube Traps, Shakti Stones & On-Lines, RPG BAD & Abbittor panels.

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-Michael Fremer
job of subtly capturing the sound of the large Lisner venue.

The Kharma Midi-Grands easily and clearly delineated the confines of the area the Fret walk through on the way to the stage, but obscured somewhat the focus of the band members walking together. When they enter the Lisner proper, the size of the space literally exploded in all directions — I felt as if I was in an enormous hall. As the band begins to play, the images were so large and spread out that I felt as if I was standing very close to the stage. But while I could hear incredible detail in the cymbal splashes and handheld percussion, and the placement of the instruments on the stage revealed the exact location of each in three-dimensional space with breathing authority, and the harmonic integrity of the instruments was fully delivered, the Rice Krispies weren’t on the table. That is, the “snap, crackle, pop” of the instruments were subtly softened. When Hayward snacks the cymbals, there was a dynamic jump — the tweeter’s superb resolution and incredible transparency let me count the rivets, but the crash lacked “event impact” and percussive snap — which is the point of his hitting the cymbals in the first place. The same thing happened on the bottom, where the Midi-Grand got everything correct about the kick drum except the impact of the kick.

These may sound like annoying subtractive flaws, but the combination of the slight softness top and bottom and the rich midrange and expansive soundfield resulted in a beautifully balanced, seamless, incredibly transparent picture my cars could sink into with relaxed assurance. The Kharma Midi-Grand was the Docker of large loudspeakers — it offered a “relaxed fit.” A cognac rather than a Tequila kind of speaker, but drawn so carefully as not to obscure subtle but important sonic differences.

Such differences are those between Classic Records’ original 180gm LPs and the same titles recently issued on 200gm Quex SV-P, which are completely flat instead of having the usual raised rim. (The raised rim allows more effective coupling with the turntable platter and produces a richer tonality with less etch and glare, though the stampers are the same ones Classic used originally. Those who complained about the original issue of the Reiner/CSCO Selebration being a bit thin, however detailed, might find the new pressing just right.)

On Classic’s reissue of Pete Townshend and Ronnie Lane’s musically and sonically exquisite Rough Mix (highly recommended), Townshend’s closely miked voice was delivered with detail and intimacy intact, even if the cowbell seemed to have an absorptive coating that prevented it from “popping” as you’d expect it to in concert, and a gritty, sandpaper-like percussion instrument I’ve never been able to identify [sandblocks? — Ed.] was somewhat smoothed-over for my tastes. But when I played either an original RCA Living Stereo or Classic’s reissue of the Heifetz/Munch/BSO recording of Beethoven’s Violin Concerto (RCA/Classic LSC-1992), the sound was hypnotic and luxurious, convincingly communicating Heifetz’s subtlest musical gesture.

The Rest of the Picture
Rated at 91dB sensitivity and with a nominal impedance of 4–8 ohms, the Kharma Midi-Grand should be relatively easy to drive. I had no problems with the solid-state Musical Fidelity Nu-Vista 300, the tubed Music Reference RM-200, or the Halo/Parasound JC 1 monoblocks (review in the works), which produce 25W of class-A power and 400W in class-AB. I even drove the Midi-Grands with a Dynaco Stereo 70, but if you know the sonic signature of that amp, you know that was a match made in hell!

In terms of dynamics at both ends of the scale, low-level resolution, delineation of inner detail, harmonic integrity, transparency, and every other performance parameter, the Midi-Grand delivered the goods you’d expect from a speaker costing $32,500/pair. When I listened at low, late-night SPLs, the full picture and musical expressiveness remained intact. When I cranked them up loud, there was no hint of compression or strain. This big, expensive speaker did the heavy lifting where it counts.

When the Midi-Grands were gone and the far smaller, much less expensive Audio Physic Avanti IIIIs were returned to my system, I played those Little Flett tracks again. The enormity of the picture diminished, as did the spectacular, Macy’s balloon-sized images — the drama departed the playing field. While the picture diminished in size considerably and there were certainly some losses of transparency, detail, and resolution, the focus tightened and the air returned.

But the Rice Krispies were back on the table. There was snap to the cymbal hits, wallop to the kick drum, sparkle to the cowbell, a deeper growl to the synthesizer, and a greater sense of rhythmic drive and forward propulsion, even as many of the Midi-Grand’s strong suits were obviously gone and sorely missed.

Combine the presentations of these two very different high-performance loudspeakers, and the sound (at least in my room) approaches what Rockport’s Antares delivered (again, in my room). In fact, combine the costs of the Midi-Grands and the Avantis ($32,500 and $12,000), and you’d be just a few thou above the Antares’ asking price of $41,500/pair.

Conclusions
Two months with the Kharma Midi-Grand/Ceramique GRCe-M-1.0 convinced me of two things: It’s a great speaker that does many wonderful things that will satisfy many music lovers over the long haul, and it’s meant for a much larger room than mine. However, while it’s possible that the Midi-Grand’s bass performance will be better-balanced in a bigger room, I don’t think “tight” and “punchy” will ever be used to describe it, nor do I think that’s what the designer had in mind.

I think Charles van Ooosterum went for maximum resolution and transparency on top, and was willing to sacrifice the last bit of air and extension up there to get it. Tuning the bass as he seems to have allows it to match the relaxed and open top end, and to mate effectively with the impressively smooth and peak-free midband to create a full-range speaker that doesn’t have a false or mechanical bone in its body. Rhythmically, the Kharma Midi-Grand couldn’t be faulted. Its sense of time was outstanding because its sonic picture held together so well from top to bottom. I’ve heard “faster,” but not more “together.”

For $32,500, you get two speakers capable of delivering an enormous and credible soundstage with commensurately large, well-focused images. The Midi-Grand’s overall harmonic integrity was up there with the best I’ve heard, though I felt its very top end was slightly muted, which slightly softened transients and took a bit of the bite out of brass.

This brand of “relaxed fit” sound won’t suit every listener, but if you’ve got a big space to fill and can spend $32,500, the Kharma Midi-Grand/Ceramique GRCe-M-1.0 is well worth considering. Me? I’d still like to hear Kharma’s $19,000/pair Ceramique 3.2s in my room. They’re probably more my speed.
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Kirskaeter Silverline 60 loudspeaker

One of the nicest surprises at any audio show is encountering a new—to me, at least—manufacturer whose products seem to stand out from the competition. At the 2002 Consumer Electronics Show, one such standout was the Kirskaeter line of loudspeakers from Germany. I spent quite a few minutes listening to and enjoying the performance of these modestly sized and priced speakers, but since my writing assignment was electronics, I tucked the experience away in the back of my mind and moved on.

When Kirskaeter importer Ray Kingcaid called a few months later, however, it was a different story. Trish and I were in the middle of packing for our upcoming move, with rooms being disassembled and boxes piling up everywhere. Amid it all, we were trying to keep a system together—for enjoyment and sanity's sake as much as to support my reviewing—and a small, good-sounding speaker was exactly what I was looking for. After exchanging a few e-mails, Kingcaid and I settled on the $698/pair Silverline 60 moni-monitors as best filling the bill.

There are two speakers in there? After spending time with the Magnepan 3.6/Rs (Stereophile, August 2000) and, more recently, the Impact Airfoil 5.2 system (Stereophile, June 2002)—not to mention a variety of huge monoblock amplifiers and multi-chassis preamps—Trish was unprepared for the diminutive Silverline 60s. "There are two speakers in there?" she asked when UPS dropped off the tiny carton. The Silverline 60 is indeed a tiny, shoebox-sized affair: 10.5" tall, 7.5" wide, 11.5" deep, and weighing only 11 lbs. The 60 is the smallest of Kirskaeter's premium Silverline series, which runs up to the Silverline 220, a three-way tower that sells for $1898/pair. Finished in black, lightly textured vinyl set off by two trim strips of solid mahogany that flank the grille, the little 60 is quite attractive.

The Silverline 60 uses a vertical array of two drivers: a 6" doped fiber-cone woofer/midrange and a 1" soft metal-dome tweeter, both made by Kirskaeter. The cabinets, of 20mm-thick MDF, are said to be cleverly braced, but they seem a little lighter than the high-end norm. A sharp knuckle rap resulted in a sharp "clack," so I'm curious to see what John Atkinson's measurements say about resonances. All of the internal connections feature gold-plated terminals, and all internal wiring is multisnarl solid-silver cable made in Switzerland. The rear panel houses the 45mm-diameter port and a set of heavy, gold-plated biwire binding posts.

System and Setup
The Silverline 60s' tenure spanned our move, so they ended up being used in two very different rooms in two different houses. At Trish's old place, my listening room was her 11' by 16', perfectly rectangular dining room. I set up the speakers about 30" in from the side walls, 48" in from the front wall, and toed-in slightly. My chair was also about 48" into the room, putting my listening position about 7' from the plane of the speakers.

In our new house, the room—and my setup—isn't nearly as simple. My listening space is one arm of an open area that combines a great room, foyer, and dining room, and flows on outward into the kitchen and the hallways to the master bedroom and kids' wing. The ceiling is high, about 20', but part of the foyer and hallway are covered by a loft that overlooks the sitting area.

My system was set up toward one end of the sitting area, in an alcove approximately 13' wide by 15' deep. The center of the wall behind the speakers is a large marble-and-glass fireplace that sits above and behind a matching marble seat running the alcove's full width. The fireplace is 6' wide and 3' tall, with a deep inset area above it that runs up another 5' or so. To the left of the fireplace is a floor-to-ceiling column of...
windows, to its right a "normal" wall. The wall behind the listening chair is standard drywall and studs, with a single glass door set into one end, opposite the left speaker. There is wall only directly opposite the speakers, defining the limits of the alcove, after which it stops, the space flowing into the dining area. The left wall is nearly all glass, which was covered with cellular blinds during most of my listening. There's no right wall to speak of, but the curved staircase to the loft protrudes into the space about 6' to the right of and a foot or so above the right speaker.

In this space, the Silverline 60s were set up about 40" from the front wall and 7' apart, again toed-in slightly. The left speaker was about 55" into the room. My listening chair put my head about 40" in from the wall, and a bit over 8' from the plane of the speakers. In both homes, I set the Silverline 60s on 30" Lovan stands, which placed the tweeters about 40" from the ground, approximately the same height as my ears in the listening position.

For most of my listening, I drove the Kirksaeters with either my VTL Ichiban or Mark Levinson No.20.6 monoblocks—both a bit more powerful than Kirksaeter's recommended 20–40Wpc. I did pair the 60s with a Rega Luna integrated amp for a few weeks to check their performance in a real-world system.

**Use and Listening**

Due to the complicated logistics associated with moving from three houses into one and doing all sorts of refurnishing and refurbishing on the new house, Trish's and my move stretched out over nearly two months. I didn't have a listening room or system "set up" during this time, just a stack of components lined up on the fireplace seat, and the little Kirksaeters. My listening consisted

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**Measurements**

The Kirksaeter Silverline 60 played surprisingly loud for such a small speaker, its voltage sensitivity coming in at 89dB(8)/2.83V/m. However, this will be true, at least in part, to its non-flat frequency response (see later). Its plot of impedance magnitude and frequency (fig.1) indicated that it will be a fairly easy load for the amplifier to drive. While the minimum magnitude was 4.6 ohms at 245Hz, the speaker's impedance remained above 6 ohms over much of the audio band, and the electrical phase angle was significant only at frequencies at which the magnitude was high, which will mitigate any drive problems.

Glitches in the impedance traces are evident at 350Hz and 27kHz. The latter is due to the tweeter's ultrasonic dome resonance and should be inconsequential. The lower-frequency glitch, however, is due to some kind of panel resonance and will be more serious in its effect. And when I examined the vibrational behavior of the 60's cabinet, I did find a very strong vibrational mode on all surfaces (fig.2). However, at 402Hz, this is a little higher in frequency than the impedance glitch, which remains a puzzle. The saddle at 50Hz in the impedance-magnitude trace at 50Hz indicates the tuning frequency of the rear-facing port. Confirming this, it is also the frequency of the minimum-motion point in the woofer's output (fig.3) and of that of the peak of the port's bandpass. There is some raggedness apparent in the port's output between 500Hz and 1kHz, but it is well down in level. The crossover from the woofer to the tweeter appears to lie at around 2.5kHz. Note, however, that the woofer's on-axis response rises toward the top of its passband, and that the tweeter appears to be balanced 3dB too high in level.

The result is apparent in fig.4, the 60's quasi-anechoic response averaged across a 30° horizontal window centered on the tweeter axis, which slopes up by 5dB or so from 500Hz to 1kHz. Yes, Brian Damkroger noted that the Kirksaeter made vocals sound a little lightened, and that cymbals decayed "into a metallic hiss rather than
mainly of stolen moments rather than intense sessions—an album side or two after the kids had gone to bed, a lazy Saturday afternoon taken off from my mountain of chores.

I occasionally tried to take notes, but mostly I just listened for the pure enjoyment of it—or, as Trish commented, "like a normal person." I listened to a lot of small-scale jazz on those evenings—the Ray Brown Trio, Oscar Peterson, Miles Davis—and quite a bit of chamber music. Never once did the system fail to draw me in. I thoroughly enjoyed the music—and I do mean thoroughly. When I forced myself to think about the sound, my overriding impression was one of a balanced "naturalness," or that the system was simply reproducing the music without adding or subtracting anything that drew attention to itself. More important, the system, and the Kirksaeters, were getting it right: re-creating the magic of the original performance instead of merely playing the recording. Deadline time arrived, however, and it was time to recheck everything, tweak the system, and sit down to see just what the little Silverline 60s did and didn't do.

Most obvious was what they didn't do: sound like a small speaker. Even in my large, new space, the Silverline 60s filled every corner with music—a big, vibrant sound with natural-sounding, balanced, properly scaled performances and performers. A lot of small speakers, even reasonably full-range ones, create a performance that feels fragile. The images might be exquisitely detailed and carefully located on the stage, but the images, and even the ambience, lack density—as if they were eggshells that would fracture and crumble if poked. There was none of this fragility with the Kirksaeters—just a big, natural, robust re-creation of the original performance.

There was a surprising amount of blooming into cascading waves of overtones—both of which correlate with the shape of the curve seen in fig.4. But I would have expected the treble rise to be more apparent than BD found, particularly as the speaker's low frequencies lack the usual mini-monitor hump in the upper bass to balance its top octaves. Certainly in my own auditioning of the 60, I was aware of there being too much HF energy apparent. At the other end of the spectrum, BD noted that the speaker's bass rolled off below 50-60Hz, exactly as shown in fig.4, which is good low-frequency extension for a small, sensitive speaker.

The Kirksaeter's lateral dispersion (fig.5) reveals the woofer to get more directional at the top of its passband than I would have expected from its small radiating diameter, which results in a degree of "flare" at the bottom of the tweeter's passband. But the tweeter itself becomes directional an octave or so lower than is usual, meaning that the room's reverberant field will lack energy in the top two octaves, which will in turn work against the on-axis excess. In fact, BD noted that the 60 sounded a bit rolled-off on top! In the vertical plane (fig.6), broad suckouts develop in the crossover region if the listener sits with his ears much above or below the tweeter axis, and the
weight in the bottom end, enough to anchor things and—as I'll discuss in a bit—balance out the top end. The 60 sounded as if it was pretty good down to 50 or 60Hz, then faded gracefully from there on down. This extension, combined with good articulation and pitch definition, served the small-combo jazz I'd been listening to pretty well. On Sunny Meets Hanky (LP, RCA/Classic LSP-2712), Henry Grimes' and Bob Cranshaw's bass lines sounded quick, clean, and bouncy, with good pitch definition over most of their ranges. "Tight and tuneful," I described it in my listening notes, "except at the very bottom, where it's just gracefully losing amplitude." Most important, the bass was "clean and articulate, with enough snap and punch to drive the music along."

On larger-scaled works, however, such as Shostakovich's The Age of Gold Ballet Suite (LP, RCA/Classic LSC-2232), the 60's bass performance depended a bit on the intensity and complexity of the music. The double basses, timpani, and lower cellos were all handled pretty well when little else was going on. The piano just seemed to gradually lose amplitude as it descended in pitch, but without changing the instrument's essential character. But as the level or complexity of the music grew, these instruments seemed to get a bit lost. Plus, their power didn't rise to match the swelling orchestration around them, so they didn't have enough weight to anchor the orchestra. In the biggest crescendos, the orchestra sounded as if it was floating a few feet above the stage.

Playing rock music, the Silverline 60's lack of low bass was evident, but it usually wasn't a fatal flaw. Dire Straits' "Brothers in Arms," from the album of the same name (LP, Warner Bros. 25264-1), was a good example. The opening thunderstorm wasn't as deep and ominous as it can be, but it still rumbled darkly enough to wake my dogs and set them to pacing and keening uncomfortably. And although the tonal balance of the tune, and even Mark Knopfler's vocals, were tipped up a bit, I didn't feel as if I was missing a critical element of the music.

For the most part, the Silverline sounded pretty well balanced despite its lack of low bass, perhaps because its top end wasn't overly extended either. Cymbals had a nice initial ring, but their shimmer quickly decayed to a metallic hiss rather than blooming into cascading waves of overtones. The triangle in The Age of Gold was audibly muted and remained locked to its image rather than cutting cleanly through the air above the orchestra.

Between the frequency extremes, the Silverline 60 had a vibrant, natural sound that seemed a touch forward but free from gross colorations. In particular, there was none of the honkiness or one-note character that many inexpensive speakers can have—particularly ones that try for full-range sound. Woodwinds sounded like woodwinds, brass like brass, strings like strings. What's more, instruments within an orchestral family—violins, violas, and cellos, for example—were as distinct in character as they were in pitch. The lightening of male vocals that I mentioned earlier was often present, but female vocals, like Suzanne Vega's on "Tom's Diner," from Solitude.

**Measurements**

tweeter's limited HF dispersion can again be seen.

The 60's step response on the tweeter axis (fig.7) indicates that both drive-units are connected in positive acoustic polarity, with the tweeter's output leading the woofer's by a quarter of a millisecond. The cumulative spectral-decay plot (fig.8) indicates a very clean decay throughout almost the entire midrange and treble, which might well mitigate the audibility of the tilted-up response.

Note, however, that a ridge of delayed energy just below 2kH is associated with a distinct step in the on-axis response. This will add a degree of stridency at high playback levels—BD did comment on how "the 60 could begin to sound confused and a bit strained during loud, complex orchestral crescendos"—and is associated with a slightly nasal coloration, in my experience.

Overall, these measurements of the Kirksaeter Silverline 60 indicate a balance that will work better in some circumstances than in others. In a small, barely furnished room with cheap solid-state amplification, the sound will be too bright. But in a larger room with better-matched electronics, such as BD used for most of his review, the 60's tonal aberrations might well disappear in favor of a superb presentation of detail, the trick pulled off by the ProAc Tablette of two decades ago.

—John Atkinson

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**Fig.7** Kirksaeter Silverline 60, step response on tweeter axis at 50° (5ms time window, 30kHz bandwidth).

**Fig.8** Kirksaeter Silverline 60, cumulative spectral-decay plot at 50° (0.15ms risetime).
Standing (A&M SP-5136), were spot-on.

The Silverline 60s didn't re-crete the reach-out-and-touch-’em images and walk-into-it 3D soundstages that I've heard from multi-klobuck speakers, but they did do a credible, musically satisfying job. Once I got them dialed in, they created a coherent, seamless soundstage that stretched smoothly across the plane of the speakers and extended a few feet outside of each one. The soundstage wasn't terribly deep, however, its front edge projecting slightly in front of the speakers, its rear fading out only a few feet behind them. They illuminated the rear corners pretty well, however, and even reproduced a good sense of recording venues' back and side walls.

Image dimensionality, like soundstage depth, was okay but not outstanding. What was outstanding was how the Silverline 60s' images bloomed very naturally, and expanded smoothly outward into the surrounding space. Ambience cues were reproduced well enough to provide a good sense of the original acoustic environment, and the Kirksaetrs were always coherent, steadfastly maintaining a nice sense of the instruments interacting with a single, common space.

Dynamics were a mixed bag with the Silverline 60. Compared to similarly priced speakers I've heard from NHT and PSB, the Kirksaeter sounded big, vibrant, a little bit forward, and quite dynamic. Transients were clear, and notes had defined starts and stops. It wasn't, however, a speaker that I'd call "fast" or "clean" sounding—not slow or rounded-off, mind you, but not as sharp or precise as some speakers I've heard.

The Silverline 60s' reproduction of dynamic gradients was also a mix of strengths and weaknesses. A solid strength was the way the 60 reproduced subtle microdynamics from pppp to p. A minus was that it really didn't like playing very loud, or swinging transients up beyond ff. At volumes much beyond a moderate or casual listening level, the presentation would gradually degrade, the images losing specificity, the soundstage shrinking into a shallow wedge between the speakers. Similarly, the 60 could begin to sound confused and a bit strained during loud, complex orchestral crescendos, or if I tried to play a densely mixed rock recording somewhere past the speaker's comfort level. Where I hit the 60's limit depended on the room, of course. It was much happier in Trish's small, enclosed dining room than in our new, more open space.

But at reasonable levels, and particu-

larly with musically simple passages, the Silverlines could be magical. The answering brass and woodwind solo lines early in The Age of Gold were good examples. The images were nicely drawn, and properly and firmly located. The images were dense, and the instruments' tonal textures and nuances were reproduced with a wonderful, natural case. There was a nice sense of air around each instrument, and a realistic coherence in how the instruments' sounds expanded into the surrounding ambience.

Part of the Kirksaeter's captivating presentation, and a solid strength, was its realistic presentation of detail. It wasn't a "magnifying glass" type of over-etched microdetail, but detail of a more natural kind—and one much better integrated into the images and ambience. On Sunny Meets Hawk, for example, I could clearly hear people—musicians as well as others on the sidelines—talking and singing along in the background. The voices didn't stand out disconcertingly, but were woven into the sounds that defined the performance space.

I mentioned "Toni's Diner." It was riveting—I couldn't believe that I was listening to a tiny, $698/pair speaker. Suzanne Vega's vocal was warm and breathy, and there was a great sense of dimensionality, of the woman behind the voice. I could close my eyes and place her right there in front of me. I found myself tightly gripping the arms of my listening chair as Vega drew each breath and I waited for her next line to begin. Even subtle changes in pitch and volume were easy to follow; I could hear her moving around the microphone, shifting slightly forward and back, dipping her chin slightly as she gathered herself, then raising it again for the next, higher note.

**Summing Up**

Reading the passages above and double-checking my pluses and minuses, it occurs to me that the essence of my description, and the essence of the Kirksaeter Silverline 60, is captured in the first few lines—before I even begin dissecting their performance, I wrote "I listened to these speakers for two months and enjoyed every minute of it."

At one point during my critical listening sessions, I cued up Ray Brown's Solar Energy (LP, Concord/Bellaphon Jazz LELP 111), fully intending to concentrate on Brown's bass, or perhaps Emily Remler's guitar, to see what I could learn about the Silverlines' performance. Twenty minutes later, I had a blank page and an empty wine glass, and realized that I'd been simply enjoying the music.

Based on my experience of a number of good speakers ranging in price from $300 to $1500/pair, the Kirksaeter Silverline 60 is very competitively priced, and more musically satisfying than the best below-$500 speakers I've heard—models like the NHT SuperOnes and the smaller PSB Alphas. On the other hand, the Silverline 60s aren't giant-killers. Good as they are, they don't compare with such topnotch $1500/pair designs as the Magneplan 1.6/QRs, the Castle Severs, or the Meadowlark Kestrels.

I definitely enjoyed my time with the Kirksaeter Silverline 60. Sure, there were compromises. It doesn't reproduce the bottom octave, and it rolls off a bit on top. It doesn't like to play particularly loudly, and it definitely prefers smaller rooms and more intimate performances. But the bottom line is that the Silverline 60 is a wonderful little speaker, and a solid value at $698/pair.

**Associated Equipment**

**Analog source:** VPI TNT Mk.V-HR turntable and JMWh 12.5 tone-arm; Grado Statement, Benz Micro L04 cartridges.

**Digital sources:** GamTuT, Simaudio Moon Eclipse CD players.

**Preamplifiers:** VAC Renaissance Signature, CPA-1 Mk.III.

**Power amplifiers:** VAC Renaissance 70/70, VTL Ichiban, Mark Levinson No.206.

**Integrated amplifier:** Rega Luna.


**Accessories:** Bright Star Big Rock, Little Rock, Air Mass isolation devices; Nordost ECO3, Disk-Solution CD cleaning/treatment fluids; MIT ZCenter, ZSystem power-conditioning and delivery systems; AudioPrism NoiseSniffer AC line analyzer, QuietLine AC filters; VPI HW16.5 LP-cleaning machine, Sumiko Fluxbuster cartridge demagnetizer, Hunt/Decca record brush.

~Brian Damkroger
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Modern hi-fi is little more than a way of getting electricity to pretend that it's music. Of course, good source components remain all-important, and even if loudspeakers are imperfect, most of us can find one or two that suit our tastes, if not our rooms and the rest of our gear.

But in between is where the challenge lies, if only because amplifiers really aren't amplifiers at all: They're re-creators. Electricity isn't just their fuel; it's their raw material as well, and rather than make the music on our records louder—which is how the first record players did it—modern amps merely use that information as a serving suggestion, or a blueprint or die (think: Play-Doh Fun Factory).

I'm not saying there's anything wrong with all that. But if there is, it's because the electricity supplied to our amplifiers is far from ideal: It's choppy, inconsistent, and shot through with things we don't want. There are snuts in Tom Kitten's pudding. try though he may to pretend they are currents.

You could make a better power supply for your amp, to try to smooth out the dough and remove the snuts, but your results will depend on how you define "better." And while some manufacturers have discovered the virtues of minimalist, holistic design, I've seen and heard a great many more amps whose power supplies were designed the way teenage boys approach the subject of automotive performance, which is to say, stupidly. Notwithstanding certain isolated gains in noise reduction, overbuilding a power supply is like bombing for peace: It's inefficient, at least partly counterproductive, and, once you've started, difficult to stop. Why not scrap the household current altogether and use something else —like batteries?

A Japanese company, Final Laboratory, has done just that, the centerpiece of their product line being a whole system's worth of battery-powered electronics: the Music-4 phono preamplifier, Music-5 line-level preamplifier, and Music-6 power amplifier. And when I say "batteries" I'm not talking about big, weird things out of the J.C. Whitney catalog: I'm talking about C and D cells, the likes of which you already have in your flashlights, toys, and personal appliances. What could be simpler?

**Description**
All three Final Music products, which have been on the market in Japan since the late 1990s, are built into small, flat boxes measuring only 6" by 9" by 2", or roughly the size of a hardcover book. Their outboard power supplies are a far sight bigger, but since these are nothing more nor less than battery boxes —albeit stylish and nicely made battery boxes, with fancy umbilicals and sturdy Cannon XLR plugs —they can be tucked out of sight without having to fret over cooling, isolation, or other tweaky concerns.

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**Dimensions:** All three active components: 9" W by 1.9" H by 6.3" D. Weights: 2 lbs (Music-4, Music-5), 2.5 lbs (Music-6). Power supplies: 12.5" D by 3.7" H by 9" W (DC-5, DC-6). Weights (with batteries): 7 lbs (DC-5, 6 lbs each (DC-6).

**Finish:** Black chassis, clear acrylic covers.

**Serial numbers of units reviewed:**
0157 (Music-4), 0180 (Music-5), 0181 (Music-6).

**Prices:** $3700 (Music-4), $3250 (Music-5, Music-6 each) $450 (DC-5, batteries included), $700 (DC-6, batteries included).

The three Music models also share a common look: contemporary and clean, but with a neat retro touch thanks to their built-in voltmeters, which are needed to keep an eye on battery condition. The chassis are made from black-anodized aluminum alloy and clear acrylic, with nicely knurled brass knobs and matching gold-plated screw caps.

The Finals have a chunky, substantial feel, and that—in concert with the fact that they're neither bigger nor smaller than they ought to be—endeared them to me from the first.

And there isn't a tube in sight: The Finals use solid-state devices—specifically, op-amps. That fact alone will rustle some petticoats.

### Measurements

Each of the three Final Laboratory components was powered from its battery power supply for the measurements, the single-box DC-5 for the preamps, the two-box DC-6 for the power amp; when appropriate, I list the battery voltage.

The Music-4 phono preamplifier offered a maximum voltage gain of 49.6dB, making it suitable for use with moving-magnet cartridges or high-output moving-coils. (The battery voltage was indicated on its meter as ±18V.) The '4's input impedance was around 500k ohms. This is far higher than normal for a phono preamp and, as Art Dudley noted, might lead to excess top-octave energy with low-output MCs, though it's fair to note that such cartridges will never be used with the Music-4. The circuitry didn't invert absolute polarity. (The switch marked "±" on the top panel selects the power-supply voltage polarity for the meter, not absolute phase, as might be thought.)

The Music-4's output impedance at 1kHz was 106 ohms. It was even lower at 20kHz, at less than 2 ohms, but at 20Hz the impedance rose to a whopping 176k ohms. As a result, the Music-4's frequency response will be very dependent on the input impedance of the line preamplifier. Fig.1 shows that the low frequencies roll off below 1kHz (!) with a low 1000 ohm load, and that, even with the 10k ohms typical of many solid-state preamps, the bass is down 3dB at 281Hz, which will give the device a rather lean tonal balance. The bass actually rolls up slightly into 100k ohms, which suggests that it will be flat into an impedance approximately that of the Music-5 line preamp.

Consistent in the fig.1 traces is a shallow but broad depression in the mid-treble. This might make the sound a little recessed, but in some systems it might also be perceived as improved image depth. Note the rising ultrasonic response: This is generally due to a series-feedback RIAA topology, which is best for ultimate signal/noise ratio, but levels off at unity gain above the audioband rather than following the RIAA de-emphasis curve down to zero. Again, the Music-4 should not be used with low-output MCs that might put out fairly high levels of ultrasonic spurious on things like record ticks.

The Music-4's wideband, unweighted S/N ratio was respectable at 65dB (ref. 5mV input at 1kHz), this improving to 75.4dB(A) when A-weighted. Channel separation (not shown) was good at better than 80dB across the audioband. With the gain set to its maximum, the Music-4's overload margins were okay, at 16.9dB at 1kHz, equivalent to an output level of 11.4V. The margins improved slightly, to 18.3dB, at the band edges, and could also be increased by reducing the gain with the trim controls.

Overall, the Music-4 phono preamp's measured performance doesn't appear to offer anything special. Its very high source impedance at low frequencies and the dependence of its bass response on the loading make it a poor choice for use with line preamps other than Final's own Music-5.

The Music-5's voltmeter, too, indicated ±18V for the measurements. The input impedance at 1kHz measured slightly higher than specified, at 61k ohms. However, the difference is inconsequential. With the gain-trim and volume controls set to their maximums, its voltage gain was 20.6dB. The volume control's unity-gain setting was 800. The trim controls could reduce the overall gain dramatically, giving, at their lowest settings, an attenuation of 49.3dB.

With these gain-trim controls set to their maximums, the Music-5's frequency response was flat across the band (fig.2), regardless of load.

---

**Fig.1** Final Music-4, RIAA error into (from top to bottom): 100k, 10k, 1k ohms (1dB/vertical div.).

**Fig.2** Final Music-5, frequency response into 100k ohms (top) and 600 ohms (bottom), with volume control and gain trim at maximum (0.5dB/vertical div., right channel dashed).

**Fig.3** Final Music-5, volume control at maximum, gain trim control at 12:00, frequency response into (from top to bottom): 100k, 10k, 1k ohms (5dB/vertical div.).
cheapo (manganese) batteries will provide up to six months of use with a Music-4 before needing to be replaced. Importer and manufacturer alike advise against rechargeable batteries, saying they make for lousy sound.

The actual amplifying is done by a pair of LF356 J-FET op-amps, a fairly ancient design as these things go; the inevitable voltage supply drift is addressed by a pair of similarly ubiquitous LM305H voltage regulators. The only other active devices in the Music-4 phono preamp are two discrete transistors, but I couldn't figure out what their purpose might be. (Emitter followers? Dunno.) Beyond that, it's just resistors and capacitors, friends, the latter noteworthy only because the slow-conscious folks at Final eschew the use of anything over 0.2μF.

Also of interest is the fact that the designers have chosen an input impedance of 560k ohms for the Music-4, which I'm told was motivated empirically and not as a result of some pet theory. That alone might indicate the use of

impedance. The output impedance in this condition was extremely low, at below 1 ohm at all frequencies. However, as the trim controls were rotated to give less gain, the Music-5's source impedance increased dramatically. With the controls set to 12:00, the impedance reached an extraordinarily high 67k ohms in the midrange, and was still 10k ohms at 20kHz. As a result, there was a large degree of interaction between the Music-5's frequency response and the input impedance of the power amplifier. This can be seen in fig.3, which shows that a flat response is obtained only with a 100k ohm load. With a load of 1k ohms, the response is down 10dB at 1kHz — resulting in very audible mufiing of the unit's highs.

Noise levels were low and the channel separation (fig.4) was basically good, though afflicted with the usual capacitive coupling, which increases the level of crosstalk with rising frequency. With the trim controls set to give maximum gain, the Music-5 could deliver more than 12V into loads from 10k to 100k ohms (fig.5), and still more than 10V into a load of 1000 ohms (fig.5). But with the trim control set to 12:00 (bottom trace in fig.5), the maximum output voltage is drastically curtailed, to 1.6V, though the noise and distortion levels below clipping are also dramatically reduced.

This interaction between the trim-control setting and the measured distortion can also be seen in fig.6, which plots THD+noise against frequency under various conditions. The top pair of traces were taken at 7V into 600 ohms, the middle pair at the same voltage but with the load increased to 100k ohms. The bottom pair of traces were taken at 1V into 100k ohms, but with the trim controls set to 12:00. Though the measured THD is low, common to all three pairs of traces is an increase in the distortion percentage at high frequencies, which suggests limited gain-bandwidth product on the part of the circuitry.

At low output voltages, the spectrum features second-harmonic distortion at a very low level (fig.7). (This graph was taken with the trim control at 12:00; the spectrum was
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a high-output moving-coil cartridge — not just because of the Music-4's lowish gain, but also because it might prefer to see a fairly high coil impedance — and owners of cartridges with drastically rising top ends will want to proceed with caution, if at all.

For its part, the Music-5 preamplifier — whose input impedance is an altogether more reasonable 50k ohms — is similar to its companion phono pre in both design and parts (more J-FET op-amps, more regulators-in-a-can). And it uses the same battery box as the Music-4, the Final Laboratory DC-5, meaning we're now up to 56 batteries — to the childless, a staggering number.

Which brings us to the brute of the family, the Music-6 amplifier: 10 big watts per channel, or a full 75% more power than I normally use with my ultra-efficient Lowther horns. As you might expect, the Music-6 requires a bit more in the way of juice; its companion power supply, the Final Laboratory DC-6, is actually a pair of battery boxes, each housing a series-connected bank of 18 D cells, for a total of ±22V. You might be able to get six months out of a set of batteries for the Music-6, but only if it's used with very efficient loudspeakers; as speaker efficiency goes down, so, too, does the life expectancy of your batteries.

The only active devices in the Music-6 are two heatsink-mounted op-amps, painted over in an apparent effort to conceal their identity. Op-amps, as a species, are designed to run at up to 100% negative feedback, and Final's designers have taken advantage of that fact by connecting a potentiometer between each chip's input and output.

**Measurements**

But note what happens at higher frequencies (fig.18): the second harmonic is still the dominant, but has been joined by a regular picket fence of odd-order harmonics. Ugh! A similar picket fence can be seen in the high-frequency intermodulation spectrum (fig.19). This was taken with minimum feedback; the picture worsened with increasing feedback.

I do have some good news to report:

With one channel driven, the Music-6 exceeded its power specification. Fig.20 plots the continuous output power against THD into 16 ohms (red trace), 8 ohms (black), 4 ohms (blue), 2 ohms (green), and 1 ohm (magenta). Defining clipping as 1% THD (noise is ignored by this FFT-based measurement), the Music-6 puts out 178W into 8 ohms (2.5dBW) at clipping, and a little more, 20W, into 4 ohms (10dBW). Although the 1 ohm power is just 11.75W, this is equivalent to an RMS current of 3.43A — quite respectable, considering the Music-6's power supply consists of 36 D cells connected in series!

Not only was I disappointed with the Music-6's measured performance, it shows that the feedback control can't be used to optimize such things as output impedance without degrading the amplifier's high-frequency linearity. But given the enormous changes that can be wrought in the Music-6's behavior by this control, perhaps the audibility of the amplifier's errors can be reduced for a specific loudspeaker. Which is perhaps why Art Dudley's auditioning comments were more concerned with what the amplifier did right than what it did wrong. It is also relevant to note that with Art's very sensitive Lowther-based speakers, he will only be asking the Music-6 to deliver at most a few hundred milliwatts, which will sidestep the amplifier's poor high-frequency linearity problems at higher levels (though the crossover distortion will still be an issue).

Overall, their measured performances strongly suggest that the Final Laboratory components should not be used with other manufacturers' products. Their behavior appears to be optimized when they're used with each other.

—John Atkinson
and letting the user adjust the amount of negative feedback — and thus output impedance and loudspeaker damping — to suit his or her own speakers and taste in sound. Neat.

The parts quality in all three products is merely average by perfectionist audio standards, but Final makes a good case for favoring parts selection over pedigree: Given their minimalist (at least in the context of modern solid-state products) approach to voltage regulation and the obvious potential for continuously changing voltage conditions, it’s easy to see how hand-matched parts can make a difference for the better. Inside the boxes, which are themselves nicely made, the quality of construction is only fair. The Final Music models are all hardwired (but not star-grounded), and most of the solder joints are bigger and bobbier than I care to see in an expensive product. Scent attention is paid to wire dressing, and board-to-chassis ground leads seem fragile.

Setup & Use

Setting up and using the Final system was fairly easy, once I got past the tedium of unwrapping and installing 92 flashlight batteries. Subwoofer owners will be disappointed that there is only one pair of output jacks on the preamp, but I suppose that’s why every town has a RadioShack. User controls are good if mildly confusing: In particular, the Mute switches on all three products allow you to select between In and Out, but I often found myself having to remember whether it was the music or the muting that was getting switched “in” — a situation not helped by the products’ counterintuitive pilot lights, which glow red when muted and go dark when music is being made.

On the other hand, I came to love the trim pots on the Music-4 and Music-5; they provide a handy way of effecting source-specific balance adjustments, and my voltage-droop paranoia was kept at bay with Final’s built-in battery-check system. After three and a half months of frequent use, none of my battery boxes had dropped below their target voltage. Best of all, these amps didn’t need to be warmed up. They sounded the same after two hours as they did after two minutes.

Listening

You can alter the Music-6 power amp’s sound to suit your system simply by adjusting its negative feedback control: Changes made there were easy to hear, and musically and sonically influential. With my speakers, more feedback extended the power bandwidth toward both frequency extremes, but also introduced some unwanted texture or “grain,” audible up top. It took only a little fiddling to find a setting that delivered a good sense of drive (the zero-feedback setting was as rhythmically slow and imprecise as it was sonically dull) while preserving the Final system’s hallmark smoothness. And believe me, this system was nothing if not smooth — smooth, noiseless, and consistently easy to listen to.

I think a lot of that sense of ease derived from the Final system’s musicallyty — a word that I use for its obvious meaning, and not the one that comes to us from the decoder-ring world of “bloom” and “caramel colorations.”

These products played music well, meaning they communicated pitches and rhythms without the subtle distortions that cloud meaning and result in indifference, fatigue, or annoyance. With the Finals, music was never uninteresting or hard to follow.

There was more to it than that, of course, and while you and I have probably heard a few different amps that get the notes and beats right, that doesn’t mean we could cozy up nightly with every one of them. But the Finals got a lot of other things right, too — like music’s natural sense of flow. On Elizabeth de la Porte’s 1982 recording of the J.S. Bach’s six keyboard Partitas (Hyperion), the Final system avoided the relentless, mechanical sound that some gear imparts to music of this sort: All too often, the Baroque harpsichord’s warmth, momentum, and sheer humanness are lost amid the pluck and clang.

Here, the Final gear was nothing less than extraordinary: natural, nonfatiguing, and downright organic. It wasn’t quite what I’d call “liquid,” but then, neither is the music itself. The idea I want to get across is that of the loudspeakers simply and easily exuding Bach’s intellect and artistry via the Finals, instead of extruding it like metal (or the aforementioned Play-Doh).

The de la Porte recording is decidedly fussy-sounding: Someone went to too much trouble to mire the harpsichord so that one register’s strings come out on one side, and the other’s on the other, the result being a spatial perspective not unlike that of a dust mite in the instrument itself. Nonetheless, the Finals got to the natural heart of the music, enough so that that sonic shortcoming shouldn’t distract (unless you want it to, in which case you’re a hopelessly obsessive audiophile).

The Final Music amps got the notes and the beats and the flow — and they got a lot of the color, too, like the dark pungency (or pungent darkness) of the clarinet in the 1962 recording of the Brahms Clarinet Quintet (Decca), available as a superb LP reissue from Speakers Corner. I believe the Finals were as free of obvious frequency-response problems or “colorations” as any amps or preamps I’ve ever heard — within their apparent bandwidth limitation, that is. Most notably, the Final system’s top end didn’t sound all that extended to me — not because instruments or voices were made to sound dark (they didn’t), but because I simply didn’t hear as much in the way of air.

**This system was nothing if not smooth, noiseless, and consistently easy to listen to.**

*Associated Equipment*

**Analog sources:** Two Linn LP12 turntables with Linn Lingo and Naim Armageddon power supplies; Naim Aro and Linn Ekos tonearms; Supex 900 Super, Tubaphon TU2, and Lyra Helikon Mono cartridges; Audio Note AN-S2 moving-coil step-up transformer.

**Digital source:** Sony SCD-777ES SACD player.

**Preamplifiers:** Fi, Audio Note M3.

**Power amplifiers:** Fi 2A3 Stereo, Audio Note Kit One.

**Loudspeakers:** Lowther PM2A drivers (15 ohm version) in modified Medallion horn enclosures, Linn Siznik subwoofer.

**Cables:** Interconnect: Audio Note AN-Vx, Nordost Valhalla, Final Laboratory Audio, plus home-mades. Speaker: Audio Note AN-SPX, Nordost Valhalla, Nordost Flatline, Final Laboratory Speaker.

**Accessories:** Mana stands under turntables and CD player, Loricraft PRG3 record cleaner, Shun Mook Mpingo discs.

—Art Dudley
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and sparkle with them as I do with my regular gear.

But over the months I had them here, I also came to think the Finals were missing an overlay of top-end hash, hiss, and general zzzzz that I'd otherwise taken for granted as part of the home listening experience. This amplifying system, for which the manufacturer claims a frequency response that goes from DC to 100kHz, may make you wonder how much of the air on your records is really air—or really there.

Nevertheless, in getting a handle on the quality of these products, it was their smoothness I kept coming back to: They were the least grainy-sounding electronics I've heard. Most of the time, that smoothness sounded right to me, but sometimes it sounded wrong—as if the Musics were missing a bit of texture that ought to be there. But was that me missing a distortion I'd come to love, or the Finals glossing over a sonic subtlety? Beats me.

The Finals never offended, but neither did they ever quite reach the heights of excitement—of musical drama—that I can attain fairly regularly with other gear. You'll notice that I haven't mentioned their way with rock music yet, and there's a reason for that: It wasn't their strong suit. They did quite a nice job with pop and rock of a more "mannered" sort; eg, those artfully compressed records that came out of England in the early 1970s—David Bowie's Hunky Dory and The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars, The Move's Looking On and Message from the Country—even late Beatles things like Abbey Road and Let It Be.

But the flat-out emotion in the best modern rock records—like The Replacements' "Unsatisfied" (from a very different Let It Be), which can normally bend me in two when the drums and bass make their entrance, then leave me drained and almost crying by the end of the song? Nope. Sorry: The Finals just didn't do that the way my usual amplification system does, even with four times the power. But just as bits ain't bits, watts ain't watts. All I had to do to know that was to hear this.

**Conclusions**

The Final Laboratory Music-4-5-6 system was consistently better than most but never quite the best: These products didn't deliver the most intense dose I've ever heard of sonic immediacy or scary, in-the-room realism, and even as I enjoyed the Final Experience (gulp), I remembered that there have been times in my life when there was a feeling of even less hardware between me and the sounds of the instruments. Of course, the fact that such experiences were also accompanied by filament hum and excessive heat may or may not be germane.

**The Finals are the epitome of a great let-me-off-this-ride-now system.**

The Finals never hummed: They always sounded their best. They never made funny noises at all, except for a loud turn-on or turn-off thump when I forgot to work the Mute switch before working the Power switch. They never got hot or even warm. They didn't take up a lot of room. And they look kind of cool.

Who wants this stuff? Someone who either wants off the audiophile roller-coaster or who never got on in the first place. Someone with limited time for enjoying music but not-so-limited funds. Someone with little kids who doesn't want them to get burned or electrocuted if they go poking around where they shouldn't. And, of course, someone with efficient speakers.

Hey—sounds like me, except for the part about the roller-coaster.

The Finals are the epitome of a great let-me-off-this-ride-now system: To buy them is to turn your back on a great many things, even more so than is usual when opting for a low-powered amplifier. For someone like me, who needs to switch a lot of different gear into and out of his system, the Finals aren't the most practical things in the world, but if not for that, I'd be tempted by their sonic ease and greater-than-average musicality, not to mention their size, looks, and sheer ingenuity. I think they're a bit pricey for what they are, but then again, if you don't have a few arrows in your back, no one will recognize you as a pioneer.

The Final Laboratory Music system is a genuine must-hear, and a strong purchase recommendation for the adventurous listener who wants to retire from all this nonsense with a musical if perpetually hungry amp.

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AESTHETIX SATURN PREAMPLIFIERS

Based on the tube audio circuitry and power supply design of the highly regarded Aesthetix Io and Callisto, designer Jim White's new Saturn single chassis remote control preamps include the Janus full function preamplifier, Rhea phono stage and Calypso line stage.

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Rogue Audio's Magnum Ninety-Nine tube preamplifier is derived from the original Rogue Sixty-Six that I reviewed in October 2000. The Sixty-Six was designed to offer consumers a taste of high-end performance in a vacuum-tube line stage. By contrast, the Magnum Ninety-Nine's pedigree is pure audiophile, with a more sophisticated multi-follower circuit topology aimed at the purest expression of performance.

"We eliminated the balance circuit for that reason," O'Brien explained. "It loaded down the input a little bit, but we still included mute and mono switches, and a headphone input on the back of the chassis, as well as an adjustable gain control.

"[The Ninety-Nine] was designed to function as a standalone performer," said chief designer Mark O'Brien, "with a high enough input impedance and low enough output impedance that it should work well with almost any amplifier. We didn't want to box people into thinking they had to have a pair of our monoblocks in order to get the most out of the Ninety-Nine."

The Magnum version of the Ninety-Nine uses Raimond Mundorf film and foil capacitors and Dale-Vishay resistors in the signal path; a significantly tweaked, more massive external power supply; gold tube sockets; premium silver wiring; and primo New Old Stock tubes, in this case vintage chromed Sylvias. But while the Sixty-Six's tube complement comprises two 12AU7s and four 6DJ8/6922s, the Ninety-Nine uses four twin-triode, octal 6SN7s, which are larger than the nine-pin triodes we've grown used to seeing in preamps.

"The 6SN7 is just a wonderful-sounding tube," O'Brien told me, "parametrically similar to a 12AU7 but much more linear in its gain characteristics — which make it ideal for use in a preamp. It's just rich with information and elicits a lot more musical details than other tubes I've heard, without sounding either overly analytical or euphonic."

In addition, Rogue has set aside a number of open bays in the Ninety-Nine that allow for future mods and upgrades, such as a plug-in (ie, no soldering) MM/MC tube phono board. And for nominal fees, Rogue is more than willing to accommodate requests for custom features, such as the second set of tape outputs in my review sample.

"When configured in the active mode [via an internal mini-switch], the tape outputs are able to drive a subwoofer. Then the Record button acts as an On/Off switch — whereas, when using it to drive tape, you'd switch to the passive mode."

**Setup**

My system was essentially the same as used for my review of Rogue's Magnum M-120 monoblocks in the December 2002 issue — save for the absence of said power amplifiers during my conclusive listening trials. (They'd been shipped off to John Atkinson's for a final round of tests, measurements, and spa cuisine.) I wrapped up my evaluations of the Magnum Ninety-Nine by pitting it against the Musical Fidelity Nu-Vista and VTL 5.5 preamps on their home turf; with their very own power amplifiers, the hybrid MF Nu-Vista 300 and the tubed VTL MB-450 monoblocks.

The original review sample of the Magnum Ninety-Nine included the optional phono stage, but the Grado Statement Master cartridge's output of only .5mV made it a less than ideal match. "The phono stage performs very well with most moving-magnet and high-output moving-coil designs," O'Brien explained. "But the reduced dynamics and higher noise you experienced are typical of the response you'd anticipate in cartridges with an output..."
below 0.75mV." He suggested I try Rogue’s standalone solid-state unit, the Stealth ($795), which I used with a second line-stage-only sample of the Ninety-Nine.

Using the low-output Grado Statement Master with the Rega 25 turntable had eliminated all the interactions and hum I’d previously experienced in mating the unshielded, high-output, moving-iron Grado Statement Reference with the unshielded motor of the Rega 3. A Ringmat 330 and a Signal Guard II Isolation Stand on a PolyCrystal equipment rack had substantially isolated the turntable from extraneous vibrations, but I’d never managed to find a phono stage that gave me the clearly articulated, realistic, high-gain structure I’ve grown accustomed to from digital gear. The Stealth not only improved the signal/noise ratio, but generated better dynamics, more palpable soundstage depth, and a smoother frequency response than the recently retired Blue Circle BC22 phono stage. It fleshed out more of the Grado’s nuanced midrange depth, natural bass extension, and effortlessly smooth top end.

A Smooth Operator

With its richly articulated yet firmly delineated presentation, the Magnum Ninety-Nine proved a most ingratiating and involving performer. Smooth and quiet, dynamic and linear, warm and clear, the Ninety-Nine offered a nice balance between tubed liquidity and solid-state precision—an accurate, musical sound, with the supple breath of life that tubes convey so well. The Ninety-Nine’s bass was tight and full right through the lower midrange, with a sweet, airy, natural depiction of midrange details and a relaxed style of top-end extension and detailing. Where the Sixty-Six had a decidedly tubey character, the Magnum Ninety-Nine’s presentation was drier and more distinct—and while its mids were sweetly layered

**Measurements**

The five positions of the Rogue Magnum Ninety-Nine’s front-panel gain switch correspond to maximum voltage gains of 18.7dB, 13.8dB, 8.6dB, 3.2dB, and -4.4dB. This will be very useful in optimizing the preamp’s amplification and noise floor to best match the overall gain structure of its user’s system. The Magnum Ninety-Nine inverted signal polarity, and its input impedance measured a usefully high 36k ohms at 1kHz, this dropping slightly at the edges of the audioband.

The Ninety-Nine’s output impedance was a fairly low 466 ohms over most of the frequency spectrum, though it did double to 963 ohms at 20Hz, presumably due to a finite-sized coupling capacitor. This results in a degree of bass rolloff into very low impedances, which can be seen in fig.1. Into 600 ohms, for example, which admittedly is lower than the Rogue will see in practice, the -3dB point was 21Hz. However, at the other end of the spectrum, the lower load impedance extended the ultrasonic response slightly. This graph was taken with the gain switch set to its central, 8.6dB, position, and the Magnum Ninety-Nine’s HF output in this condition was 1dB down at 20kHz, 3dB down at 43kHz. At higher gain settings, the preamp's bandwidth increased slightly, to 1dB at 30kHz. There was no change in the bandwidth with different volume-control settings, as is sometimes seen in tube circuits.

Despite its dual mono construction, the Rogue’s channel separation was somewhat disappointing, at less than 50dB in both directions at 20kHz. The shape of the traces in fig.2 suggests that the crosstalk is due to capacitive coupling, probably at the shared volume control. The wideband, unweighted signal/noise ratio in the maximum-gain mode was also not as good as is usual in high-end preamps, at 58.8dB (ref. 1V), this due to some ultrasonic noise. Restricting the measurement bandwidth to the audioband improved the S/N figure to 84.4dB, while switching in an A-weighting figure gave further improvement, to 87.7dB.

Fig.3 plots the percentage of distortion and noise in the preamp's output against its output voltage into 100k, 10k, and 1k ohms. Below 1V into the higher loads, the figure is dominated by the noise mentioned above. Actual distortion influences the reading above that level, but the Magnum is capable of swinging many more low-distortion volts than it will ever be required to in practice. Even into 1k ohm (top trace), the preamp will deliver 8V at the usual 1% THD+N clipping point.

The distortion is uniform with frequency, with only a negligible increase visible above the audioband into higher impedances (fig.4). It does increase into 1k ohm (top trace in this graph), but is still below the level that would be regarded as audible, particularly as the spectrum of that distortion (fig.5) reveals it to be

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**Fig.1** Rogue Magnum Ninety-Nine, central gain position, frequency response into 100k ohms (top below 1kHz) and 600 ohms (bottom below 1kHz), with volume control at maximum (0.5dB/vertical div.).

**Fig.2** Rogue Magnum Ninety-Nine, channel separation (R–L dashed, 10dB/vertical div.).

**Fig.3** Rogue Magnum Ninety-Nine, distortion (%) vs output voltage into (from right to left at 3%) 100k, 10k, 1k ohms.
and textured, I wouldn't characterize them as particularly round or euphonic.

The Magnum Ninety-Nine offered a much more sophisticated portrayal of midrange resolution, with greater bass control and considerably more top-end extension than the Sixty-Six—not especially bright, but deliriously detailed. As such, it was far more revealing than its more euphonic, forgiving sibling, and offered superb illumination of low-level information. Nevertheless, when paired with such a relatively brash dynamic performer as my Mesa Baron, the Magnum Ninety-Nine accurately conveyed its rich, punchy dynamics, even as it gently smoothed out the rough edges without smoothing anything over, or with any appreciable loss of detail. If my goal were to rein in the Baron, the Sixty-Six would prove a better match.

Still, in one crucial area, the child was clearly father to the man. At its price, the true glory of the Sixty-Six was its soundstaging, which, in the context of my original review, proved more than equal to that of the Musical Fidelity Nu-Vista line stage, itself no slacker in dimensionality. The soundstaging of the Magnum Ninety-Nine was far more open and transparent, with remarkably holographic depth and light-years more resolution. When I listened to the Magnum strut its stuff on the delicate vocal and instrumental strains of La Rondinella's Sephardic Journey: Spain and the Spanish Jews (CD, Dorian DOR-93171), its depiction of acoustic space was simply luminous, each instrumental image seemingly framed in a glowing little pool of fluid.

On “Una noche al bodre de la mar,” the Ninety-Nine maintained a firm yet supple hold on Tina Chancey’s springy bass-viol underpinning, while eliciting all sorts of crisp, delicate details from a raspy, shaken percussion instrument. This last was perfectly rendered in the micro- and macrodynamic senses, both as an assemblage of individual beads and as the totality of their sound—not

almost entirely the subjectively innocuous second harmonic. Note, however, the presence of spuriae at multiples of the 120Hz full-wave-rectified power-supply frequency in this graph. Yes, they’re all close to or below -100dB (0.001%), but I couldn’t eliminate this noise no matter how I arranged the grounding of the test setup. This suggests the preamp has a somewhat suboptimal internal grounding arrangement.

This power-supply noise can also be seen in the spectrum of the Magnum Ninety-Nine’s output while it reproduced an equal mix of 19kHz and 20kHz tones (fig.6). However, the actual intermodulation distortion was quite low in level, with the 1kHz difference component lying at 0.0055% (-83.5dB).

While not the best-measuring tube preamp I’ve encountered, Rogue Audio’s Magnum Ninety-Nine seems to be generally well-engineered.

—John Atkinson
Here at musicdirect we are always experimenting with different tweaks, components, and accessories seeking to extract the most musicality from our favorite discs. Our entire staff of experts are available to answer questions or make recommendations to help you maximize the performance of your system.

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as some grainy, sibilant suggestion of white noise. Better yet was the Magnuni's depiction of vocalist Alice Kosloski's plumblike alto, a folksome integration of her warmly inflected lower register, dulcet midrange, and gracefully soaring top end. Particularly striking was the way the Ninety-Nine tracked her upper-register harmonics and let them bloom without italicizing the top end, even as it illuminated the reverb trails from her voice, portraying them as spectral neon descents into an inky blackness of silence well behind the speakers.

Comparisons

In competition against the Musical Fidelity Nu-Vista and VTL 5.5 preamps, the Rogue Magnum Ninety-Nine proved smooth, nimble, and muscular. The hybrid Nu-Vista (on MF's Nu-Vista 300 power amp) offered a cooler, more laid-back presentation, with exceptional lateral imaging and a brilliant, extended top end. The Rogue's soundstage extended farther behind the speakers, and, due to its wealth of midrange detail, seemed to project farther into the room as well, giving the music a palpably live, forward presence. While the Rogue wasn't as breathtakingly transparent as the Nu-Vista, it was still quite clear and open. Nor did the Ninety-Nine evince the sort of excessive bloom that makes for the softened, diffuse presentation or laggard rhythm and pacing of some tube line stages; tight, quick, and snappy, it offered a more focused brand of midrange presence—blossom without bloat.

But where the Rogue truly excelled was in its control of bass and the palatable three-dimensionality of its images. On the Keith Jarrett Trio's Always Let Me Go: Live in Tokyo (CJ, ECM 1800/1801), the Magnum did a much more efficient job of fleshing out the attack and harmonic content of Gary Peacock's lightly amplified upright bass, even as it illuminated a vividly perceptible image of the instrument on the visual plane.

With its smooth, clean, dry musicality, the Rogue Audio Magnum Ninety-Nine preamplifier delivered a wealth of realistic detail and splendid harmonic control.

To double-check, I listened to pianist Bill Cunliffe's Live at Bernie's (LP, Groove Note GRV1009-11D1), a superb direct-to-disc, 45rpm trio recording engineered by legendary mastering engineer Bernie Grundman. Derek Oleszkiewicz's acoustic bass was rendered in a decidedly dry, purely acoustic manner as often felt as heard. With the Nu-Vista, the bass tended to melt into the piano, whereas the Rogue locked on to it like a rabid Gila monster and wouldn't let go. Not only could I clearly make out the woody decay and soft leading edges of the bass's transients, but I felt as if I could see the bass and Joe LaBarbara's drum set in realistically delineated, three-dimensional images. These suggested precisely how a drum set actually looks to a listener in the audience—every bit as much as it sounds to a set of microphones.

The differences between the Rogue Magnum Ninety-Nine and the VTL 5.5 proved far more subtle. Both displayed superb soundstaging depth and imaging, with excellent resolution of low-level detail, pinpoint resolution of recorded detail, and natural midrange layering. I found myself returning again and again in my notes to a favorite metaphor: that of the dry, tangy white wine is a more robust, aromatic red. The white-wine-inflected Rogue was not only quicker, but its midrange liquidity never translated into overripe colorations. And while I'd hardly characterize it as analytical, its linearity and taut control suggested solid-state antecedents as well as tubes—surely a less romantic depiction of la triode de amore than that of the 5.5. The Magnum maintained a firmer grip on the music from top to bottom, particularly in the bass. While the 5.5 was no slouch in this regard, there was a velvety aura to its midrange, and a brilliant sheen to its top end, that suggested a more traditional tube sound—a red-wine signature, if you like. In the end, I found the Rogue to be more forward and dynamic, the VTL more luxuriant and laid-back.

Conclusions

With its smooth, clean, dry musicality, the Rogue Audio Magnum Ninety-Nine preamplifier delivered a wealth of realistic detail and splendid harmonic control without calling undue attention to its tube pedigree—though there was a magic to its midrange that was pure triode. It offered honest presentations of my records' unalloyed musical truth.

This Rogue is ballys yet refined—a no-BS, emotionally engaging preamp you can build a true high-end system around, confident that it will prove an accommodating, revealing performer regardless of the amp or speakers you pair it with. I can't imagine any preamp at this price whose performance even vaguely approaches that of Rogue's Magnum Ninety-Nine.

Associated Equipment

Analog sources: Rega Planar 25 turntable, Rega RB600 tonearm, Grado Statement Master cartridge, Marantz PMD430 portable cassette recorder.


Preamplifiers: Musical Fidelity Nu-Vista, VTL 5.5, Rogue Audio Stealth phono.

Power amplifiers: Musical Fidelity Nu-Vista 300, Mesa Baron, VTL MB-450.

Loudspeakers: Joseph Audio RM33i Signature & RM7si Signature, Meadowlark HotRod Shearwater.


Accessories: Equi=Tech 2Q Balanced AC Power System, Mon·ster Cable AVS 2000 Automatic Voltage Stabilizer, PolyCrystal equipment racks and amp stand, Ringmat 330 and Signal Guard II Isolation Stand (turntable), Shakti Stones, Polycrystal cones, Argent RoomLenses, Echo Busters Bass Busters and Absorptive and Diffusitive Panels. —Chip Stava
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Acoustic Zen cables

If the devil is in the details, then Beelzebub has taken up residence in the collections of cables we use to connect our components. Reviewing the stuff is tough enough, but things are even more difficult for the average audiophile: Inevitably, the wire that sounds fabulous in the store or in your friend's system doesn't work worth a hoot in your own system, and you're left where you began. Equally inevitably, the wire that does work best carries a price more often seen in Tiffany's or Harry Winston. It's enough to drive a hi-fi nut to drink. So relax, pour yourself a nice glass of wine, and sit right back to hear the tale of Robert Lee and his amazing wires...

In 1998, Robert Lee and his then business partner, Jim Wang, founded Harmonic Technology, which quickly developed a reputation for making cables offering outstanding sound at reasonable prices. In 2000, wanting to further push the ultimate edge of the performance envelope, Lee struck out on his own under the Acoustic Zen flag. The name alone suggests what Lee was after with his new designs: the musical enlightenment that comes only from hearing the nothingness in the sound of the cables.

**Cable constructions**

The wire in every AZ cable is made with the Ohno Continuous Cast (OCC) process, which drastically reduces the number of crystal boundaries in a given length of wire. According to Lee, the thousands of boundaries between the metal crystals in a typical cable result in a lengthy break-in period—the signal must burn in the path of least resistance through the cable. (Lee seems to be correct about this. I have had lengthy, tedious experience with high-performance cables that have taken up to 500 hours to finish breaking in; listening through all those hours is not an enjoyable process. The AZ cables gave about 90% of their ultimate performance fresh out of the box, and stabilized completely within 40 hours. That alone makes them something of a marvel.)

Furthermore, each crystal boundary is, in essence, an extra barrier to signal propagation through the cable. There may be only a handful of crystals in 1m of OCC wire—AZ claims that, in many cases, there will be only one or two crystal boundaries in any individual strand of wire in its cables. This, proponents of the OCC process assert, is the true path to neutrality, wide bandwidth, and coherence. If they and Lee are correct, AZ cables are the wire equivalents of a simple signal path in an amplifier: fewer parts, fewer places for signal to be lost or for anything to go wrong.

In his designs, Lee directly addresses such relevant performance parameters as capacitance, inductance, and resistance, all of which are minimized to the lowest practicable levels. AZ's construction technique is based on "constant air-twisting," in which multi-gauge groups of conductors are arranged in a constant twist on the outside of air-filled Teflon tubing. The resulting dielectric is mostly air, and the rest is Teflon—next to air, the best dielectric. This, says Lee,

**Silver Reference II interconnect:** 7N Zero Crystal Silver, 1.0m: $948 (RCA), $998 (XLR); $506/m for longer cables, 15% off for 0.5m.

**Satori Shotgun loudspeaker cable:** 7 AWG total, 6N Zero Crystal Copper, $1188/8' pair; $100/ft extra for longer length, less $50/ft for shorter lengths.

**Gargantua II AC cord:** AWG, 6N Zero Crystal Copper + Silver, 6.0', $1488; $160/ft for longer cord, less $80/ft for shorter cord.


**Approximate number of dealers:** 51.
In the months following the 2002 Home Entertainment Show held at the Hilton in New York, I have been extremely encouraged by the response to our independent presentation of high-resolution, multi-channel DVD-Audio. It's been particularly gratifying to have both audiophiles and many writers express their thanks that we took the initiative to bring what we believe is some of the finest hardware and software to a gathering of dedicated music lovers. Demonstrations of this quality take a lot of planning, effort, money, and coordination...And thus far have been rare public events. The consortium of companies, both manufacturers and record companies, and organizations responsible for launching the new DVD-Audio format have struggled to make the public aware of the exciting new format. Writers and publications covering the emerging formats have not always been even-handed with their words...at times even knowingly inaccurate. As a lifelong audiophile and equipment dealer, I am less interested in the politics of the debate and focused more on what I believe will bring the best listening experience to my clients...my friends. Many of my staunchest audiophile friends have been convinced over the summer that it is more about the music and less about the format. I want to publicly thank Meridian Dr. Mark Waldrep of AIX Records and Hi-Res Records for helping make our HE 2002 presentation possible...we are proud of our effort and will do it again!

Steve Davis Owner Hi Fi Farm | Consultant Sanibel Sound

An audiophile and customer’s thoughts...

I am a music lover and an avid collector of high-end audio equipment. Because I have been fortunate enough to have the financial resources to pursue and acquire some of the best audio gear available, in that quest, I have met many dealers from across the country but one stands out because of his intimate knowledge of the gear, open-minded approach to new trends, and representation of many of the top audiophile brands. That dealer is Hi Fi Farm. Steve Davis, the owner, has uniformly made solid recommendations and I have come to trust his advice with respect to the audio equipment that I purchase.

Four years ago, I decided to make a trip up through the beautiful mountains of Virginia to the Hi Fi Farm showroom, which I had seen ads for in various audio magazines. Not knowing what to expect when I arrived, I was warmly greeted by Steve who showed me around his store. I couldn’t take my eyes off of the exotic hifi system he had on display. It was both beautiful to look at but more importantly it provided a truly memorable listening experience. Ever since then, I’ve been drawn back to Virginia to visit Steve and hear the latest gear. It has been Steve’s dedication, passion and talent for his craft that has genuinely lifted my appreciation for music to a new plateau. If great experiences in audio are built on the relationship with your dealer, then Steve Davis has filled that bill for me. With his newest venture into the DVD-Audio format and his plans to build a dedicated listening room exclusively for multi-channel audio, I look forward to more trips to the mountains for great hospitality and listening experiences.

Knowing Steve, they will be nothing less than extraordinary.

Eric Ford
provides a high common-mode rejection of noise and improved resistance to electromagnetic interference. Finally, the interconnects are double-shielded, using both copper foil and braid, to minimize pickup of residual radio-frequency and electromagnetic interference.

Along with cartridges, cables are the jewelry of audio, and AZ’s designs and finishes have the jeweler’s touch. All lugs and terminations are made of pure OCC copper and are gorgeously finished. They certainly feel like jewelry. The cables are all heavily jacketed and shielded, and over the shielding is a fishnet of some sort of plastic (Teflon?) that gently glows when the light hits it. Very snazzy-looking.

**Cable sounds**

The Silver Reference II interconnects are the top of AZ’s line of interconnects and are made of pure seven-nines silver. Besides featuring the construction techniques described above, each conductor is individually insulated with Teflon tape.

The result of all this effort was well worth it. The SRII’s sound was a near-ideal balance of superb low-level resolution, harmonic richness, speed, and dynamics. Bass was firm, deep, and defined, the midrange open, silky, and richly detailed. The top end was an especial strength, providing exceptional extension, scads of detail, and absolutely no etch or grain. Dynamics were subtle or explosive—whatever the music demanded was readily available.

Lee’s pursuit of quiet has reaped rich rewards—the SRII gave me profound silence between instrumental spaces, worked equally well with tube and solid-state front-end components, and stood toe to toe in every aspect of overall performance with my (vastly more expensive) reference cables. Given the Zens’ sound and quality of construction, I would not have been surprised had their price been twice as high.1

If the SRII represented a stunning bargain, the Satori Shotgun took the concept of value into another universe. A chunky, full “dual-mono” run of the Satori cable, the all-copper Shotgun has a total weight of 7 AWG—there’s a lot of wire between amp terminals and speaker inputs. Prior to installing the Shotguns, I was biwiring my EgglestonWorks Andra IIs with two pairs of Nordost single-wire speaker cables costing $11,000. The Satori Shotgun is optimized for biwiring three- or four-way speaker systems. (AZ’s Hologram speaker cable is optimized for biwiring two-ways.) When I replaced the Nordost cables with one run of Satori Shotgun, I hoped that the falloff in performance would not be so acute that the listening would be a chore.

I needn’t have worried. The Satori Shotgun sounded so similar to my reference that I was stunned. Deep, taut, articulate bass? Check. A harmonically rich but uncolored midrange? Double check. Smoothness, purity, and world-class extension on top? Triple check. At times it seemed as if there was just a dash of silvery inaudibility at the top, but the Satori Shotgun never seemed to impede the retrieval of low-level detail on reverber trails, cymbal strokes, brushed snare drums, or the sheen of massed violins. The Satoris’ dynamics provided everything I asked of them with any type of music. Speedy and responsive, they paired superbly with both the Calix Phoenix Grand Signature and the EgglestonWorks Andra, two mightily revealing speakers with clearly differing characters.

Like the interconnects and speaker cables, the copper-silver Gargantua II AC power cord is optimized for low resistance and loop inductance. It’s also a big, stiff mutha that is a complete pig to muscle into place. It was also a joy to hear. Its huge gauge allows unimpeded flow of vital electricity, and its extensive shielding should present a high barrier to air- and powerline-borne grunge.

The Gargantua II let the Lamm M2.1 and Halcro dm58 power amplifiers show exceptional dynamic response against a background of utter, graceless quiet while allowing the distinctive sonic character of each amp to speak clearly. The Ayre D-1x DVD player I use for CD playback preferred the Gargantua II to any other AC cord I tried; with it, the Ayre’s bass firmed up impressively. Although the Ayre is already one of the best-shielded components out there, with the Gargantua II backgrounds became even quieter, giving better low-level resolution. The Gargantua II is not cheap, but its performance put it in the company of the best power cords on the market.

**Conclusions**

The character of all the Acoustic Zen cables—more precisely, their lack of character—was astonishingly consistent regardless of the components and speakers I used with them. Such consistency across differing components has always been a leading indicator of overall excellence and neutrality in cables. My only caveat is that they might not be the best choice for a system that already sounds bright or forward. The Zens hid nothing on top, and did not act as mollifying, euphonizing tone controls. They did not accentuate any band of frequencies, instead behaving in as linear and evenhanded a fashion as the finest cables I have used.

No one cable can be the very best for everyone; synergy will always be a consideration in getting the finest performance out of any system. What puts the Acoustic Zen cables among the best to be had is that their performance equals the best I have ever heard in my system at a small fraction of the price of wires providing similar quality. Here, at last, are reference-level cables that the average audiophile can realistically contemplate owning. Miss hearing the Acoustic Zen cables not only at the risk of your wallet, but of losing out on some of the finest musical enjoyment possible.

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1 Lee also sent along a set of AZ’s Matrix Reference II interconnects. At $548 per XLR-terminated meter, the Matrix offered 85-90% of the performance of the SRII, yielding just a bit in ultimate top-octave air and resolution of inner-voice detail on orchestral music.

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**A c o s t i c Z e n c a b l e s**

**Associated Equipment**

**Analog sources:** SOTA Cosmos turntable, Graham 22 tonearm, Dynavector XV-1 cartridge; Clearaudio Champion II turntable, Unify tonearm, Benz L2 cartridge.

**Digital sources:** Classe Omega SACD/CD player, Ayre D-1x CD/DVD-V player.

**Preamplification:** Manley Labs Steelhead and Boulder 2008 phono stages; Jeff Rowland Design Group Synergy II line stage; Ayre K-1x, Atma-Sphere MP-3 full-function preamplifiers.

**Power amplifiers:** Halcro dm58, Lamm M2.1, Manley Labs 250 Neo-Classic monoblocks.

**Loudspeakers:** EgglestonWorks Andra II, Calix Phoenix Grand Signature.

**Cables:** Nordost Valhalla interconnects, Nordost Valhalla and SPM shotgun loudspeaker cables.

**Accessories:** Argent Room Lenses; Grand Prix Audio Monacor, Ultra Resolution Technologies Bedrock equipment racks; Geneva, PolyCrystal isolation footers; Nordost Ti Pulsar Points; WallyTools analog setup equipment; Caig Pro Gold contact cleaner; Ayre/Cardas IBE system enhancement CD.

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Paul Bolin

Stereophile, January 2003
Hair is consolidating its position. 100% cotton clothing, and normal shoes. In stock selection of 100 models of preamps, poweramps, and digital. Both tube and solid state. Huge stock of premium vintage tubes. Uses terms like "Cool" and "Bitchin" to describe gear.

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2002 Upscale Audio

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1977 and my first HIFI job
Long hair. Wore polyester, platform shoes, and a clip-on tie. Offered a choice of 8 cutting-edge receivers and several cassette decks and 8-tracks. Sold tubes to nutty people that would not give up obsolete technology. Used terms like "Cool" and "Bitchin" to describe gear.
Joseph Audio RM33si Signature loudspeaker

For audiophiles, love is a sometime thing. It's not that we're so damn flighty or impossible to please; it's just that familiarity breeds, if not contempt, then surely a tendency toward obsessive nitpicking and analysis. A blush of enthusiasm for the new is irresistible to most audiophiles, yet, as we expand our range of reference gear, the scales shift, and we find ourselves focusing more on a component's shortcomings. And since no one piece of gear does it all, this process of calculating relative strengths and weaknesses, tradeoffs and system synergies, is part and parcel of the critical process. Which is why Stereophile encourages us to periodically reacquaint ourselves with old flames.

Which explains why, after living for the better part of a year with the two-way Meadowlark HotRod Shearwaters that I reviewed in September, I was taken aback when I returned to the three-way RM33si Signatures from Joseph Audio.1 I'd grown comfortable with the Shearwater's bass balance and midrange presentation, and while still enamored of the Josephs' clarity, fineness, resolution, and depth of soundstaging, I began to apprehend issues John Atkinson had raised in his January 2002 "Follow-Up" to my October 2001 review—particularly his lack of enthusiasm for the way the Joseph navigated the transition between its 8" aluminum-cone bass driver and 5" magnesium-cone midrange. While the RM33si Signature was still a very satisfying loudspeaker, I began to hear in my mind's ear how much it might be.  

In the spring of 2002, Joseph Audio's Richard Modaferri and Jeff Joseph set about improving the RM33si, spending several months experimenting with different crossover points and voicings. "The entire crossover was re-engined, and optimized for the new crossover point—which is now roughly 220Hz—and small adjustments were made to improve the midrange/tweeter integration as well," Joseph explained. While the original RM33si Signature's midrange seemingly tracked the entirety of the baritone, tenor, alto, and soprano vocal ranges above its crossover point of 125Hz, for all its incredible clarity, I found myself longing for more punch and body. To my ears, making the Joseph's bass driver cover more of the low-end fundamentals has let the midrange driver operate more efficiently. As a result, the fill between the bass and midrange frequencies is more natural and satisfying in the new iteration of the '33si.


1 The RM33si Signature costs $7499/pair. Joseph Audio, P.O. Box 1529, Melville, NY 11747. Tel: (631) 474-4434. Fax: (631) 424-7986. Web: www.josephaudio.com.

Stereophile, January 2003
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When, in 1995, IRS Records gave Kirsty MacColl the “Best of” treatment with Galore, the CD’s booklet overflowed with praise from famous fans and comrades:

“Great songs and a crackin’ bust...a supreme original but not—as far as I know—one of the original Supremes.” — Morrissey

“The wit of Ray Davies and the harmonic invention of the Beach Boys.” — Johnny Marr, Big Mo’s fellow former Smith

“The Noel Coward of her generation.” — the irressibly waggish Bono Vox

“ Writes like a playwright, sings like an angel.” — Billy Bragg

“Special thanks to my friends,” MacColl replied, “who contributed liner notes and made it possible for me to revel in the glory without the inconvenience of actually dying.”

Irony (real irony, not the inverted-comma or Alanis Morriscette variety) is cruel, cruel, cruel. And Edmund Kean (or was it Sir Donald Wolfit?) had it very wrong: Comedy is easy. Dying suck.

On December 18, 2000, Kirsty MacColl’s life ended without poetry. There was no better-to-burn-out-than-fade-away self-immolation, no rock’n’roll decadence, no cemic tie-ins to her art. Diving near Cozumel, Mexico, with her two sons, she was run over by a speedboat in a swimmers-only zone. She was 41.

Tropical Brainstorm, MacColl’s first record since 1993, had been released in the UK nine months earlier. It was her second foray into Latin music—something she was just as versed in as folk or power-pop or Tin Pan Alley. MacColl was nothing if not versatile—her top three moments in the general public’s ear neatly represented the three sides of her craft: collaborator, on the Pogues’ Christmas classic “Fairytale of New York”; songwriter, of Tracy Ullman’s Top 10 single “They Don’t Know”; and interpreter, delivering the definitive version of Billy Bragg’s “A New England.”

Like the man said, she was as brilliant with the hook and lyric as she was with the voice box. Think Marianne Faithfull and the Stones, Dusty Springfield and Goffin-King, Richard and Linda Thompson—but in a single package. Like all great artists, MacColl lives on: in a tribute concert at London’s Royal Festival Hall, on the soundtrack of a Sex and the City episode, and via covers by Bette Midler, Kelly Willis, and Leslie Carter (13-year-old sister of Backstreet Boy Nick Carter), who tackled “They Don’t Know.”

The daughter of Scottish folkie Ewan MacColl, who wrote “The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face,” Kirsty was raised in Croydon, South London, by her choreographer mother, Jean Newkoe. (Daad, an anti-Dylan purist, remarried, to Peggy Seeger.) MacColl got her punk-rock start as “Mandy Doubt” in the Drug Addix, Chiswick Records peers of Bragg’s band, Riff Raff. In 1979, MacColl went back to her real name and fell in with the Stiff gang, including Liam Sternberg. The Ohio-bred producer used her on the debut by Jane Aire and the Belvederes, then put the Belvederes to work as MacColl’s backing band for “They Don’t Know,” which, at the time, was just another New Wave non-hit.

MacColl’s first album, Desperate Characters (1981, UK Polydor), is out of print, as is Kirsty MacColl, a 1985 Stiff reissue with three replacement songs. Also confined to the Record and Tape Exchange is The Essential Collection (1993, Stiff, STIFFCD-17), a 14-song disc (plus three alternate takes) that collects a half-dozen entries from the debut record plus a smattering of singles. This turf was covered one more time on The One and Only (2001, Metro Square METROCD0063), which repeats 11 of Essential’s 14 and includes cuts by Bragg (the sublime “Greetings to the New Brunette”), Irish accordionist Sharon Shannon (“Libertango”), and Ewan MacColl (a 1983 rendition of “Manchester Rambler” with Seeger, Kirsty, and sons Hamish, Collum, and Neill).

What it all boils down to is a string of catchy tunes combining pub rock, girl-group, rockabilly, and music hall, including covers of “Just One Look” and “He Thinks I Still Care” (both of which were also covered by Anne Murray, of all people). It’s material that doesn’t necessarily hint at the greatness yet to come; the three songs people know the best are also the best songs.

Phil Spector himself would have been proud of “They Don’t Know,” while MacColl’s bouncy, breathy, ultimately resigned “A New England” still breaks hearts and induces goosebumps two decades later. “I don’t want to change the world / I’m not looking for a new England / I’m just looking for another
girl" became "are you looking for another girl" in MacColl's version. There's also the Rockpile-style swing of "There's a Guy Works Down the Chip Shop Swears He's Elvis," a novelty title but not a novelty song, with "but he's a liar and I'm not sure about you..." as the witty, wounded kicker. Apparently, a US version of the song was issued with the title changed to "Truck Stop" — all the more reason for Kelly Hogan, the Damations, or Christy McWilson to cover it immediately.

"A New England" was produced by Steve Lillywhite, whom MacColl met during sessions for the Simple Minds record Sparkle in the Rain. They married in 1984 and were inseparable in the studio as well, with session work taking up much of Kirsty's time for the next five years. She worked with everyone from Frida and the Smiths to Robert Plant, Happy Mondays, and the Stones, mostly with Lillywhite at the board. "Fairytale of New York," from the Pogues' If I Should Fall from the Graces of God, remains the high point of that time. (Funny enough, the Pogues had recorded "Dirty Old Town," written by Kirsty's father, before they ever worked with ("big money" on one song, "alright" on another) are supplied by MacColl, layer after glorious choral layer.

Kite is also the closest thing to a good Smiths record after The Queen is Dead. Johnny Marr is the guitarist on eight tracks and co-wrote two, not counting the fabulous version of "You Just Haven't Earned It Yet Baby." Pete Glenister is the other major co-songwriter and guitarist, while the supporting cast includes Pink Floyd's David Gilmour, Simple Minds drummer Mel Gaynor, the Pretenders' Robbie McIntosh, and ace-of-bass session men Pino Palladino, Guy Pratt, and James Eller.

MacColl's version of the Kinks' "Days" goes right up there with Chrissie Hynde's "Stop Your Sobbing," while "Don't Come the Cowboy with Me Sonny Jim!" is such an impeccable slice of country-flavored sass that it's surprising to find it's not a standard. (Kelly Willis covers it on her latest album, Easy.) There really isn't a bad song to be found, and just when you think you've got MacColl pegged as a veddy British pop thrush, she finishes in French — with the original "La Foret de Mimosas" and the McGarrigle Sisters' "Complante Pour Ste. Catherine."

MacColl then moved from français to español. The Cuban–Puerto Rican aesthetic of Electric Landlady (1991, Charisma/Virgin 91688-2) flowered from David Byrne's album Rei Momo, which Lillywhite produced and MacColl sang on. New York trumpeter Angel Fernandez handles arranging chores for an army of horn men and percussionists whose past and future credits include Byrne, Ray Barretto, Tito Puente, Marc Anthony, the Alman Brothers, Ruben Blades, Buena Vista Social Club, and J Lo. Among the other players are flutist Dave Valentin, pianist Oscar Hernandez, Steely Dan guitarist Elliot Randall, and Fairground Attraction's Mark Nevin, the last a throwback to the Stiff days. Most of the Kite core returns as well.

"All I Ever Wanted" (co-written with Marshall Crenshaw) and the forlorn but super-sprightly "He Never Mentioned Love" are the most satisfying fusions of sing-song Britpop with busy Latin lope. Less inspired is the single "Walking Down Madison," which is turgid funk with wah-wah guitar, drum machines, and a rap interlude. The Pogues show up for the closing-time Celtic lilt of "The One and Only," and Hernandez adds jazzy beauty to the ballad "We'll Never Pass This Way Again." The unquestioned highlight is "My Affair," a salsa-spiked big-band romp that declares feminine independence amid a bright array of conga, trumpet, and Spanish call-and-response. Electric Landlady is more memorable for its adventure than its songs, but it foreshadowed better work to come, and MacColl deserves points simply for trying. As Bragg said later, "Can you imagine Gloria Estefan having the bottle to do a track with the Pogues?"

Titanic Days (1993, IRS 27214) abandons the occasionally joyous carnality of its predecessor to...
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wallow in the bitter aftertaste of D-v-v-o-r-c-e. Lillywhite produced the precise single "Angel," another not-great moment in drum-machine technology even if it anticipated trip-hop, but MacColl's now-ex was otherwise sup- plantled by Victor Van Vugt (Nick Cave, the Walkabouts, Beth Orton, Shivaree), credited here as "Vic." Mark Nevin steps in as primary collaborator, co-writing seven songs, with Johnny Marr on board for one (the machine-gun gui- tar-pop of "Can't Stop Killing You") and former Ruts/Aztec Camera drummer Dave Ruffy making his first appearance in the Scooby Gang. Pete Glen- ister and pianist Steve Nieve (Elvis Costello and the Attractions) also do their parts.

"Titanic Days" has the harmony and pop sense of "Kite," but it's a riskier, more sophisticated, and very, very somber album that MacColl herself once com- pared with the English weather. When the pace and tempo are relatively upbeat the dark content works, as on the tile track: "his ropes / my wrist, I never knew there might be days like this," MacColl sings with gusto, amid swirling strings and jangling guitars. When the music matches the downbeat emotions, the results aren't as striking. The exception is "Bad," 2:45 of torch that's both affirmative and self-lacerating: "I want a brief encounter in a stolen car / A hand on my buttock in a Spanish bar.../ I want to try something that I've never had / look out world, I'm about to be bad." The ominous noir arrangement reminds one of Van Vugt's Bad Seeds connection, while Kate St. John provides a snaky solo on English horn.

Another standout, "Soho Square" is too pretty-sad to be an actual bummer. It's a gracefully descriptive evocation of romantic loss featuring one of Mac- Coll's most vulnerable and stripped-down vocals — with, as the payoff, a string- and oboe-swollen chorus worth of Sgt. Pepper's. The song's ill-fated hope- fulness seems that much more poignant now that its singer is no longer with us, a sentiment MacColl's fans embrace by installing an actual "empty bench in Soho Square" as a memorial.

"Soho Square" is inexplicably absent from Galore (1995, IRS 30257), though it's hard to quibble with the track selection of a greatest-hits disc that's up there with Endless Summer and The Immaculate Collection for career-spanning scope, extra goodies, and track-by-track de-light. Eighteen indelible moments of bliss, plus those star-studded liner notes Galore kicks off with four singles from the early years (it's the only place to find 1985's "He's On The Beach"), offers a taster menu of the three albums, and, crucially, the Pogues tracks: "Miss Otis Regrets" (from the Red Hot and Blue Cole Porter tribute) and "Fairytale of New York." In a eulogy he wrote for Hot Press, the Pogues' Phillip Chevron described how it felt to perform the latter song when MacColl showed up on tour:

"I could have been someone... The rueful sound of Shane MacGowan cursing the emigrant's luck. This was it, the moment when, every night without fail, the tear ducts would do battle with the heartstrings. Two thousand, ten thousand voices raised in reproach, united with our flame-haired cheer- leader, our big sister, the Maureen O'Hara of our brighter dreams: Well so could anyone!!"

Galore ends with the Titanic Days outtake "Caroline" and a duet with Evan Dando of the Lemonheads on Lou Reed's "Perfect Day."

What Do Pretty Girls Do? (1998, Hux HUX001) is an equally bathe- retropective — and yes, if you're keeping score, there are exactly as many compilations in MacColl's discography as there are releases proper. This one, culled from BBC sessions in 1989, 1990, 1994, and 1995, has enough quality and charm to make it more than just a curio for fans — it's her analog of the Smiths' Hatful of Hollow.

MacColl rarely toured — she had stage fright and children — so she viewed the radio work as a chance to let loose for an audience she couldn't see. The acoustic, quasi-rootsy settings on What Do Pretty Girls Do? are in strong contrast to the ornate studio albums, and allow MacColl's voice and craft to shine on through. Here are excellent versions of several Kite tracks, as well as early hits, B-sides, and marvelously minimal takes on "My Affair" (mariachi style) and "Bad." There are also two priceless duets with Bragg that are essential for anyone who's even half a fan of either artist: "A New England," hatch, and "Darling Let's Have Another Baby," a punk nugget (origi- nally by pre-Dannned Chiswick band Johnny Moped) that they tackle Twitty- Lynn style.

While fans reveled in past glories with Galore and What Do Pretty Girls Do?, MacColl headed for Brazil and Cuba. This time, she got serious. She studied Spanish and Portuguese, hung out with musicians in both countries, considered pursuing a degree in Latin Studies, and became involved in the Cuban Solidarity Campaign. At the time of her death, she had just completed an eight-part document- ary on Cuban music for BBC Radio 2. All that research and passion came to fruition in Tropical Brainstorm (2001, V2/Instinct INS557-2), a typo-phon-level success. It's MacColl's Graceland, only way more fun.

And there's hardly a Latin player to be heard. The record was written in Cuba and Brazil but recorded in the UK, with Pete Glenister and Dave Ruffy tweaking the knobs — nearly all the percussion, horns, and sound effects are computer-generated, with Israel Lopez, Celina Gonzalez, and Willie Bobo among the sampled. The lush production rings out like a million bucks without sacrificing heat or heart. And while its musical direc- tion makes Tropical Brainstorm a successor to Electric Landlady, it also features MacColl's best songwriting since Kite, wry, perfectly scene-set character sketch- es à la Davies or Costello, steeped in sweat, mangos, and libertine behavior. Forget the Latin pop explosion — MacColl dwarfs the sexuality of Christina or Shakira with one shake of the hip. If anything, hers is a brighter, feminized take on Arto Lindsay's edgy regialism.

"Don't be afraid of the rhythm it's..."
made / to give life to the way you want to be," MacColl announces on the opener, "Manambo de Luna," stepping right into the Carmen Miranda vibe. "In These Shoes," which Miller covered and Adidas used in ads, is the first of two twisted pickup tunes; the other is "England 2, Colombia 0," an impeccably constructed samba de deceit set in a pub amid the 1998 World Cup. "You lie about your status you lie about your life / you never mentioned your three children and the fact you had a wife / now it's England two, Colombia nil / And I know just how those Colombians feel."

The centerpiece is "Us Amazonians," preceded by the hip-hop funky pulse of "Alegria." MacColl's breathy whisper is laid over a full techno-meets-tribal percussion jam, the sort of workout that demands to be played live, even though little of it was. "Alegria, alegria / happiness and joy," MacColl chants. A guitar riff takes flight, foreshadowing the next song, and suddenly it's an anthemic whirlwind of pop pleasure, a sexual fairytale-cum-liberated-anthem by a 40-year-old divorced mother of two. "Us Amazonians know where we stand / we got kids we got jobs why do we need a man / us Amazonians make out all right / we need someone to hold in the forest at night."

"Her last record was her best," Neil Spencer of UK newspaper The Observer wrote in his obituary for MacColl. For me, that distinction belongs to Kir—partly 'cause I like the Beatles more than Celia Cruz, partly 'cause it's the one I fell for first. But Tropical Brainstorm takes second, and Gahoc also belongs in the first tier of must-own MacColl.

So we're left to wonder, as we are with any artist once the shock of too-early death has begun to recede: What might have been? Who knows how Tropical Brainstorm might have fared in the US had MacColl been around to assemble a band for concerts at Town Hall, and slots on Letterman and Leno? And who knows what she might have gotten up to next? An Elvis Costello covers album to erase the memory of Wendy Janes? Country-western? Standards? Southern soul? Most pop artists and rock bands succumb to the Dorian Gray factor, but MacColl's music didn't depend on trends. She never made a lousy record. We should have had another 30 years' worth.

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For those attuned to the sensory crossover of synaesthesia, this album's sound shimmers between aquamarine and hazy ginger, the colors of sunset on the sea, of Rio de Janeiro as evening takes over from afternoon. The trio Morelenbaum2/Sakamoto — comprising Brazilian vocalist Paula Morelenbaum, her cellist husband, Jacques, and genre-defiant Japanese keyboard-composer Ryuichi Sakamoto — recorded Casa at the house of late bossa nova master Antonio Carlos Jobin, its windows open to the hills above Rio and Sakamoto playing Jobin's piano. Blessed with breezes and occasional birdsong in the background, Casa serves as the ideal showcase for a group of lovely, rarely heard Jobin songs composed for films and other special projects.

The authenticity isn't limited to the atmosphere: The Morelenbaums worked alongside Jobin in his last decade (Jacques works as the music director for Brazilian singer-songwriter Caetano Veloso), and Sakamoto's affinity for Impressionists from Claude Debussy to Bill Evans gives him a genuine feel for the material's trademark pastel harmonies and lilting rhythms. The three musicians are fully familiar with each other, too: The cellist collaborated with Sakamoto on his exceptional chamber-music album 1996, and both Morelenbaums appeared on his electro-pop disc Smoothly. With the trio augmented in just a few pieces by discreet strings and percussion, the feeling is intimately communicative, and the clear, warm sound is as beautiful as the performance.

If there are still any musical souls left on the planet who haven’t fallen in love with (or to) Jobin’s songs, the wistful piano opening of “As Praias Desertas,” or a few seconds of Paula’s romantic charm in “Vivo Sonhando (Dreamer),’’ will be all it takes to do the trick. Warner Bros. issued Casa last year in Japan, preceded by a concert album featuring better-known Jobin material. Sony’s US version of the studio set features two live bonus tracks, but the company would do us all a favor by issuing the live disc here, too, plus anything else by Morelenbaum2/Sakamoto.

—Bradley Bambarger

Symphony orchestras may not need the major recording labels that have spurned them, but to judge from the recordings they’re putting out themselves, they now face — with less industry expertise to guide them — the steep challenge of being noticed in a recording market in which nothing sells itself anymore. LSO Live, the do-it-ourselves label of the London Symphony Orchestra, has triumphed critically, and may just make a profit on its Grammy-winning recording of Berlioz’s Les Troyens. Yet the LSO enjoys the visibility of existing in one of the world’s great music-consuming capitals. The San Francisco and Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestras are now making their own recordings on the strengths of their respective music directors, Michael Tilson Thomas and Mariss Jansons. The financial verdict won’t be in for a year or two, but the artistic pluses and minuses of making records without the checks and balances of a conventional label are already apparent.

If there’s anything to be learned by the failed Arch Media, the St. Louis Symphony’s label, which pioneered the idea of the orchestra-owned label with conductor Hans Vonk’s middle-of-the-road interpretations of Beethoven, it’s that new recordings can’t sound like anything that’s already out there. The Pittsburgh Symphony has issued perhaps the only western-label disc devoted exclusively to the music of veteran Russian composer Rodion Shchedrin, Michael Tilson Thomas leads the San Francisco Symphony in a hugely personal performance of Mahler’s Symphony 1, and the LSO’s Colin Davis makes a rare recorded foray into Bruckner. Some of these readings justify themselves better than others.

Those who love Shchedrin’s music enough to take it home with them will prize this disc containing spirited performances of music taken from his opera Lolita and his ballet Anna Karenina. But how many such people can there be? The conservatism of Shchedrin’s music is unlikely to inspire strong allegiances, even among those who find it agreeable. One has to philosophically applaud Shchedrin for his courage in taking on the above-mentioned heroes of legend, but wonder if it’s worth doing unshaped by a bold vision. Try connecting with the Lolita excerpts without knowing the opera. You can’t. However eventful, the score could’ve been written to any number of dramatic scenarios; the music has an all-purpose quality that doesn’t go very deep in one’s psyche.
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The Anna Karenina suite is more successful, beginning with Tchaikovsky-like moments that put the action in a time and place that the Lolita music does not. From there, the composer’s abstract communion with Anna’s psyche results in some compelling moments, such as the inclusion of her brief, pre-suicide speech, recited near the end by Robin Walsh. Shchedrin projects the strongest personality in the more modest pieces, such as the two tangos from In Initiation of Albéniz and the uproariously funny Concerto 1 for Orchestra, but those alone aren’t worth the price of the disc. Jansons is a perfectly sympathetic interpreter and the PSO plays as well as you could want, but I can’t imagine even a financially comfortable label authorizing a recording of such repertoire much less a small label trying to establish itself.

San Francisco, in contrast, is in the midst of a Mahler cycle in a world with no shortage of them. The justification is that music director Thomas has lived so long with Mahler that he now approaches Symphony 1 with the re-creative freedom of a composer (which, increasingly, he is). However, this is nothing like the re-creations of another composer-conductor, Leonard Bernstein. Thomas’ Mahler has leaner textures, a cooler emotional temperature, and is more rhythmically spirited. Interpretive decisions seem to be made with a healthy horror of becoming too tedious and pedantic (as Bernstein, in his later years, could be). Thomas is also a grandchild of major figures in New York’s Yiddish theater, which explains why the Jewish folk elements of this work stand in the interpretive foreground. The effect can be fussy, but makes perfect musical sense, particularly in a performance that, over its four movements, changes the way one hears this familiar score. The orchestra plays as though it adores him.

But repertoire and performance aren’t the whole story: The handsomely packaged San Francisco disc has the selling point of being recorded in superaudio DSD. The sound is no big improvement over many intelligently but conventionally recorded CDs, but has excellent definition and presence, and a sound picture that’s so subtle you’re not even aware of its boundaries. Though light on bass, the recording is an improvement over the unduly distant microphone placements of Thomas’ recording of Mahler’s Symphony 6, which began this series. In comparison, the Pittsburgh disc is more conventional, with a clearly framed but warm sound picture that gives an attractively forthright view of orchestral color. But wouldn’t it have been nice to have had track listings somewhere in the booklet? And cover art that doesn’t quote the composer’s cynicism-inspiring bromides, such as “I want music that is alive.”

Colin Davis and the LSO’s Bruckner Ninth is too contained for comfort by the prosaic acoustics of the orchestra’s home, The Barbican, especially with a composer whose music many of us are used to hearing amid the Old World glow of Vienna’s Musikvereinsaal. Far from flattering this performance, the Barbican’s that, unwarmed sound detracts from it, the upper strings lacking the bloom you want with Bruckner and, with what sounds like close miking, revealing a bit too much of the orchestra’s struggles with this massive score.

Yet of the three discs, this is the most welcome, in some ways because of its shortcomings. No conventional label would have recorded Bruckner under these circumstances. However, this is the orchestra Davis has worked with the longest, which has to be a significant factor in the highly personal voice of this performance. It’s thoroughly thought-through and deeply felt in ways that perhaps aren’t possible with a Central European orchestra steeped in a particular Bruckner tradition. The first movement’s introduction, for example, projects the opening rhythms with implacable firmness, as if to establish Fate (with a capital F) as the symphony’s dramatic antagonist — one that is examined, step by step, throughout the symphony and finally embraced in the final movement. It’s so effective that one wonders why it hasn’t been done before. To describe more of Davis’ many brilliantly considered touches would be to spoil the surprises of this recording — a distinctive second choice for admirers of the work, and a solid first choice for admirers of Davis. — David Patrick Stearns

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Sunday morning—it's all the same for Burke.

Building a record by a revered elder with songs from contemporary songwriters isn't the newest idea in the world, but on Don't Give Up On Me, producer Joe Henry finds just the right groove for senior citizen Burke. Rather than try to prissy Burke up for the 21st century, Henry re-creates the spare feel of the old days.

Listen to Burke chew on Henry's own "Flesh and Blood." The song rests on a single repeated riff, and Burke's voice, deep and resonant as the sax that fades in and out of the track, shows that though he might have lost a few notes on the high end, he more than makes up for it in the low register.

Dan Penn complements his 1967 "Take Me (Just As I Am)" with the equally catchy title track, based on the kind of acoustic guitar riff that distinguishes his best material. Van Morrison weighs in with two little-known tunes. Before I heard it, I thought strange the choice of Tom Waits and Kathleen Brennan's "Diamond in Your Mind," not because it's a bad song, but because it doesn't fit Burke. But, like any masterful interpreter, Burke finds just the right cadence without conjuring Waits's raspy drawl.

Perhaps the biggest surprise is "Soul Searchin." A lot of words have been used to describe Brian Wilson and writing partner Andy Paley, but "soul brothers" wouldn't be among the first to come to mind. Yet Burke makes this song sound as if it was written back in the Atlantic Records days. Can't ask for much more than that.

—Leland Rucker

JOHNNY CASH

The Man Comes Around
Performance **** ½
Sonic *****

At Madison Square Garden
Performance **** ½
Sonic **** ½

Dressed in Black: A Tribute to Johnny Cash
Various Artists
Performance **** ½
Kindred Spirits: A Tribute to the Songs of Johnny Cash
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feel it," John Lee says as they get going. By the end, Booker T. Jones and the late Randy California are feeling it good.

—Leland Rucker

BEN KWELLER

Sh'a Sha

Performance ***½
Sonics ***½

Next big thing before he even entered high school, post-Nirvana afterthought two years later. Now, at the tender age of 20, Ben Kweller escapes the land of never-was with the scruffy-sweet pop album of the year.

A literal bonus baby when his band Radish scored the big record deal and bigger New Yorker profile back in the crazy, lazy days of alt-rock, Kweller was a prodigal teen with uncanny melodic instincts and admittedly transparent influences (Pavement, Sonic Youth), both of which were remodeled into harmless grunge on the trio's first album, Restaining Bolt. So Kweller made a second Radish record that was truer to his muse, got dropped, moved east, went solo acoustic, built his name on the emo and "anti-folk" circuit, and finally signed to Dave Matthews' ecclectic label, ATO, also home to Patty Griffin and David Gray.

Sh'a Sha is still teenage in its earnestness, from its felicitous love songs and bubblegum doggerel ("Sh'a-sha," "bop-bop," "do do do do," "ba ba ba ba ba ba," and "ooh ooh ooh ooh ah ah ah ah," all of which make it onto the printed lyric sheet) to the use of slang and buzzwords. The latter can be trite (that Planet of the Apes name check), but ultimately offer vérité seasoning on "the slacker lifestyle," as Kweller sings on the deliciously rockin' "Commerce, TX" (needless to say, he is skewering, not celebrating).

The music is eclectic and familiar, bringing to mind another guy named Ben when Kweller gets behind the piano ("In Other Words") to the giddy harmonics and energetic acoustic heartbeat of "Walk On Me." What counts the most, as anyone who's seen Fast Times at Ridgemont High can tell you, is the tunes, and Sh'a Sha is there, 11 for 11. You'll hunch it at the office, crank it in the car, and wonder what Kweller might do next. After all, he's got at least 20 years of music ahead of him.

—Jason Cohen

Randy Newman

Three Classics

Sail Away
Performance ****
Sonics ****

Good Old Boys
Performance ****
Sonics ****

Ragtime
Performance ***
Sonics ***

All three: Leroy Waronker, Russ Titelman, prods.; Lee Herschberg, eng. ADD:

In 1972, after two studio albums and a live one, Los Angeles singer-songwriter Randy Newman painted his first masterpiece. Sail Away still sounds fresh today. Musically speaking, its blend of Tin Pan Alley melodies, slow-burn grooves, and sparse but incisive arrangements for chamber orchestra can't be beat; tunes like the vampish New Orleans blues of "Last Night I Had a Dream" and the slyly pop soul of "You Can Leave Your Hat On" are as good as anything The Band ever recorded. And the title song, a deeply ironic look at the slave trade, ranks as an all-time classic—Linda Ronstadt even covered it, famously cropping it out by substituting the words "little one" into Newman's then-controversial line, "Climb aboard little wog—Sail away with me." For this remastered reissue Rhino has added five bonus tracks, notably an early alternate version of "Sail Away" and the sweeptly textured "Let It Shine," previously unreleased. A thick, detailed booklet rounds out this must-own artifact.

Jumping ahead to 1981, we find Newman's second film-scoring credit (his first was the obscure Cold Turkey, from 1971), for Ragtime, directed by Milos Forman and starring Jimmy Cagney. Though his score was nominated for two Academy Awards, this disc is not as essential as Sail Away. It contains only one Newman vocal, but his piano playing and period arrangements hold up quite nicely. This is the first time Ragtime has appeared on CD; a bonus track is included.

Back in 1974, Newman followed up Sail Away with his second masterpiece, Good Old Boys. Widely misunderstood at the time, in retrospect it's clearly no celebration of the racist, white-trash Southern lifestyle but an examination of its mindset and culture through the narrative use of characters. True, the chorus of "Rednecks" includes the line "We're keeping the niggers down," but that's immediately preceded by "We don't know our ass from a hole in the ground." Thematically, the album skillfully juggles this duality from start to finish; "Kingfish" outlines some of the positive achievements of the otherwise despicable Louisiana governor Huey P. Long, while, near the end, in "Back On My Feet Again," a supposedly open-minded college-educated man bemoans the fact that his sister "ran off with a Negro from the Eastern shore."

But the chief virtue of Good Old Boys is its musical consistencty. Featuring many of the same players from Sail Away—among them Ry Cooder, Jim Keltner, and Willie Weeks—it weaves its way through barrelhouse jazz boogie, jaunty country rock, and twinkly orchestral pop in a virtual history lesson in the different strands of Americana that make up our national musical fabric. It also contains what is arguably his finest song, "Louisiana 1927." On this remastered reissue, one bonus track, a demo of "Marie," is included. Newman also consented to let Rhino include an entire second disc, Johnny Cutler's Birthday, of piano-vocal
Where has all the fun gone?

Reading the recent "40 Years of Stereophile" article brought to mind how much joy and enthusiasm there was to be found in the olden (and even the not-so-olden) days of audio. Folks bought war surplus parts on "Radio Row"; people read (and did) do-it-yourself articles; Corey Greenberg's spicy copy made for lively, blood boiling reading. I don't think I can rattle off a similar list of things about high-end audio today. It makes me wonder—where's the fun gone?

The high-end business of today seems pretty serious—and why shouldn't it be? People who were once hobbyists are now running big companies—assuming they've managed to survive at all—with serious needs for sales. Distribution opportunities lure the companies making less expensive high-end products into mergers with mid-fi companies that are attracted to the credibility of a high-end line. Companies building Class A gear find themselves in an ever-upward price spiral of flagship competition, and/or building monster home theater systems (a real honey pot, as wealthy movie watchers outnumber wealthy audiophiles by a wide margin). As a result, manufacturers are either serious about distribution or serious about building expensive stuff. Either way, it's all about being serious.

How does this affect you, the audio enthusiast? Well, when you're hooking up your $10,000 mono-blocks to your $15,000 speakers and want to buy a $3,000 speaker cable, you've got a pretty serious decision to make. When you're planning to spend $7,000 on a CD/HDCD/DVD/SACD/DVD-A player and you're worried about buying into a format that won't survive, you've got yourself a tough choice. All these big expenditures seem to put a bit of a pucker on things. The question you should ask yourself is, "How am I going to keep calling this a "hobby" if I don't get to go out and have some good ol' fun now and then?" And, maybe just as important, the question this industry should ask itself is, "How are we going to get the new blood (read: young folks) we need to keep the high-end alive (and growing into the future) without having a playground full of good sounding products at accessible prices?" We think one very good answer to both of these questions is head-phones.

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Don't worry; you can still get serious whenever you want. But, when you're looking for some fun, join the ranks of the headphone phreaks and enjoy a good listen with headphones. The easiest way to start is to call HeadRoom; after all, we are...

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demos he taped on a single day in 1973 and that would eventually be fleshed out to become Good Old Boys. Included are Newman’s spoken intros and explanations for each song — for fans, pure manna. I recall, as a teenager, once using the word “redneck” in my father’s presence. Daddy, a Carolina peach farmer turned politician, offhandedly observed, “I’m not ashamed to admit I’m a redneck.” Revisiting this album, I finally understand what he meant. To know ourselves, we must first probe and understand our heritage, not shut it out. In that regard, Good Old Boys is as powerful a history lesson as anything your high school teachers ever flung at you.

— Fred Mills

jazz

CHARLIE HADEN

American Dreams

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

Charlie Haden makes records with a purpose. Going all the way back to the protest music of his Liberation Music Orchestra in 1969, Haden has always made, in the highest sense, concept albums. Each recording proceeds from a particular aesthetic impulse and explores a specific emotional texture, whether boleros with Gonzalo Rubalcaba, spirituals with Hank Jones, or film noir with his Quartet West. As illustrated by their Grammy awards and nominations and “Record of the Year” awards from all over the world for more than 30 years, Haden’s recordings as a leader have been among the most praised in jazz.

American Dreams is the latest addition to this distinguished portfolio. Its premise is to express how Haden feels about his country, which “is built on the ability to have dreams and create.” (Haden denies a connection to the events of 9/11, but with its timing and with the inclusion of “America the Beautiful,” others will make the connection for him.) Haden’s stature now supports major-label, high-budget recording projects. For American Dreams, Verve provided a 34-piece string section, three arrangers, and world-class sidemen.

Haden began his career 45 years ago as a musical revolutionary and monster bass technician in the groundbreaking quartet of Ornette Coleman. Now 65, he’s more interested in paring his art to quintessentials. Haden is in search of unalloyed beauty. He’s all about tone now—a somber, resonant darkness that, at its best, infuses the music around him with majesty.

His reflections on the American experience have more to do with yearning and poignance than simple idealism. Many of the pieces here are moody, pensive reveries. The title track opens with Haden throbs that hang in the air like a call to judgment. “Nightfall” and “Young and Foolish” are pure ear candy, with creamy violins flowing around the three compelling solo voices: Haden’s bass dramas; Michael Brecker’s plaintive, yet taut and quick, tenor sax; and Brad Mehldau’s bright, penetrating, unexpected piano lines. Changes of pace are provided by five quartet tracks, without the strings, and harder, thornier material like Mehldau’s “Ron’s Place” and Ornette Coleman’s “Bird Food.”

American Dreams is a deeply felt work of uncommon quality. What might have made it even better is a strong, objective producer. Haden usually produces his own albums (often, as here, with his wife, Ruth Cameron). A producer who stood back from the music might help Haden identify the fine line between sweet lyricism and sentimentality—a line across which Haden, on his own, occasionally strays. Not even Brad Mehldau’s abstractions can save “America the Beautiful” from sounding slightly silly in a jazz context. An outside producer might have questioned some of the choices in material, such as “Love Like Ours” and “It Might Be You,” both by Alan and Marilyn Bergman, the latter from the film Tootsie. That hypothetical producer might have insisted on more incisive sound quality than is provided by engineer Jay Newland (who, in my opinion, has never served Haden’s music especially well).

But American Dreams still deserves the honors it will undoubtedly receive. Its rewards are deeper than its minor disappointments.

— Thomas Conrad

DIANA KRALL

Live in Paris

Diana Krall, vocals, piano, Fender Rhodes; Anthony Wilson, John Pisano, guitar; Michael Brecker, tenor sax; Ron Mounsey, additional keyboards; John Clayton, Christian McBride, bass; Jeff Hamilton, Lewis Nash, drums; Paulinho Da Costa, Luis Quintero, percussion; Alan Broadbent, conductor; Orchestra Symphonies European. Verve 440 065 109-2 (CD), 2002. Tommy LiPuma, prod.; Al Schmitt, eng. DDD. TT: 70:17
Performance ****
Sonicity ****

R are is the jazz recording that features liner-note credits for wardrobe, makeup, and hair styling. Yet those are essentials in the packaging of Diana Krall, who has skyrocketed from being a shy, somewhat awkward singer leading a piano trio to an attractive pop superstar who has sung and glitzed her way into the fast lane of mainstream music. She has ambitiously applied her trade of re-envisioning nostalgic standards from the songbooks of Cole Porter, Howard Arlen, and the Gershwins, as well as more contemporary treats from Burt Bacharach and Joni Mitchell. Krall has yet to compose her own material, but as a song stylist, she has what it takes: hardy vocals with an alluring delivery that is by turns passionate, wistful, spunky, and romantic (with a wink). She also puts on a spirited show. That spirit is exhibited on Live in Paris, recorded during four consecutive concerts (November 29–December 2002).

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The CD is a fair representation of Krall’s live sets. It includes several standbys from her repertoire, such as the gently swinging “East of the Sun (and West of the Moon),” the smooth bossa nova “S Wonderful,” and a walking bass-brush rendition of “Fly Me to the Moon,” on which Krall stretches out on the keys. It’s one of several tracks here that demonstrate her maturing pianism, which has seldom been documented on her studio recordings. Other noteworthy piano breaks come during her rousing rendition of Peggy Lee’s “I Love Being Here with You,” and her big swing through Walter Hirsch and Fred Rose’s “Deed I Do.” And she opens Bob Dorough’s “Devil May Care,” one of her crowd-pleasers, with a reflective piano sketch that gradually develops into the song’s scampering tempo.

Krall enlisted excellent accompaniment for these dates. Joining her are bassist John Clayton and drummer Jeff Hamilton, both of whom nurtured and mentored her when she moved from her native Vancouver to Los Angeles in the early 1990s. The basic quartet also includes guitarist Anthony Wilson, who almost fills the shoes of Krall’s former guitarist, Russell Malone, who left a few years back to pursue his solo career. The Orchestra Symphonics European contributes lush strings and horns to the light-hearted, skipping “Let’s Fall in Love” and the sweeitly melancholic “I’ve Got You Under My Skin.”

If you’ve already got all of Krall’s hit albums, you’ll find only two significantly new covers here. For a few years now, in concerts, Krall has sung Joni Mitchell’s “A Case of You,” from Blue. Here she gives a ruminative solo reading of the tune. It’s the show-stopping gem of the collection, and it’s too bad that Live in Paris doesn’t close on that graceful note. Tacked on at the end is a so-so studio recording of Billy Joel’s top-40 radio favorite “Just the Way You Are”—one more sad example of how tightly marketing and music have become entwined. The song—with, of course, some pop-friendly tenor-sax talk by Michael Brecker—is featured on the soundtrack of the upcoming film The Giant. If the movie’s a hit, don’t be surprised to hear this track more times than you care to.

—Dan Ouellette

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Accessories & Headphones
Benz/Audytec MC Demagnetizer (Freener) ..................................  7-33
Caim Pro Gold wipes (Marks) ..................................................  12-43
Extreme None-Felt Mat (Tellig) .................................................  8-31
Grado SR125 headphones (Reina) ..............................................  6-101
Grand Prix Audio Monaco equipment stands (Bolin) ..............  12-131
HeadRoom BlockHead headphone amplifier (Seull) .................  7-75
Moze Zero Dust (Freener) ........................................................  3-35
Musical Fidelity X-Can++ (Tellig) ...........................................  12-29
Premier! Record cleaner (Freener) ...........................................  10-37
Sublilant 22 (Marks) ..............................................................  12-43
Wally Tools (Freener) ............................................................  5-37

Interconnects, Data Links, AC Cords & Speaker Cables
Audience Au24 interconnects & speaker cables (Damkroger) ....  8-85
Audience PowerCord AC cord (Damkroger) ................................  8-85
Stetsowx cables (Marks) .......................................................  12-43

Cartridges
Benz Micro Glider L2 (Freener) ..................................................  3-35
Clearaudio Varnosoo Wood (Reina) ..........................................  12-125
Dynavector XX-2 (Freener) .....................................................  7-33
Ortofon Kontrapunkt II (Tellig) ......................................  8-31
Transfiguration Spirit Mk.3 (Freener) ...................................  7-33
ZYX R100 (Tellig) .................................................................  8-31
ZYX R100FS (Freener) ..........................................................  7-33

Tonearms
Graham 2.2 (Freener) ............................................................  7-33
VPI JMW-12.5 (Freener) .......................................................  3-35, 11-47

Turntables
Rega P9 (Freener) .................................................................  11-47
VPI Extended Arctics (Freener) ............................................  3-35, 11-47

FM Tuners
Tivoli Audio Henry Kloss Model Two table radio (Tellig) .......  4-37

Recording Equipment
Audio-Technica AT-R25 stereo microphone (Marks) ...............  8-45
Denon DL-110V2 microphone preamplifier & A/D converter (Marks) .................................................. 8-45
Marantz Professional PS-L400 CD-R recorder (Marks) ..........  8-45

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Index
Revel Ultima Studio (Robinson) ...........................................  6-85
Rockport Technologies Ariaire (Freener) ..............................  8-65
Snell Acoustics XA Reference (Greenhall) ......................  4-157
Thiel CS1.6 (Atkinson) ..........................................................  9-88
Triangle Zerius (Tellig) .........................................................  3-27
Wilson Audio Specialties Sophia (Adkinson) ......................  7-46
Wilson Benesch Discovery (Marks) .....................................  1-35

Stereophile, January 2003
153
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Manley Labs on VTL on Harley-Davidson
Editor:
In reply to VTL's "Manufacturer's Comment" in the November issue (p.193), we, the engineering staff of Manley Laboratories, Inc., would like to tell Luke Manley that if he disapproves of the measured performance of Harley-Davidson motorcycles, well, that's his business and we won't hold it against him.

Mitch Mangold, Slide Rule Jockey
Hutch Hutchinson, White Tester
Humberto Rodriguez, Oiler & Boiler
Baltazar Hernandez, Chassis Fulfillment
Paul Yang, Valve Grinder
Evie Anna Manley, Pit Boss
Manley Laboratories (Winner, No.1 Best Sound at HE2002 Show)

Grand Prix Audio Monaco
Editor:
There was a time — remember? — when all amps were believed to sound the same. Years passed. Then folks burried that myth for good. Later, cables began to make a difference. More time passed. Just now, equipment reports are beginning to come out of the closet. They are drowsily emerging from their Dark Age hibernation. We sincerely appreciate Paul Bolin's willingness, with enthusiasm and understanding, to don the role of torchbearer. His report in the December issue of Stereophile educates our music-loving friends around the world about the very real benefits of scientific engineering when it is applied to resonance control.

Unlike in audio, this is a well-documented, half-century-old, highly advanced science in mechanical engineering. Literally millions upon millions of applied R&D dollars have been invested. Paul's comprehensive and elegantly stated review leaves little to add.

When designing competitive — and winning — racecars for champions like Michael Andretti, performance advantages must be repeatable time after time. Translation? The assurance of predictability, the elimination of chance. Not only winning is at stake — lives are. In audio, thankfully, it is not lives but hard-earned money. Audiophiles should demand demonstrable returns of real significance for their dollars. The various cone, puck, high-mass, and bearing-based approaches operate on a less efficient and far more erratic scale.

By contrast, we can unequivocally state that the performances of all Grand Prix Audio isolation systems are predictable and repeatable — as were the racing cars we designed and manufactured. What Paul heard is exactly what any of your readers would hear with their components, their systems, in their rooms. It's easy to be this confident when your designs are based on actual testing, zero-tolerance execution, and textbook science.

However, take us to the test. Our home trial program makes this uncomplicated and rewarding. You will find that we are the best not because we say so, but because proven experience from a highly competitive, very-well-funded industry has been systematically applied. Once you understand the rules of engagement and obey them categorically, performance accelerates from possible yet arbitrary to guaranteed and predictable, each and every time.

One small correction to the review: Tom Huschilt was involved in the design of the Swift 007 CART Indy car we produce at Swift. This car won its first race (Miami Homestead GP 1997), which was the first time an American-designed and -produced car had won an Indy Car (CART, USAC, etc.) race in over 20 years. Further, later in our season, with Newman Haas we were the first American-designed and -manufactured racecar to finish one and two (Road America GP 1997) in over 22 years! We did not win the Indy 500 (as printed), because we could not enter due to the founding of the IRL.

Thank you again for the time and effort applied to review our design.

Alvin Lloyd
Grand Prix Audio

van den Hul DDT-II Special
Editor:
Let me take this opportunity to welcome Art Dudley to Stereophile's writing team. We look forward to his long tenure with "Listening" — it's clear to us he is doing just that with acuity honed from much experience.

I, too, would not name a phono cartridge after the deadly poison DDT. But there is another point of view from Dutch culture, for which land is so precious they reclaim it from the sea, and a Dutch company whose mission is defined by the fact that its products have the environmentally friendly designation "Green care" (vdH has bumper stickers for your Saab too).

In Holland, the poison DDT is out of sight and out of mind. Therefore, why not reclaim the name for something good, like a recyclable (read: repairable and upgradable) vdH phono cartridge? Your point of view from across the pond loses the delicious Dutch irony here, missing the forest for the trees — or, more precisely, the indigenous wild boar.

Art makes telling observations about both the absolute level of spending by consumers of specialty audio a generation ago (adjusted for inflation) or the relative level of satisfaction for a less expensive purchase today. Stanalog's historical database and personal experience both support his position. Art says that the old Supex 900 Super was a great cartridge and that the vdH DDT-II Special bettered it. Based on his assumed rate of inflation, our historical data show that the same $325 Supex cartridge would today cost at least $850 or about $900 for our superior design — arguably a negligible difference when you take into account the DDT-II's added value in musical ability (emphasis borrowed from your review).

Yet much contemporary music listening would seem to settle for less sound quality. This past fall I went to homecoming at my alma mater and met a friend I had not seen in the 20 odd years since our graduation, after which he had developed an expertise in international banking while moving among foreign offices. Fast-forward to find that, lo! he, too, proudly owned a Bose system but was unable to play those myriad LPs he had carted about since we last faced a glowing hearth in our fraternity with music via an AR tuntable. At which point I said, "Brother, have I got something for you to hear!"
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P.S. I sent my friend's wife, Stereophile's October 2002. “Recommended Components” issue in exchange for an extra set of the reunion photographs she took of all of us.

Brinkmann USA Integrated
Editor:
Helmut Brinkmann, the combined staffs of Brinkmann Audio (Germany), Brinkmann USA, and I would like to thank John Marks and Stereophile for the wonderful review of the Brinkmann Integrated amplifier.

It is refreshing to be recognized for our aesthetic internal and external chassis design, technological advancements in electrical circuit design, and, ultimately, the sonic flavor that crosses the divide of music and accuracy with the production of recorded music. As ardent music lovers, we have voiced each Brinkmann Audio component toward the realism of the musical event. This review demonstrates that we have succeeded in achieving our goals.

Again, thank you, Mr. Marks, for your concise analysis of our life's work.

Lawrence C. Blair III
Managing Director, Brinkmann USA

Acoustic Zen cables & interconnects
Editor:
The team at Acoustic Zen offer our utmost gratitude to Stereophile and Paul Bolin for the marvelous review of our products. It is a delight and a tremendous compliment to know that we were able to capture the breath of a veteran audio critic.

Acoustic Zen products are all inspired by the dream of reproducing the majestic sound, the rich emotions, and the sublime experience of live music to satisfy the ears of many avid music lovers. With such a demand for unblemished sound comes a requirement of using the most unadulterated constitution of metals joined with revolutionary craftsmanship in production. What we offer is finess with a sensible price tag. Paul Bolin came the insight himself when he discovered our cables to be equal to or better than his vastly more expensive ones.

The word perfect is defined as “satisfying all requirements, and faithfully reproducing the original.” Indeed, Paul Bolin seems to have found perfection right out of the box! We hope that other fellow music-lovers will dare to experience their systems in a whole new way.

Once again, we thank Stereophile and Paul Bolin for an excellent review.

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On an otherwise nondescript, unseasonably warm and humid Monday in November, I spent much of the day listening to Rolling Thunder Revised (Columbia/Legacy) the first official release (after several generations of bootlegs) of recordings culled from Bob Dylan’s storied 1975 Rolling Thunder Revue tour. That night, I saw the man himself in concert at Madison Square Garden. The juxtaposition was telling.

The 22 tracks of Rolling Thunder Revised are quite a chunk of music to absorb. While fraught with the usual problem of live albums—a limited dynamic range that results in tinny sound—the sonics are tolerable, and a huge improvement over unofficial, or so-called “gray-area,” editions of this material. It’s also one of those live documents whose passion makes the less-than-ideal sound more acceptable.

For those who don’t know the Rolling Thunder tale, here’s a little history. After recording most of the Desire album during a long and feverish night in the summer of 1975, Dylan decided to activate an idea he’d reportedly pondered for years: a combination of traveling medicine show, guerrilla theater, and musical revue that would ape many of the characteristics of the old Italian commedia dell’arte street troupes.

The origin of the resulting extravaganza’s name remains, like many things Dylan, a murky, overly romanticized knot. Dylan has said that it came to him when thunder sounded over his house in Malibu. Also mentioned as inspirations are a Cheroke/Shoshone shaman and the bombing campaign in Vietnam, both named Rolling Thunder, and Native Americans’ use of the phrase to mean “speaking truth.”

Whatever the origins, the Rolling Thunder Revue—with guitarist T Bone Burnett and ex-Bowie guitarist Mick Ronson, poet Allen Ginsburg, ex-Byrd Roger McGuinn, and Joan Baez—opened October 30, 1975, in Plymouth, Massachusetts. From there, the four-hour show meandered through the northeastern US and eastern Canada, playing 2000-sear halls in places like Cambridge, Boston, Montreal, and Worcester, the four cities where this album was recorded on multitrack tape.

As it progressed, the tour gained momentum. At some point, for no apparent reason, Dylan began appearing in whiteface. Joni Mitchell joined the tour in New Haven. Dylan’s mom came onstage in Maine. Leonard Cohen was a guest in Montreal. But all too soon, it was over. A second Rolling Thunder tour in 1976 failed to generate the electricity of the original.

Dylan may be a grittier road warrior today than ever before. Except for scattered breaks of a month or two, he’s been touring for the better part of the last three years with his current band. Similarities between the 27-year-old recordings and the current live show abound.

In both tours Dylan fronted what was basically a slip-into-the-groove-and-stay-there rock’n’roll band—a variation on the heretical ensemble that caused such a fuss (much of it apocryphal) at Newport in 1965. He’s also still taking his folk songs and making them into rock’n’roll. On Rolling Thunder Revised, in a version recorded at the Forum in Montreal, “A Hard Rain’s a-Gonna Fall” (written in 1962) becomes a full-throttle stomper. In concert at the Garden Monday night, “All Along the Watchtower” boomed out in a version that rocked hard and sure. Unlike the Rolling Thunder set, however, the current concerts feature covers of songs not written by Dylan—such as “Old Man” (Neil Young), and “Brown Sugar” (Jagger-Richards).

Great talent attracts great talent. In both tours, the hands were and are peopled by pros. While they may not quite be Ronson and Burnett, current guitarist Larry Campbell and Charlie Sexton are cream, A-list players unquestionably attuned to Dylan’s material and his onstage body language.

What the two tours hold most in common is Dylan’s fire. Notoriously inconsistent and capable of giving downright terrible shows (the Spring tour) he clearly wants to be on the road today. Twenty-seven years older and with half the voice he had in 1975 (that’s saying a lot—he was never gonna be mistaken for Judy Garland in the first place), it’s clear he’s living off the energy he derives from making music in front of an audience. As impassioned as the performances on Rolling Thunder Revised are, Dylan flashed some of that fire last Monday evening. He’s been quoted recently as saying that he’ll “die on the road.” Having seen him, I believe it. At 61, he remains, on record and in concert, the godfather of American popular music. His latest studio album Love and Theft was Stereophile’s November 2001 “Recording of the Month.”

At a time when reissues of older recordings are often the most interesting records out there, it’s gratifying to see and hear a performer who, even if no longer at his peak, continues to challenge his own recorded legacy. Having first listened to Rolling Thunder Revised, the concert made more sense. The next day the reverse was true. Audiophilism is about listening to recorded sound, but that, I was reminded by my Dylan immersion, is only half the story. Much as I love my rekkids, getting out of the house to see live music is essential to “getting it,” to fully understanding an artist and his craft.
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