SPECIAL SECTION: 80 RECORDS TO DIE FOR

FEBRUARY 2003

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Christopher O'Reiley's piano transcriptions of Radiohead tunes—is, to another, deeply communicative music-making (again, see “Aural Robert”). So my apologies to Berlizoz, Morrissey, Mr. Wilder, Sam Tellig, Radiohead, and Christopher O'Reiley. Though I will note that if you want to hear O'Reiley at his virtuosic best, playing music more worthy of his talent (there I go again), check out my recording of Mendelssohn's Sextet in D on Encore (Stereophile STPH011-2).

The measurements are not matters of taste.

Also in this issue's "Letters," I publish some comments in response to my December 2002 essay on the occasional disjuncture between a component's measured performance and its sound quality. My thoughts had been triggered by that issue's reviews of the Sutherland 12dAX7 and PS Audio HCA-2, in which significant shortfalls in both products' measurements had to be balanced against the reviewers' enthusiasm for their sound qualities. If that's the case, comments Jim Grant on p.9, the question I should be asking is not "Should we publish a particular graph?" but "Why bother at all?" Mykal Howatt adds that he doesn't "know or care what [the graphs] do, don't seem to, or seem not to reveal."

Coincidentally with my receiving these and other e-mails, all expressing the same dismissive sentiment, Jon Iverson posted a "Vote" question on www.stereophile.com at the beginning of December, asking, "When you read a Stereophile review, how important are the measurements and graphs?" No less than 54% of the respondents let us know that the measurements were important, even essential, while another 22% felt they were "kind of interesting." Only 5% wished "they weren't there." Let me tell you, this came as music to my ears! Pareto's Principle kicks in big time: 20% of my work but 80% of my logistical and organizational headaches stem from the preparation of our "Measurements" sidebar.

So if, as I said in December, "making the essential causal connection between measurement and observation is far from simple," why do I feel that publishing measurements is essential, especially since Stereophile was founded on the principle that it's the sound of a component that matters most?

The answer is the same reason I insist that my reviewers list all the recordings they listen to and all the ancillary components they use to form their review opinions: a review that isn't complete lacks a reference for the value judgments expressed; a review that lacks measured data is unsupported opinion and, as Martin Bish from the UK said in response to our website poll, "God knows there's too much of that floating around already." No, the measurements don't describe the sound. But without them, you get only half the picture.

The measurements reveal problems that may not have been picked up by the reviewer or may have been underplayed in the review's relatively short auditioning period, but that nevertheless might become significant over months or even years of listening. For example, I recently received a letter from Canadian reader Tony Fenise, who had finally had enough of his Monitor Audio Studio 6es, despite loving so much else about the speaker. I had noted a mid-treble problem in my February 1994 review, but felt that it was not generally intrusive, at least in the couple of months during which I used the speaker. But the measurements in my review clearly showed that the metal-cone woofer did have a resonant problem at 5KHz, which clearly correlates with Mr. Fenise's long-term dissatisfaction.

The measurements reveal whether or not the designer knows his craft. One look at the graphs that accompany Kal Rubin-son's review of the Weiss Medea DAC in this issue (p.85) and you're left in no doubt that Daniel Weiss knows his stuff. And as with the graphs accompanying Art Dudley's review of the Final Laboratory components last month, they reveal serious issues of compatibility that the would-be purchaser needs to know about.

These are not matters of taste. S. Chapman summed it up best on the website: "While sound and individual perception are still the most important, a component that measures well is much more likely to work in a variety of systems and lead to long-term listening happiness." But, as John Myers asks in a letter in this issue, "How am I to know the bad from the good or the good from the excellent? Can you help to explain 'in English' what each graph really means?"

I will publish a series of articles in late spring doing just that.

1 Actually, as revealed by Berlizoz's epic but essentially readable Memoirs... translated and edited by David Cairns (London, Gollancz, 1969, reprinted by Dover in 1990), his most significant accomplishments were not as a composer but as a conductor, both in proselytizing the music of Beethoven to a wider, pan-European audience and in formalizing the concept of the classical concert experience.
Features

Records to Die For
The Stereophile writers choose their musical poison in the 2002 edition of our annual R2D4 extravaganza.

Equipment Reports

68 KEF Reference 207 loudspeaker
   (John Atkinson)

77 Parasound Halo JC 1 monoblock power amplifier
   (Michael Fremer)

85 Weiss Medea D/A processor
   (Kalman Rubinson)

93 Ayre D-1x DVD/CD player
   (Paul Bolin)

103 VPI Aries Scout turntable
    (Art Dudley)

103 VPI JMW-9 tonearm
    (Art Dudley)
Columns

5 As We See It
John Atkinson muses on the music of Morrissey and Marr, as well as returning to the subject of measurements and both what they tell us and what they can't tell us.

9 Letters
Readers wish they had started reading Stereophile years ago, are glad they have Michael Fremer to rely on, reveal their cynical fanaticism, bemoan their disdain for and affection about measurements, and argue (convincingly?) for coverage of the Smiths.

11 Industry Update
High-end news, including dealer-promoted seminars, plus: A CD/DVD-A hybrid, two entertainment industry lawsuits settled, bechamel drive units from JBL and Final-JMlab, and the Gateway/PressPlay electronic music partnership.

19 Sam's Space
Sam Tellig brushes up on his French while listening to the intriguing YBA Intégrale Passion and then it's back to English with the Portal Audio Panamae Integrated.

27 Analog Corner
Michael Fremer puts the SOTA Comet, Rega P3, and the Nottingham Analogue Horizon turntables to the test—he likes what he hears.

35 Listening
Art Dudley visits with Arvadaque Music & Cinema in their new New York City showroom and listens to the wonderful old and new technology of home.

113 Record Reviews
February's *Recording of the Month* is a new set of the complete Beethoven Violin Sonatas by violinist Augustin Dumay and pianist Maria João Pires. In classical music this month we review a fresh reading of music by Heinz Werner Franz Biber. In Rock/Pop there are new releases by Björk, Guy Clark, Tom Petty, and The Soft Boys. In Jazz there are new recordings by Von Freeman and Michel Petrucciani.

123 Manufacturers' Comments
This month we hear from Mission, Canton, Kirschner, Rega, and YBA.

130 Aural Robert
Radiohead transcribed for solo classical piano? Has the classical crossover craze gone too far? Robert Baird interviews pianist Christopher O'Riley.

Information

126 Audio Mart
110 Manufacturers' Showcase
124 Dealers' Showcase
129 Advertiser Index

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Stereophile, February 2003

7
“... a serious high-end contender, and a formidable one ...”

- Robert Deutsch, Stereophile on the Studio/100
Shared regrets
Editor:
Wish I’d started reading Stereophile 10 years ago!
Bryce S.
Seattle, WA

I wish you had too.
—JA

Shared enthusiasm
Editor:
As usual, Michael Fremer is on point (“Analog Corner,” November 2002, p.47). Having read many of the “highly educational articles” on audio in the New York Times, I see them as another example of the mainstream being bamboozled by the labels! We need only look at the “Red Book” and the claims of “perfection” in early CD sound. When Michel Marriot commented in the Times that the DataPlay formar’s sound is “comparable to CD,” perhaps he means CD à 1983!

I am confident that those of us who love our music on vinyl, who spend hours in a bookstore browsing, and who will never prefer to read pixels over print, can still sleep at night. There will still be analog, due, in part, to Mr. Fremer’s efforts.

Jody M. Latham
Powell, OH

Now you’re talking
Editor:
Hemp woofers (Mission Pilastro review, December 2002, p.113)? Now you’re talking, brother.

By the by...wooden sticks on a brass dish (p.117)? No! Quite. Brass is an alloy of copper and zinc. Brass is sometimes used in large church-style bells, and is used to make saxophones, trumpets, French Horns, trombones, and tubas. Cymbals are made of bronze, an alloy of copper and tin (with trace elements of silver in some cases), like the classic Zildjian B20 formula of 80% copper, 20% tin. There are other forms of bronze using different proportions of copper to tin, like 92%/8%, which is called “B8” in the metal industry. Paiste 2002 cymbals are B8. Their proprietary Signature Bronze is B15.

A small point, to be sure, but I am both a cymbal fanatic and a collector, and it would be remiss of me to let this point go by uncorrected. My third choice for this issue’s “R2M” would have been an LP of Jack DeJohnette’s called New Rag (ECM 1103), a great lost modern jazz fusion recording from 1977 which has never been out on CD. For many years, this was one of my main reference recordings, for its superb Manfred Eicher production values, particularly the drum sound and the portrayal of DeJohnette’s Paiste Formula 602 ride cymbals: a 22” Dark Ride and a 20” Medium Flat Ride. You could hear the leading edge of the transient very clearly, as well as the harmonic body of the cymbal and its complex overtone series.

Chip Stem

Why bother?
Editor:
The message I get from John Atkinson’s December 2002 “As We See It” is that, after 13 years of measurements, he is no closer to correlating sound with measurements than he was at the outset. The question he needs to be asking is not “Should we publish a particular graph?” but “Why bother at all?” His December column gave no hope at all that he will be any closer in 2015 to finding the truth on the test bench.

My guess is that it’s definitely a male thing, this obsession with measurements. No matter how often we are told size doesn’t matter, there are those who insist it must make a difference, and a whole industry caters to this perception.

Go ahead and continue to measure, JA. I will go right on skipping over the charts, occasionally pausing to marvel at their very presence and wondering what on earth anyone does with them.

And surely he didn’t really mean that at least some of the reason the Mission speaker and Halacro amplifier “sound so good is because of the way they measure.” It’s not the measurements that create the sound, is it? I can accept that they measure well because they are good-sounding components, but I can’t accept measurements as the cause of good sound.

Jin Grant
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Please help
Editor:
I enjoy reading Stereophile’s loudspeaker reviews; they have helped me purchase some nice products. But when I read the “Measurements,” I get confused. Yes, the graphs help illustrate a speaker’s response, but how am I to know the bad from the good or the good from the excellent? Can you help to explain “in English” what each graph really means and maybe show what an ideal response would be?

John Myers
jmyers3843@rogers.com

No Smiths? No way!
Editor:
What’s this? No Smiths? I was glad to see one of my favorite bands listed in the “Honorable Mention” section of last November’s “40 Essential Albums,” but then I noticed the editor’s interjection where Lesser Than Bombs should have been: “No Smiths.”

What? What?? No Smiths? You included Beethoven, didn’t you? You included the Beatles, you included Bob Dylan, John Coltrane, and Jimi Hendrix. So where’s The Smiths? Not only did you exclude the Smiths, you pointed out your opposition to ever including one of their albums! Have you ever listened to The Queen is Dead or Meat is Murder? Every teenage guy who spent hour after lonely hour on a Saturday night wondering about that beautiful girl he met last weekend could take solace in their music. Listening to “The Boy with the Thorn in His Side” or “Heaven Knows I’m Miserable Now,” you knew Morrissey had been there too.

Let’s try this again next year, Stereophile. And you better add Depeche Mode’s Black Celebration or Music for the Masses.

Steven J. Wilder
Irving, TX

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JAPAN
Barry Willis

"Imitation is the sincerest [form] of flattery," as Charles Caleb Colton (1780-1832) put it. It might also offer a way for DVD-Audio to establish credibility and build a customer base.

The DVD Forum may consider the development of a dual-layer, stereo CD/multichannel DVD-A hybrid disc to compete with the Super Audio CD format backed by Sony and Philips, according to reports appearing the second week of November 2002. An emerging CD/DVD-A hybrid could be compatible with the world's millions of CD and DVD players, eliminating the necessity for consumers to buy new machines.

Back-compatibility with the CD format seems to be working well for SACD. Many music fans have purchased the high-resolution discs without even knowing that they're something special. In the case of the recently released Rolling Stones recordings, the news about the SACD layer wasn't on the discs' covers, but buried in the accompanying booklets.

DVD-Audio may take a similar approach, in light of some marketing studies that indicate that consumers may balk at the idea of buying new, dedicated hardware when they already own CD and DVD players. As with multichannel SACD, multichannel DVD-A content could be enjoyed at a later date, while the stereo CD tracks could be enjoyed immediately. One hitch could be the DVD Forum's lack of proper licensing for CD technology, a group spokesman admitted.

The DVD Forum issued a call for technology proposals, and preliminary discussions took place when the group met in Tokyo on November 28. "We strongly support a change in the DVD-A specifications to enable DVD players to distinguish between a CD and a DVD layer," said Paul Vidich, executive vice president for strategic planning and business development at Warner Music Group, a major supporter of DVD-Audio. "We believe that this flexibility is very important to the new format because it will permit content companies to put out dual-layer discs."

US: DISTRICT COURT
Barry Willis

When do fractions of pennies add up to millions of dollars? When they are accumulated unpaid royalties for one of the most popular albums of all time.

Songwriters Jackson Browne, J.D. Souther, and Jack Tempchin stand to collect as much as $10 million after winning a lawsuit in November that had been brought against Warner-Chappell Music for royalties owed for songs included in The Eagles: Their Greatest Hits (1971-1975), one of the best-selling rock albums ever released. The plaintiffs, who wrote such monster hits as "Take It Easy" and "Peaceful Easy Feeling," had asserted that they were due compensation of 2.4 cents per song per record sold, rather than the 2 cents per song they were paid.

Two cents per song was the government-mandated minimum rate in 1975, the year the record was first released. Not revealed to the songwriters was a deal Warner-Chappell had signed with Warner's Elektra/Asylum/Nonesuch label division to pay a higher rate, 2.4 cents per use. The discrepancy was uncovered when Tempchin commissioned an audit of his royalties a few years ago, his lawyer told the Los Angeles Times.

Warner-Chappell also agreed to pay Eagles members Don Henley and Glenn Frey a higher rate for songs they wrote or collaborated on, although those band-members were not named in the lawsuit. Browne, Souther, and Tempchin reached the settlement Friday, November 22, with the publishing arm of AOL Time Warner, Inc. Eagles members have had their own wrangles with their record label; Henley is a founding member of the Recording Artists Coalition (RAC), a group seeking reforms in contract law for musicians.

Singer Sam Moore also recently won a lawsuit. The protracted suit had been brought against retirement-fund trustees of the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (AFTRA). The settlement of the nine-year-old case was announced in an Atlanta federal court on Wednesday, December 5.

Those promoting audio-related seminars, shows, and meetings should fax (do not call) the when, where, and who to (212) 886-2809 at least eight weeks before the month of the event. The deadline for the April 2003 issue is February 3. Mark the fax "Attention: Stephen Mejias, Dealer Bulletin Board." We will fax back a confirmation. If you do not receive confirmation within 24 hours, please fax us again.

Please note that it is inappropriate for a retailer to promote a new product line in "Calendar" unless this is associated with a seminar or similar event.

CALIFORNIA

- Monday, February 3: Tonian Laboratories, distributor of Supra Audio cables, AER, and PHY-HP drivers, will host a discussion and demonstration. For more info, contact Tony Minasian, CEO, at (818) 848-9881, or e-mail tonianlab@hotmail.com.

GEORGIA

- Sunday, January 19, 2-5:30pm, 2815 Colonades Court NW, Norcross: The Atlanta Audio Society and Jim Weir of the Brüel & Kjaer National Headquarters will co-host an audio electronics testing, measurement, and evaluation seminar. The latest laboratory equipment for testing electronics, microphones, and loudspeakers will be demonstrated. For more info, visit the AAS web page at www.mindspring.com/~chucksaudio/index.htm, or contact Chuck Bruce at (770) 493-7105.

WISCONSIN

- Wednesday, February 19, 6-9pm: Hi-
**Industry Update**

Moore, the Sam of legendary soul act Sam & Dave, was instrumental in litigation that involved 14 other artists, including the estate of the late singer Mary Wells. The artists and their attorneys agreed to settle for $8.4 million in a case that eventually found union members battling administrators of their own retirement fund. Attorneys’ fees could consume more than $2 million of the settlement, according to entertainment-industry reports.

Moore initiated his one-man crusade in 1993. The case became a class-action suit after other artists joined, and the union was dropped from the list of defendants after the first year. The plaintiffs had charged that, for more than three decades, trustees of the AFTRA Health and Retirement Funds had failed to ensure that record companies were properly paying contributions into recording artists’ pension plans. In March 2002, AFTRA Funds, a legal entity separate from the union, had proposed an $8 million settlement. The Funds have a value in excess of $2 billion, according to the *Hollywood Reporter*.

The settlement was reached in US District Court for the Northern District of Georgia, presided over by Judge Clarence Cooper. It frees AFTRA Funds from all charges in the case (Moore, et al vs AFTRA Funds, et al), but gives artists the right to bring challenges against AFTRA Funds in the future.

AFTRA national executive director Greg Hessinger told reporters that provisions of the settlement would usher in a new era of “artist-friendly arbitration procedures” that would “facilitate the processing of claims filed by recording artists.” AFTRA had intervened in the suit “so that no affected artist would be deprived of the fundamental right of due process,” he said.

As part of the settlement, AFTRA will hire a full-time ombudsman to assist retirement-plan participants in obtaining information and filing claims. “That person will be a part of the AFTRA national staff, adding a significant layer to the representation services we already provide to members,” Hessinger explained.

**K2 S9800**

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**Beryllium diaphragms are now making a comeback, this time in the form of a thin foil.**

AFTRA’s 80,000 members include recording artists, television actors, broadcasters, and other professionals in the media and entertainment industries. Union contracts require that employers make contributions to AFTRA Funds to provide health and retirement benefits for performers and artists who work in AFTRA’s jurisdictions.

Still in litigation are Moore’s several lawsuits brought against record companies for underpaid royalties, unpaid pension contributions, and other accounting irregularities. Plaintiffs in those cases are defending themselves against alleged violations of the Employee Retirement Income Security Act (ERISA) and the Racketeering Influenced and Corrupt Organizations (RICO) Act.

Sam & Dave was one of the most popular acts of the 1960s, with dozens of multi-platinum hit records, including “Soul Man” and “Hold On, I’m Coming.” Their music was reprised in the *Blues Brothers* films, starring Dan Aykroyd with first John Belushi, then John Goodman.

**CaliforniA & France**

**Paul Messenger**

There’s nothing a marketing department likes more than a Unique Selling Point—a magic bullet that allegedly sets a product ahead of its rivals in performance terms, while providing salesmen with a convincing argument when dealing with customers. While such devices and techniques make good stories for journalists, they need to be treated with due skepticism, because they’re usually mostly hype.

Hype was what I expected when I first heard that JBL and Focal-JMlab were starting to use beryllium for their drive-unit diaphragms. Now, having had the chance to hear what beryllium can do, I’m beginning to suspect it might be the real deal.

Beryllium is a notoriously nasty and expensive material that has some innate benefits as a diaphragm material. According to Focal-JMlab’s senior engineer, Dominic Baker, it has greater stiffness for less mass than titanium, and the superior self-damping characteristics of magnesium. I first encountered the element back in the 1970s, when Yamaha began using it in the midrange dome of its redoubtable NS1000 loudspeaker. The beryllium was vapor-deposited onto, I believe, a plastic substrate. While the NS1000 sold very well, no other maker followed Yamaha down the beryllium road.

Beryllium diaphragms are now making a comeback, this time in the form of a thin foil. JBL’s professional division started the ball rolling a few years back; its substantial VT4889 Vertec Theater PA system uses Type 2345 compression treble drivers with beryllium diaphragms. Not long after that, JBL developed a new high-end domestic hi-fi speaker, the very impressive K2 S9800, with two beryllium diaphragm drivers. Originally intended for the Japanese market, the K2 was launched in Europe in summer 2002, and shortly thereafter I fell deeply in love with it. A *Stereophile* review wasn’t appropriate then—the K2 S9800 was not yet being sold in the US—but I’ve just received an e-mail from Dr. Floyd Toole at Harman, JBL’s parent company, saying that the K2 is now available in the US (see www.jbl.com).

Although there have been previous K2s (and an Everest), the K2 S9800 harks back conceptually to JBL’s classic 4320 Studio Monitor, a mid-1960s floorstander. Essentially a giant two-way (plus a supertweeter that takes over above 10kHz), the K2 combines a 15" paper-cone main driver (with alnico magnet) operating all the way up to 800Hz, and a biradial compression horn driver with a 3" beryllium diaphragm that covers 800Hz–10kHz. Above 10kHz, a 1" beryllium compression horn adds some extra “air.” This large loudspeaker is ugly, with attitude, and sounds absolutely gorgeous. I’m hoping a pair of them will take up permanent residence in my listening room.

How much of the K2’s sparkling performance is due to the beryllium is impossible to say—like most things in loudspeakerland, it’s virtually impossible to isolate any individual variable. However, I’ve just been over to France, where I was treated to a demonstration of a very different speaker that also uses...
It's a shame we can't trademark the word 'best'.

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"Stereo Magazine" (Japan)  
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"Radio Technique" (Japan)  
Best Stereo Component Grand Prix 2001 Awards  
'Grand Prix Award for No.1 Power Amplifier in all price categories'

"Hi Fi Review" (Hong Kong)  
'Product Of The Year 2001'

"Stereo Magazine" (Japan)  
2002 Best Buy Component Awards  
'Best Buy in the Power Amplifier category above 1 million yen'

"Super AV" magazine (Hong Kong)  
'The Outstanding Power Amplifier 2001'

"Stereophile" (USA)  
'2002 Product of The Year

"Stereophile" (USA)  
'2002 Amplifier of The Year

Chicago Athenaeum: Museum of Architecture and Design  
'Good Design Award 2002'

Robb Report (USA)  
Best of the Best Award 2002  
'Best Audio Equipment'

"Super AV" magazine (Hong Kong)  
'The Outstanding Power Amplifier 2001'

"Stereophile" (USA)  
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'Best Audio Equipment'

"Super AV" magazine (Hong Kong)  
'The Outstanding Power Amplifier 2001'
WHERE'S NAGRA?

You know Nagra for their award-winning audio components. But, did you know that Nagra is a five billion dollar Swiss high-tech pro-audio and satellite communications company? Nagra's won three Oscars and an Emmy. They supply both the CIA and FBI with miniature recording devices. And they sponsor the Montreux Jazz Festival. They’re everywhere!

Play the Where’s Nagra? game. Be the first to spot a Nagra and report it to us, you'll win a Nagra Montreux Jazz Festival T-Shirt. Email sightings to wherensagra@asigrouip.com (see www.audiophilesystems.com/nagra for complete game rules).

Here are last month’s Nagra Spotters:

- CO (movie) – C. Burke Baxter, III
- JAG (movie) – Timmy Smirn (TV) – Philip Baugh
- Jazz at the Pawnshop (CD) – John J. Van Shura, Jr
- Supranos – third season (TV) – Armin Paya
- Stereophile (April 1998) – Douglas Erickson
- The Equalizer (TV) – Roger A. Miller
- Law & Order – Oct 30th (TV) – Jeffrey Catalano
- Deep Threat (movie) – Dan Barnhard
- The Manhattan Project (movie) – Robert B. McKeever
- Cen-Ar (movie) – Marc Drewek
- Stereophile (November 2002) – David McLeod

For David McLeod it was almost too easy. He spotted the Nagra PL-L Preamp on the cover of the November Stereophile. Of course, so did hundreds of others. So, our congratulations to David for his quick response. For the rest of you, keep in mind that the more obscure the sighting, the better your chance of being first. Think you’ve spotted a Nagra that everyone else has missed? For a complete list of past sightings, visit our web site at www.audiophilesystems.com/nagra.

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a beryllium diaphragm driver, again with hugely impressive results.

This was Focal-JMlab’s new Grande Utopia Be (see my November 2002 “Industry Update,” p.30), which is just going into production, and whose “Be” suffix is also the periodic-table symbol for “Beryllium.” Eighteen months after my last visit to St. Etienne, the company has undergone a surprising number of changes, some of which I’ll describe in due course. Beryllium tweeter domes — inverted, of course — are just the tip of the iceberg, though Focal-JMlab is inordinately proud of the fact that it has developed the necessary machinery for making beryllium diaphragms that, they claim, are only half the thickness — around 20µm — of JBL’s.

A high point of my visit was the couple of hours I spent with a collection of my favorite discs and a pair of the Grande Utopia Be’s in the company’s well-appointed, good-size listening room. The system comprised a Mark Levinson No.390S CD player, No.380S preamplifier, No.336 power amp, and Transparent speaker cables.

With an unfamiliar listening room and system, I’m very cautious about jumping to any absolute judgment of a loudspeaker’s worth. But I have to admit that the sound of the Grande Utopia Be had plenty going for it. The bottom end might have been smoother and crisper, but that was undoubtedly a room effect. Otherwise, the notes I made at the time are very positive indeed.

The sound had brilliant headroom, giving a very relaxed effect overall while revealing lots of subtle details on some very familiar recordings. Strings and brass had nice texture, and difficult frictive and sibilant consonants, such as s, z, and ß, had a lovely naturalness that was clean and crisp without being in any way romanticized.

Still, under such circumstances I’m much happier with more relative comparisons. After an hour or so, I suggested we switch from the new Grande Utopia Be’s to the original Grande Utopia, introduced in 1995. I’d had little previous direct experience of these, which are too large for most British homes.

The session proved a real shocker. I couldn’t quite believe how dull and boring the original Utopias sounded after the new model, and couldn’t help wondering whether they were truly representative, or had in some way been “nobbled,” the better to portray the new model. But I don’t believe Focal-JMlab would stoop so low. Rather, I suspect we now live in a time when loudspeaker performance is improving quite rapidly, possibly due to advances in simulation software techniques. In the context of the state of the loudspeaker art, seven years is a long time — the improvement ought to be substantial. Moreover, the improvement I heard in the Grande Utopia was roughly proportionate with the less dramatic but still considerable advance that I recently heard at B&W’s Steynig labs, when I compared 2001’s Nautilus 800 with 1998’s Nautilus 801.

Is the new Grande Utopia Be simply an old Grande Utopia whose titanium-oxide tweeter has been replaced with a beryllium dome?

Is the new Grande Utopia Be simply an old Grande Utopia whose titanium-oxide tweeter has been replaced with a beryllium dome? Can owners of the older model perform a simple upgrade on their speakers? Apparently not. Like the Volkswagen Beetle, the new Be might look like its predecessor, but virtually every element has been re-engineered; hardly any parts are shared.

The new Be tweeter represents a far more radical change than simply substituting the diaphragm material. It still has an unusually strong (2 Teslas) magnetic field, but instead of creating this, as the Grand Utopia did, with a large neodymium magnet and carbon-free Telar 57 pole-pieces, the Be uses a combination of samarium cobalt (for its high Curie point, which means it’s unaffected by high temperatures) surrounded by a neodymium “focus ring.” The Be also deliberately operates with the actual magnetic gap in saturation, so that the driving force is unaffected by signal modulation. The entire tweeter is built on a substantial alloy faceplate.

More changes: The original Grande Utopia’s lead lining is now gone, partly for environmental reasons; the Be’s cabinet performance is significantly better because of strategic bracing; the front baffle is now 50mm thick and horizontally convex; and the Grande Utopia Be’s total weight is 95 lbs, compared to the original’s 80 lbs. Also, the crossover network and components have been drastically revised; for example, the in-

Stereophile, February 2003
Arcam’s awesome amps

When you win the lottery and begin to plan your ultimate home cinema system, there are two brands you’ll probably be steered towards: Lexicon, from the US, and Meridian, from dear old Blighty. And there’s a good reason why: these two brands have consistently pushed the home cinema boundaries further, and for longer, than any rival, and at the high-end of AV, it’s track record, not brand name, that counts. Without a home cinema pedigree, trying to gain membership to this particularly prestigious private club is hard with a huge H.

But that doesn’t stop the occasional brave soul from trying, and this month it’s Arcam’s turn, with the launch of the AV8 surround processor and its matching multichannel power amplifier, the P7. There’s no point beating about the bush: we reckon that they’ve cracked it. The AV8/P7 pairing is very, very special indeed.

There’s so much technology on show, it’s hard to know where to start, so forgive us if we head to the highlights. The AV8/P7 is a THX Ultra2 certified surround-sound pairing (see panel) designed to provide the very best in home cinema performance, as well as excellent hi-fi quality. The £3000 AV8 supports pretty much every surround processing mode around: THX Surround EX, Dolby Digital, Dolby Pro-Logic II, DTS Neo:6, DTS-ES Matrix 6.1, DTS-ES Discrete 6.1, Dolby Pro-Logic II, the lot. It also allows you to run in THX Ultra2 mode, with seven speakers (two as ‘centre-rear’ units) and, as you’d expect, has a vast array of audio inputs and outputs. The £2500 P7, meanwhile, delivers a spectacular 150w into seven loudspeaker channels (rated at 8 ohms), rising to 230w x 7 into 4-ohm speakers. Put another way: the P7 can provide 1610w. Blimey.

Setup is made as easy as it could be by virtue of top-quality onscreen graphics and a fine learning remote handset. And once you’ve configured your speaker system, assigned all your digital inputs and done all the other tweaks that a top-end AV set entails, there’s only one word to describe the resulting sound: sensational. During a particularly powerful passage from Star Wars: Attack of the Clones, one reviewer commented that the hairs on his head were standing up, but it wasn’t just excitement that was disturbing the coiffure: it was sheer sonic force, outright air-shifting, sofa-shaking muscle. And that’s quite something, especially because the Arcam manages to generate such amazing levels of force and drive while remaining utterly smooth and refined.

What is THX Ultra 2?
The latest evolution of THX’s ever-changing home cinema performance standard, THX Ultra2 is designed to provide optimum performance for both music and movies using seven loudspeakers and a subwoofer (or multiple subwoofers). The arrangement of loudspeakers uses two “centre-rear” designs, two conventional rears, and the standard three front speakers; and Ultra2-certified processors are capable of channeling audio from any incoming source signal, whether conventional 5.1 or true “extended-surround”, through all seven speakers.

As yet, only two manufacturers have produced THX Ultra2 speaker systems — comparatively reasonably priced kit from Jamo and one super-high-end offering from Snell — although you can use existing THX Ultra speaker systems with good results if you prefer (assuming, of course, you purchase an additional pair of centre-rear loudspeakers).
Reduction to the essentials: The Karat series from Canton combines pure design with pure listening pleasure. State-of-the-art technology in simple yet elegant furniture quality cabinets represents the Canton ideal of loudspeakers. Information about the Karat series as well as the complete line of Canton loudspeakers is available in our new “Living HiFi” Magazine. To receive a free copy, please contact Canton, 1723 Adams Street NE, Minneapolis, MN 55413, call 612-706-9250, or visit www.cantonusa.com.
ductor is now wound with silver-plated multi-strand cable.

Similar revisions are planned for the other Utopia models, all of which will feature the beryllium tweeter and be launched in the first six months of the year. Following the Grande Utopia Be will be the Alto Utopia (replacing the Mezzo); then the Nova Utopia (replacing the Utopia); a new, more compact Micro Utopia; the LCR-style Diva Utopia; and the compact, floorstanding Petite Utopia.

Focal-JMlab company tailors its drive-units very precisely to specific applications—it makes no fewer than 200 variations of its basic models, and has put a lot of development into its W-sandwich cone drivers. For example, the Grand Utopia Be's midrange driver cone is now an "open sandwich," with two thin layers of woven glass fiber giving optimum sound velocity, backed by a single, thicker layer of stiff foam that provides more stiffness and a degree of controllable damping. The motor uses a "power flower" magnet array of six small magnets clustered around the pole-piece core, an arrangement that combines high and consistent magnetic flux without the need for tight machining tolerances.

I was also given a scoop preview of Focal's brand new initiative to establish a foothold in the pro-audio sector. A new project has been set up under engineer Philippe Bobineau, who has previously worked for both Tannoy and Turbo-sound in England, and its first product was due to debut at the NAMM LA show in January. Stressing its unique beryllium tweeter and W-Sandwich cone drivers, this is a high performance three-way desktop monitor, actively powered with DSP networks and time alignment. Built in mirror-image stereo pairs (with little thought for 5.1 symmetry), it's shaped a little like an over-size Bose 301, pentagonal in plan and about 1.2cu ft in volume. Mid and treble drivers are on the slim inward over-angled face, the bass unit points forward, and an ABR is on the outside face.

Focal-JMlab has completed its move to an industrial estate near the edge of St. Etienne, where it has much more space to operate, plenty of room for further expansion, and a spanning new headquarters building. The firm's marketing strategy involves gradually de-emphasizing the JMlab name to focus on the longer-established Focal name.

US: IOWA
Barry Willis

PC manufacturer Gateway, Inc. appears intent on expanding into the home entertainment arena. Just a month after launching a 42" plasma television at the breakthrough price of $3000, Gateway announced a partnership with music subscription service PressPlay that will enable legal downloads to consumers' computers.

Purchasers of new Gateway computers will also receive a pre-loaded 8.5-gigabyte music library—the so-called "Gateway Music Vault by PressPlay"—and pre-installed PressPlay software. The 8.5GB Music Vault includes approximately 2000 popular songs, according to a December 5 announcement. Older computers can be upgraded with a Gateway Music Vault that includes a $150, 40GB hard-drive package.

The pre-loaded playlist—the "Mega Pack"—is said to include songs from all five major music conglomerates, in addition to many independent labels. Music fans who want to take the system for a test drive can sign up for a free three-day trial period called the Basic Pack, according to Gateway marketing vice president Brad Shaw. An intermediate option is the $30 Genre Pack, which offers 150 songs from one of seven popular music genres. The partners have addressed portability rights, according to the announcement. If a subscription lapses, any tracks a customer has saved will remain playable.

Convenience is a big part of the Gateway Music Vault pitch. With a 56kbps dial-up connection, it would take a music fan approximately 480 hours of continuous downloading, or two months of eight-hour days, to acquire the library that comes loaded on the new computers. "Digital music is one of the things that's helping us differentiate ourselves in an increasingly commodified market," Shaw noted.

The Gateway/PressPlay partnership is a fascinating twist in the continuing struggle of record labels against piracy, and proof that record labels and technology companies will continue to experiment until they find a formula that works for everyone—artists, copyright holders, content distributors, and consumers. "The Gateway Music Vault by PressPlay is a great example of the technology and recording industries working together to drive innovation and ultimately serve consumer demand for legitimate digital music," said Gateway chairman and CEO Ted Waat. One goal is to eliminate the popular conception that downloading is piracy while supporting "consumers' right to enjoy digital music legally," he added.
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“Y”ou have to come over and hear this.”

This was the fall of 1988. My friend David Wolf had just opened Audio Images, a high-end hi-fi salon in New Canaan, Connecticut.1 David was lining up brands — always dicey for a new dealer.

“What is it, David? Did you land Mark Levinson? Krell?”

“I got YBA.”

There was such hope in his voice.

“It’s a line of French electronics and the stuff sounds fabulous.”

In many ways, YBA seemed just right for the upscale Fairfield County suburb where David had located his store — European, beautifully made, rather like a fine Swiss watch. Surely, the well-off denizens of New Canaan and Darien would be impressed.

I loved the place. Everything seemed so right — except, perhaps, that you had to climb a long flight of stairs to get to it. And there were no windows to walk by. Still, the store was friendly, social, comfortable — surely it would catch on.

It did, in a way. Audio Images became a destination store that drew audiophiles from as far away as New York City, especially to the wine-and-cheese parties late on Saturday afternoons. People would meet, mix, mingle — audiophiles, writers, even musicians. I’m not sure how many people bought, though.

But the locals, in the words of the late Samuel Goldwyn, stayed away in droves. The sad thing was, David would have done just fine a few years later, with the advent of home theater and custom installations.

It was David who introduced me to YBA. Shortly after he closed his doors, distribution of the line passed from Sumiko to Roy Hall, aka Music Hall.

Roy called me one morning, all chipper. “I think I am going to take on YBA.”

“Great stuff!” I replied. “But is it really your thing? Aren’t you into tap your foot, wiggle your big toe, bang your speakers up against the back wall?”

Roy stopped me with words I can’t print. Then, enthusiasm undiminished, he continued. “Yes, I know the stuff is different from British gear. But it’s magnificently made. Did you know that Yves-Bernard André makes some of his own parts — or has them custom-made? He makes some of his own resistors, for instance. He goes to incredible lengths to isolate components from vibrations.”

Death to bad vibes.

“It apparently makes a difference,” said Roy.

“I’d like to review the YBA Intégré. It might be fun to compare it in the same column with an ‘umble Creek.”

But by opening my big mouth, I dashed any hope of receiving a review sample.

A few months later, Roy gave up the YBA line. “It was too much like hard work,” he told me.

YBA wasn’t the easiest sell, perhaps. Quality instead of quantity. Elegant. Stylish. Much more about la restitution sonore than PRAT (pace, rhythm, acceleration, timing.) In French, if I understand properly, the word restitution combines the meanings of restitution (in the English sense) and reproduction.

I’ve razzed Roy about YBA ever since he gave it up. Daniel Jacques, of Audio Plus Services, headquartered in Montréal and already YBA’s Canadian distributor, assumed the line’s US distribution as well. M. Jacques promptly sent me the YBA Intégré that Roy should have sent but hadn’t. I reviewed it in the December 1996 Stereophile (Vol.19 No.12, www.stereophile.com/showarchives.cgi?636). As soon as the column appeared in print, I phoned Roy to rile him.

“That Daniel Jacques. He knows good sound,” I said.

“Darned right he does. He distributes Creek in Canada.”

The Intégré is still available, and probably will be for years to come. That’s the way it is with YBA. Models go into production and stay in production for a decade or more. Yves-Bernard doesn’t discover a new miracle circuit every two years, clearing dealers’ shelves and leaving owners with last year’s models.

If you opt for the standard Intégré, you’ll probably want the DT (dual transformer) version. Basically, there are separate power supplies for the two channels. In its line-stage-only version, the Intégré DT sells for $2350. Add $150 for a moving-magnet (MM) phono stage and $300 for remote control. If you have a low-output moving-coil (MC) cartridge, you’ll need a step-up device; YBA offers an outboard transformer, the MC Module, for $400.

The Intégré DT is rated at 50Wpc into 8 ohms, 90Wpc into 4 ohms. As M. André himself once told me, many years ago, “Eet iz not zee size, but what you do wizz czt. N’est-ce pas?”

The Intégré Passion

The YBA Intégré remains an excellent value. But, as I had to tell my friend Matt, who owns one, the new Intégré Passion is even better — which it needs to be, at almost twice the price. The line-level-only version retails for $4500 with remote included. Add $150 for a built-in MM phono stage and $400 for the MC step-up transformer.

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1 No connection with the store of the same name in Whitehall, Pennsylvania, which continues to this day.
The Intégré Passion is rated to deliver 100Wpc into 8 ohms and 170W into 4 ohms. The Passion comes in black or silver-colored brushed aluminum, the fit and finish are superb, and it weighs just 24.25 lbs.

Following Yves-Bernard's design philosophy, the Passion is quite compact: 16.75" wide by 3.5" high by 14.5" deep. Yes, you can get more for your money. Or can you? Looking for more, does the audiophile often get less? You can own some other manufacturers' separates for less than the price of the Passion Intégré, but you won't own a YBA.

Like M. André's other designs, the Passion is a purist design. There are no tone controls. No balance control. No volume potentiometer, either. You have to listen at just one level. Je ris mon mauvaisrire. (I laugh my evil laugh.) Only kidding. Sort of.

You can bypass the volume control. Connect any line-level source to the Passion's video input. Now press the Video button on the remote and hold it for three seconds. Eh, voilà—a home-theater bypass mode where you use the volume control on your surround-sound processor.

Volume control on the Intégré Passion, meanwhile, is achieved by an array of relay-control resistors, which "effectively eliminates the inherent problems of [a] potentiometer — non-linearity, difficult matching—and allows a more natural sound." Only two resistors are in the circuit at any one time.

M. YBA is fanatical about "le contrôle de l'énergie vibrotaire," one of the things that distinguish his marque. He's had the Intégré Passion's owner's manual translated into English, but it's far more fun in French. M. André refers to "les vibrations mécaniques" and, more darkly, to "les vibrations parasites." In English, he wrote about "draining" these bad vibes. In French, he referred to "une excellente évacuation des vibrations."

M. André was way out in front about vibrations when he launched YBA in the mid-1980s. Things were shaking all over then. Such vibration-control accessories as Mod Squad Tiptoes and VPI Bricks were just being introduced—and dismissed by some audiophiles (and audio journalists) as risible, which of course they weren't. Vibration control has been a distinguishing characteristic of YBA gear from the start, and perhaps no one knows as much about it as M. André.

Like other YBA models, the Intégré Passion has three feet—you can't rock a tripod. Ringing each foot, inside a special notch, is what looks like a rubbery tube damper. Its purpose? To further control vibrations.

Surely, these little rings couldn't possibly make a difference, I told myself. Well, easy enough to try. I slid them off and listened. I won't definitely say I heard a difference—but danged if I didn't think I heard some improvement when I slipped the rings back on. Possibly I am losing my marbles.

Danged if I didn't think I heard some improvement when I slipped the rings back on. Possibly I am losing my marbles.

Years ago, M. André advised me never to place any hi-fi gear on a piece of glass (one of the worst things you can do, he told me at the time)—advice he repeats in the Intégré Passion owner's manual. If you have to use glass, make it automotive glass, he wrote. Wood or granite are preferable.

I mentioned la restitution sonore. French hi-fi scribes use this term regularly. If I understand correctly, it has as much to do with restitution as resolution. It means not only resolving detail, but preserving the harmonic structure. When single-ended tube buffs rave about SET sound, what they're usually talking about is la restitution sonore—sonic purity, if you will. The very simple construction of SET output tubes, like the 2A3 or 300B, may do less to alter harmonic relationships than more powerful output tubes. What happens, I think, is that there is less smearing of harmonic relationships in time. Or, to put it another way, with a lot of hi-fi, harmonics go out of whack, as some octaves are shifted in relation to others. I can't prove this, however.

"Mechanical vibrations in the air have a negative impact on the purity of sound," declared M. André. "The impact of these vibrations depends on the size of the preamplifier, the quality of materials used, and the rigidity of the construction."

So, while American manufacturers like to build big, M. André prefers to build his products as compactly as possible: "Small physical size moves resonant frequencies out of the audio range."

As always, M. André is thought-provoking. One of my own favorite themes, over the years, has been that small amplifiers tend to sound better than big ones. I've usually ratted on about this in the context of fleawatt wonders—SET amps producing 3-8W of power.

Yves-Bernard seems to be saying something else. He appears to say that the bigger you build it, the more problems you have with those parasitic vibrations—one more reason, perhaps, that a manufacturer's small amplifiers might sound better than its bigger ones.

Like many other top designers, Yves-Bernard believes in minimizing the number of components. "No passive components alter the original purity of the music signal," by which I assume he means that no passive components are placed in the signal path. "[T]he musical signal meets only transistors," he wrote. You wouldn't want your music meeting the wrong element.

The output stage of the Intégré Passion uses two pairs of bipolar transistors per channel. There's no overkill here, but two pairs more than suffice to deliver the commercially desirable 100Wpc. (The older Intégré DT uses a single pair of bipolar output devices per channel to deliver about half the watts.) Remember, the more pairs of output devices you use, the more trouble it is to match them.

Yves-Bernard said he uses no loop feedback in the output stage, and keeps the overall feedback to less than 20dB.

Like the Intégré DT, the Intégré Passion is a dual-mono design, with a separate power supply for each channel. Yves-Bernard uses a pair of grain-oriented double C transformers. In the owner's manual, he explains their advantages over less costly toroidal transformers. Most notably, the primary and the secondary windings are wound separately, achieving such isolation between the two that the windings serve as an AC line filter.

Two pairs of speaker outputs are provided, each offering a somewhat different sound. One pair accepts only banana jacks and has a lower damping factor than the other. M. André says this pair "gives warmer, fuller low frequencies, but with less bass extension, and there is a reduction in transparency." The other pair, with a higher damping factor, is fitted with annoying plastic sheaths, to comply with CE regulations. Slide them off and you can use banana plugs, spades, or a direct-wire connection.

I listened mainly in the high-transparency mode—ie, to the outputs with
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The New THIEL CS1.6

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With its high efficiency and superior sonic performance, the CS1.6 is an ideal choice for both your music and movie needs. Visit our web site at www.thielaudio.com to locate your nearest demonstrating dealer and find out for yourself!

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— Tom Miiller, *The Absolute Sound*, April 2002

CS1.6 PERFORMANCE FEATURES:

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the higher damping factor — using a Sony SCD-XA777ES SACD player and Sonus Faber Cremona speakers. Phono was supplied by a Goldring G1042 MM cartridge in a Rega P25 turntable, eliminating any need, in our living room, for a step-up device. Speaker cables were XLO — they must be 10 years old by now. Interconnects were mostly Nordost Blue Heaven.

With the Intégré Passion, I heard an extraordinary degree of resolution — again, not just detail, but resolution, or SET-like sonic clarity and purity. While the amplifier did not romanticize material, it was surprisingly kind to some older historical classical recordings, many from the 1930s, recently reissued on Naxos. Which is to say that the YBA Intégré Passion never seemed to add an edge of its own.

The Passion delivered what one might expect from a French integrated amplifier: openness, clarity, speed, with no perceived slowing of the music and no perceived thickening of the harmonic soup. If you've heard a French symphony orchestra (or one from Montréal, for that matter) in concert, you know what I mean. The French like their music clear, quick, bracing — I know this is true, because I once attended a concert in Paris with M. Renaud de Vergnette, of Triangle.

Having two different sets of speaker outputs is peculiar, but there does appear to be a purpose. If you want more richness and warmth — more fullness, too, perhaps — you can always use the pair of speaker outputs with the lower damping factor. However, I didn't like the slight loss of resolution — or, restitution.

I wouldn't term the sonic presentation lean or even austere, but I think it headed somewhat in that direction. I've heard other designs go in the same direction — Musical Fidelity's A3.2CR preamp and power amp, for instance, or Conrad-Johnson's MV-60 power amp.

I think that the YBA Intégré Passion establishes a true benchmark reference at the price. Is it the best amplifier ever? Danged if I know. At less than $5000, it's still reasonable, and reinforces my favorite adage: You can have great sound for not a lot of money; you just can't have a lot of it.

With the Intégré Passion, I heard an extraordinary degree of resolution.

I'd mate the Passion with reasonably sensitive speakers, though — maybe a model from JMlab or Triangle. And if your speakers can be biamped, you have an option: use the Intégré Passion for the midrange and treble and a separate YBA power amplifier for the bass. In general, though, I'm with Franco Serblin, of Sonus Faber: I don't like such complications.

I did have a couple of mishaps with the Passion Intégré though, one of them minor.

While substituting the Sonus Faber Minima FM2 speakers for the Sonus Faber Cremonas, I accidentally shorted one of the speaker cables. Poof. The Passion clicked and conked out.

Negligence on my part? Perhaps. I assumed that when the small light on the front panel (a bulb, not an LED) goes out, the speaker outputs are muted. Mais non — current still flows through the speaker outputs. It took only a few seconds, but I'd rendered my first review sample inoperable.

Several weeks later, I did the same to the second sample of the Passion.

Marina had just come home from work. When the cat's away, the mouse will play — and I was playing one of the blues recordings I'd bought at Chad Kassem's Blues at the Crossroads weekend in Salina, Kansas. (Got to go again next October! See you there?)

"Sam, the music is much too loud," she said.

I had one more minute while Marina was in the bathroom, and cranked up the sound for one last blast. That blast was, indeed, the last. The volume level started to decrease, slowly. I ran to unplug the amp, but it was too late.

Fortunately, I'd blown only the Passion's single fuse — a 5-amp slow-blow for North America, and not, as stated in the manual, a 10-amp, which is the right value for Europe. (The manual will be corrected.) The amp was up and running in the time it took me to get to Rat Shack and back.

So, if you drive the Passion into clipping — which is what I probably did — you can expect a fuse to fail. No big deal.

I do have a complaint about the Intégré Passion; others have beeped about it, too. While Yves-Bernard is undoubtedly correct that his array of stepped resistors achieves great purity of sound, I found that the differences in volume between the steps were just too great.

The following is not a complaint, but a comment about the phono stage: I thought it sounded about as good as the one in the original Intégré. Since it adds only $150 to the price, it may be the same one that's found in the original Intégré, but I certainly have no complaint at the price. For the ultimate in phono resolution, you need to spend much more than $150. You should be able to use any MM cartridge, of course, and any MC with an output of about 1.0mV or more. For low-output MCs, of course, you're not limited to YBA's own step-up transformer.

The YBA Intégré Passion is an exceptional piece of equipment. For a solid-state integrated amplifier that costs less than $5000, it achieved a level of performance that set a standard — for me, anyway.

**Portal Audio Panache integrated amplifier**

Despite its name, the Panache is not made in France, but here in the States, by Portal Audio, headquartered in Charlotte, North Carolina. The company is owned and run by Joe Abrams, a longtime veteran of high-end hi-fi who was once closely associated with Threshold.

Threshold. Portal. Get it?

The Portal Audio Panache is an integrated amplifier rated to deliver the magic 100Wpc into 8 ohms and 200Wpc into 4 ohms. Portal sells directly to consumers, mainly by the Internet, and there are no North American dealers. The Panache costs $1795 and the company offers an unusually generous 60-day home trial. You do, however, pay shipping both ways.

Joe didn't say who designed the amplifier, but at Threshold he was long associ-

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**Contacts**

**YBA:** Phlox Electronique, BP-12, F-91440 Bures-sur-Yvette, France. Tel: (33) 1 60 12 51 00. Fax: (33) 1 60 12 50 60. Web: www.phlox-electronique.fr. Distributed in the US by Audio Plus Services, P.O. Box 3047, Plattsburgh, NY 12901. Tel: (800) 663-9352. Fax: (450) 585-5862. Web: www.audioplus services.com.


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With the Panache, using the same Sony SCD-XA777ES SACD player and Sonus Faber Cremona speakers, and let the unit cook for a while. Like the YBA, the Portal Audio Panache ran cool. You can probably leave it on most of the time.

I didn’t hear quite the same extraordinary resolution — oops, restitution — that I had with the much more expensive Passion Intégré, nor did I expect to. The YBA will set you back more than twice the money.

But the Portal Panache came remarkably close, exhibiting very good clarity and harmonic purity. The amp was clear, quick, and clean, with nice body through the midrange and a smoothly extended treble. The Panache did not impart a transitory tinge.

In one respect, the Panache did outperform the Passion. I was able to play it louder into the Sonus Faber Cremona without shutting down the amp or destroying the speakers. I also noted that the bass was somewhat more authoritative with the Panache — more extended, if perhaps not tighter. Piano notes, in particular, seemed to reach lower. I could go loud with less sense of strain — and without blowing a fuse.

Bear in mind, though, that 100Wpc is still 100Wpc. The Portal Panache did not deliver the weight and authority of a much larger amp, nor could I expect it to.

I especially liked the convenience of being able to connect headphones directly. (This mutes the speaker inputs.) Headphones are driven from the power-amp stage, naturally (since there is no active line stage). A simple device takes the signal straight from the speaker output jacks and converts that signal for headphone use. With my Sennheiser HD600 and Grado RS-1 phones, the sound was exceptional. When you think what some people have paid for outboard headphone amps...

Complaints?

Being lazy, I could have done with a remote control — at least a remote volume control. I wasn’t crazy about the styling. The late Henry Kloss could have made this unit look Spartan and sexy at the same time. But there’s nothing shoddy about the construction.

The Portal Audio Panache makes an excellent alternative to, let us say, itty-bitty British integrateds. With its generous power supply and four pairs of output transistors per channel, the Panache should have no problem at all with low-impedance loads, and is probably up to driving most speakers in all but the largest rooms.

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According to Donna the Comet II platter's frame is made of plastic<1> and is constrained by two layers of thin acrylic, and it is actually a plastic sandwiched between two layers of 3/8-inch Plexiglas. Top it off with the Rega RB300 arm, and you get a lot of engineering value for your $934 (add $76 for a locking I-Clamp record clamp). But before I talk about the sound, I have two major bones to pick with the Comet II.

First, the amount of play in the bearing was more than I like to see. Second, the platter's speed was off by about 1% (a 1000Hz tone was actually 1011Hz). Because the Comet II's motor is AC synchronous, you could correct its speed with an outboard motor drive, but that's not a cost-effective solution. If you're considering a Comet II, be sure to insist that your dealer check its speed. Surely, SOTA can machine the pulley to drive the platter at 33 1/3 and 45rpm within a more reasonable 0.5% tolerance. Spinning the platter at or close to the correct speed is a turntable's Job No.1.

Like last month's batch of tables, the Comet II and the others this time were placed on an original Townshend Audio Seismic Sink and fitted with a Sumiko Blue Point high-output moving-coil cartridge ($249) using the moving-magnet phono section of Musical Fidelity's new Tri-Vista integrated amplifier. After "live" auditioning, I made 24-bit/96kHz recordings of LPs played back on the SOTA using the Alesis MasterLink hard-disk recorder. Direct comparisons of the digital dubs revealed that I preferred the sound of the I-Clamp and the Comet's bonded soft platter surface to the Ringmat (sitting on the soft platter surface) without I-Clamp, which tended to cause the music to lose some focus.

Guess what happens when you run about 1% fast? Things sound snappy and lively, but a bit crisp; heavy on transients, light on harmonics. Images are forward on the stage, with a bit of etch added to cymbals and female vocals.
vocals. On the tracks from the two reference discs I recorded— "Bluesville" from Count Basie’s 88 Basie Street (Analog Productions Originals, 180gm reissue); and "Let Me Touch You for Awhile," from Alison Krauss and Union Station’s New Favorite (Diverse Vinyl) — the Comet II’s presentation was slightly aggressive, but with fine dynamic sock and good bass extension and control.

I imagine that running 1% slower — ie, at the correct speed — would give the bass more weight, but I’m not sure what it would do to definition and overall LF integrity. The standup bass on the Krauss track had reasonably good “touch” and focus, but, as it did with most of the ‘tables in this survey, lacked the last bit of stop/start control that would make it sound completely convincing as a plucked instrument. Basie’s piano was appealing in terms of transient attack, and the reverb behind it was cleanly delivered, but, probably because of the speed shift, it sounded a bit hard, as did the plunger-muted trumpet and, especially, the horn section.

Of all the non-suspended turntables in this survey, the Comet II was, by far, the least subject to outside vibrations of the finger-tap variety. When I tapped on the Seismic Sink while the stylus rested on a stationary LP, I heard almost nothing through the speakers. Same result when I tapped on the plinth itself — impressive results for a non-suspended design. Listening to the plinth through a stethoscope revealed a moderate amount of motor noise — not surprising, considering that the motor is hard-mounted to it.

The stylus’ vertical tracking angle (VTA) can’t be adjusted with the Rega RB300 arm. In exchange, you get rigidity. You can set a set of shims and adjust the VTA, but this requires you to remove the arm. If you don’t mind this, or the Comet II’s plain-Jane looks, this package offers a great deal of engineering value and physical substance. Given that the RB300 arm alone sells for $425, you get a lot of ‘table for the additional $500. Spend the extra $76 for the 1-Clamp while you’re at it, and make sure your sample runs at the right speed — or within 0.5% of it.

Rega P3: $750

Speaking of product placement, I just saw a Rega P3 and some LPs perched subly on a $50000 wall unit in a Maurice Villency ad in the New York Times. Gee, between this and a VPI TNT in full regalia in a recent edition of the Style section, there’s a regular analog revival going on at the Times. Just don’t expect to see any such revival — or anything at all about real audio (as opposed to RealAudio) — in the paper’s Circuits section. Or about HDTV, or anything about quality audio/video. I don’t know why the food section doesn’t just serve up burgers and fries every week. The humiliation of the computer geeks who now run Circuits continues.

The venerable Rega Planar 3 turntable has been upgraded to P3 status ($750) with a new, ultra-low-mass plinth of microfiber, laminated with high-rigidity phenolic resin for faster, more effective dissipation of vibrational energy. Of greater significance is a new electronic motor-controller circuit — a simplified version of the motor phase-trim technology used in Rega’s P25 — that allows the motor to be hard-mounted to the plinth instead of via an elastomer suspension. While the suspension effectively isolated motor vibrations, it also allowed the motor to move, causing the pulley-to-subplatter distance to vary, which created microvariations in speed, which in turn resulted in a lack of ultimate focus and some softening and smearing of transients. Listening through a stethoscope placed on the P3’s plinth, I heard very little motor noise. The motor-controller circuit seems to work.

Otherwise, the P3 is unchanged from the Planar 3. It uses Rega’s RB300 arm, and the same motor, pulley, O-ring, subplatter, bearing, and felt mat as the Planar 3. Like the SOTA Comet II, the P3 ran a full 1% fast. Again, I don’t know if this represents mere sample-to-sample variation or if it’s a plot to give these ‘tables a snappy delivery, as some who shall remain nameless have charged. If you own a Rega turntable, have access to a voltmeter with a “Hz” setting, and have a reliable test LP with a 1000Hz tone on it, let me know how yours runs. When I reviewed the Planar 3 back in December 1996, I don’t remember if I even bothered to check its speed—an egregious mistake I blame on my reckless youth.

The P3 continues the Planar 3’s sonic heritage: it’s fast, slightly forward, and a bit etched. It’s lively as hell but coherent, the music all arriving at close to the same time — an easy-to-listen-to turntable with a well-balanced palette of subtractive faults.

Tonaly, the Rega sounded remarkably similar to the SOTA Comet II. Both had surprisingly deep bass extension and control, though the SOTA was a bit warmer and richer-textured in the lower midbass and the Rega had a tauter rhythmic foundation. Clearly, your choice of cartridge will be a much bigger determinant of the final sound. Was the similarity due to the RB300 arm? The 1% speed error? Both? I don’t know.

The more I learn about tonearm behavior, the less Rega’s O-ring–suspended counterweight makes sense to me. The compressed O-ring is a spring with a high resonant frequency that’s probably in the range of music — it can’t decouple the counterweight one whit, and can probably do only bad things to the sound. That’s one reason some Rega aficionados prefer the less expensive RB250 arm, whose counterweight rotates in and out on a thread engraved in the counterweight shaft. The connection is therefore direct and springless. While a truly decoupled counterweight might be even better, getting rid of the spring is a step in the
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right direction. Express Machining makes just such a counterweight for the RB-300, RB600, and RB900 arms, but I didn’t have one on hand for this review.

The other controversy with the RB300, 600, and 900 arms is the VTF setting spring and how the bearing associated with it is suspended to allow for the spring. Some Rega fanatics claim that this arrangement actually reduces rigidity and thus makes the RB250 potentially the best-sounding Rega tonearm, even if the RB250’s bearings are not of the same quality as those in the more expensive models, and the time it takes to build an RB250 is not as great.

**Big Surprise: the Nottingham Analogue Horizon: $1000**

The least expensive Nottingham Analogue turntable, the Horizon ($800, $1000 with Rega RB250 tonearm), resembles a stripped-down version of the company’s most expensive ‘table, the AnnaLog (review in the works). Eschewing the traditional plinth approach to turntable design, the Horizon features a narrow slab of what I think is high-density fiberboard, supported by three attached half-cylinders made of some sort of synthetic material, each containing a threaded leveling foot. The main bearing and the motor sit on this slab, while the armboard—made of the same material as the half-cylinders—is attached to the rear right half-cylinder, and is thus somewhat isolated from the motor. This design is similar to the big AnnaLog, which uses an enormous “log” of wood, supposedly made of slices from a 400-year-old mahogany beam taken from an old church. (I’m checking into this story.) The Rega RB250 arm is supplied with a mounting collar with a locking VTA adjustment insert.

The Horizon’s platter, by far the heaviest among these budget ‘tables, appears to be of cast iron, like the AnnaLog’s. It weighs a hefty 10.8 lbs and spins on a bearing system used on far more expensive Nottingham Analogue ‘tables. The instructions were thoroughly inadequate—but, in high-end audio, what else is new?

Like other Nottingham ‘tables, the Horizon has an oversized, two-step motor pulley and an undersized motor (let’s hear the applause) that drives the platter via a soft, pliable, elastic rubber O-ring. There’s also a thick elastomer damper ringing the platter perimeter, and a foam platter pad. You plug the ‘table in and the motor begins to fibrillate, the platter remaining stationary—there’s no On/Off switch. The designer says no harm is done to the motor in this mode. When you want to play a record, you put it on the platter and give it a spin to get it started—the motor lacks sufficient power to do the job itself. I think designer Tom Fletcher has it right: No motor is best, but if you must have one, use the smallest one you can. Less vibration and noise is better than more—especially in a budget design such as this, which places the motor and main bearing on the same slab of HDF.

My biggest concerns about the Horizon were the amounts of vibra-

| Nottingham Analogue Horizon turntable |

**When I measured the Horizon’s speed, I was surprised and gratified to find it dead on.**

[Contact Information]

SOTA Comet: 10830 S. Nagle, P.O. Box 247, Worth, IL 60482.
Tel: (708) 246-9815 or (800) 772-SOTA. Fax: (708) 246-9778. Web: www.sotaturntables.com.

Rega P3: Lauerman Audio Imports, 519 Noelton Drive, Knoxville, TN 37919. Tel: (423) 521-6464. Fax: (423) 521-9494. Web: www.regaco.co.uk.


**Grand Conclusion**

My survey comprised six turntables priced from $499 to $1500, each with a variety of strengths and weaknesses.
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Consider the coelacanth. In 1938, a healthy specimen of this Paul Simon-sized fish was pulled from the Indian Ocean, not far from the mouth of South Africa’s Chalumna River. But prior to that happy event (depending on your perspective, of course: the sight of the coelacanth’s long, fleshy fins probably made for some very unhappy creationists), the scientific community believed the animal in question was extinct, and had been for 65 million years.

We have also learned that these elusive dinotrout spent at least some of the last 65,000,065 years working on their act, if not quite taking it on the road: Underwater footage of a small colony of coelacanths still living off the coast of Madagascar shows them spending many a long hour standing on their heads, for no apparent reason. Ah, the irrepressible whimsy of the living dead.

This all came to mind when I went to the grand opening of Avantgarde Music & Cinema, a New York City showroom set up to demonstrate the German hornspeaker line after which it is named, along with a few select brands of associated gear. And while getting their own Manhattan showroom may not prove that horns are forever safe from the indignities of extinction, you have to admit: It’s a pretty big deal. The only fair comparison would be if the coelacanth came back, increased its numbers a thousand-fold, and landed a television deal.

Horns, of course, are the oldest kind of baffle on earth. You dabble in horn theory when you cup your hands around your mouth and holler at someone — an instinctual practice that begins in early childhood — and the PA system at every public school, rock concert, and internment camp you’ve attended probably used horns, too. Horns can function as loudspeakers, amplifiers, musical instruments, or different combinations thereof, but at their most basic level they’re something else altogether: Horns are acoustic transformers. They

**You dabble in horn theory when you cup your hands around your mouth and holler at someone.**

swap high pressure and high acoustic impedance at one end for low pressure and low impedance at the other, which is a useful trick if you want your small loudspeaker diaphragm to get a bite on the big, nebulous volume of air in your room. And you do.

Of course, there’s no such thing as a perfect transformer of any sort. Some are more or less efficient — and more or less distorting — than others. And so it goes with horn loudspeakers. The trouble is, for whatever reason, horn design is as potentially disastrous as it is potentially rewarding: No speaker on earth is more efficient or dynamic than a good horn, but good horns are rare, and all the rest range from the merely unsuccessful to the downright horrid.

Designing a horn loudspeaker is also very, very difficult — much harder than, say, filling another me-too truncated pyramid with off-the-shelf drivers, pretending to modify them, calling the results a “Monitor,” and selling it for $10,000 and up a pair — and the high-end audio establishment has an answer to that challenge: don’t bother. Amplifier power is cheap (and even if it isn’t cheap, it’s profitable!), so efficiency is irrelevant. And the high-end press doesn’t seem to think we need anything new in the way of dynamics. Why, they’ve already rewarded the industry by inventing yet another new concept: microdynamics. This now sits proudly on the shelf alongside transparency, slam, bloom, yin/yang, and other things that don’t have a damn thing to do with music, or with much of anything else, for that matter.

Yet some folks never stopped believing in the hornspeaker — like the Japanese hobbyists who eventually sparked a tiny single-ended-triode revolution in this country, and the recording industry pros who know from experience how uncannily alive a good horn can sound, even when you aren’t benefit of power.

Then there are designers who simply believe that the full-range horn is the most “organic” of speakers, and that to ignore the horn is to ignore everything nature itself has to offer our hobby. Avantgarde Acoustic’s Matthias Ruf is one of these: “Horns are natural,” he says — not only in that cupped-hands sense, but because “they are mathematically natural as well.”

In a field where too many people design by whim, Ruf is that rarity: a real engineer who is also a music fan. His enthusiasm for horns seems driven by the fact that he enjoys the mathematical challenge of designing a good one, as well as the technological challenge of proper construction. Talking horns with Matthias Ruf — an enjoyable if intellectually tiring thing for this non-engineer — is like talking about turbocharging with proponents of that technology: You come away wondering...
Listening

why anyone with half a brain would overlook such a potent and otherwise untapped source of power. (And look how popular turbocharging has become, after its humble beginnings in the hands of autoflakes like Saab enthusiasts—eg, me. And look how much better turbocharging has become: It no longer sticks out like a sore thumb, the way it used to. Now what does that remind you of?)

On the less mathematical side of things we have New Yorker Bob Visintainer, the man behind Avantgarde Music & Cinema. In his own Victor Kiam-esque way, Visintainer liked his first pair of Avantgarde Duos so much that he bought a second pair, and he liked them so much he approached the speaker’s US distributor, Jim Smith, and suggested giving the speakers their own store in a city where some audio dealers are notorious for their arrogance, condescension, and unceasing efforts on behalf of the cult of the trophy system status quo. Smith said yes, and on November 13 he and some associates gathered at Avantgarde Music & Cinema for a meet’n’greet.

AM&G is on the edge of New York’s Chelsea district,1 a perennially interesting area that offers the shopper a number of offbeat but generally friendly and affordable choices for antiques, houseplants, and other home furnishings. Bob Visintainer’s spacious new place fits right in, with its nice oriental rugs and subtle lighting. And then there’s the music…

The large main room at AM&G has a poor end and a rich end, the former set aside for Avantgarde’s second-newest loudspeaker, the Solo. This is a compact, self-powered, concentric two-way, with an active equalizer that brings the Solo’s low-frequency response down to an impressive 30Hz. Unusually for a concentric, the 1” high-frequency driver doesn’t use the bass cone as its horn; instead, it’s nestled at the throat of its own 4” polyurethane horn, which itself doubles as a phase plug for the 12” treated-paper bass driver. Solos cost $7000/pair and up, depending on finish; custom stands are additional.

At the other end of the room, literally and figuratively, is Matthias Ruf’s latest creation: an enormous bass horn called, ta-da, the Basshorn. It’s a modular, self-powered hornspeaker: You can have two, four, or six of them in your room (more than six will kill you), the minimum space requirement for two being approximately 270 square feet. Each single module contains a pair of Avantgarde’s proprietary 12” drivers firing into a horn whose shape is part spherical, part exponential. Onboard electronics provide 200W for each individual driver, but more than that, they contain Ruf’s new patent-pending ADRIC circuit. This is intended to allow the use of a horn mouth of moderate size while electronically simulating the radiation resistance of a larger one. (Radiation resistance is the acoustic equivalent of electrical resistance in an amplifier circuit: It is the frequency-dependent load that is required in order to generate power.) Thus it is possible for designer Ruf to get an 18Hz tone out of a bass horn that has “only” a 9ft² mouth.

So what does half a ton of lightning-fast, ultra-efficient, 18Hz-deep, true horn bass sound like? Avantgarde Acoustics’s founder, the usually soft-spoken Holger Fronius, says the six-module Basshorn system he’s presently enjoying in his home “relegates other commercial bass systems to the Kindergarten.” (There’s something cool about hearing a real German use that word.) The Basshorns cost $20,000/pair—but if you’re already in the market for Avantgarde’s top-of-the-line Trio loudspeakers, you can skip the powered subwoofers that are normally a part of the package, and Avantgarde will give you $16,000 credit toward a pair of Basshorns instead.

In between those extremes at AM&G are upgraded versions of the three mainstays of Avantgarde Acoustic’s hornspeaker line: the three-way Uno ($12,000 and up), the slightly larger three-way Duo ($17,000 and up), and the four-

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1 Avantgarde Music & Cinema, 27 West 24th Street, Suite 502, New York, Tel: (212) 229-1842. E-mail: TheHornStore@aol.com.
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...the closest approach to the original sound
way Trio ($43,000 and up). All three are now being sold in 3.0 versions, and Matthias Ruf makes a point of saying that all existing Avantgarde products are fully upgradeable. All are available in a range of automotive colors that are deeply gorgeous but helliaciously expensive: The ABS plastic horns are devilishly difficult to finish, I’m told. My favorite is Zenith Blue Metallic, probably because it matches a certain car I want to buy.

Also in use at AM&C are accessories from Cardas, RPG, Grand Prix Audio, and Elrod Power Systems, and electronics from Audio Aero (France), Viva (Italy), and Audiopax (Brazil). All range from at least mildly interesting to downright exotic—especially Amadeo Schenbr’s beautiful Viva tube amps, which can be ordered with custom automotive finishes to match a given pair of Avantgarde loudspeakers. But of the electronics on display, it was the Audiopax Model 88 amplifier that most intrigued me. [Bob Deutsch will be reviewing this amplifier in the March issue.—Ed] Yes, the Audiopax is a tube amp, and yes, it’s single-ended. But beyond that, it’s a bit hard to describe…

The Audiopax Model 88 is a $9970/pair monoblock rated for 30W a side, with a stated frequency response that goes all the way to 95kHz. It uses KT88 output tubes, but doesn’t split the music signal about its axis, à la push-pull operation. It finds a clever way of using asymmetry to cancel out distortion at its output. The Model 88 doesn’t have tube rectification per se, but it does have…

Well, you can see what I’m getting at. A fair and full description takes a great deal more space than this, and in any event the Model 88 really must be heard and seen to be appreciated: Beyond everything else I can (or, apparently, can’t) say about the 88, it’s a pleasure to find a physical design that is completely, 100% fresh, new, and inviting without looking silly and done. Bravo to Audiopax and its founding designer, the very friendly Eduardo de Lima, who speaks English a little better than at least one “elected” official I can think of.

In other words, whereas the selection at some audio salons puts you to sleep the minute you walk in their doors (careful—that’s how they get your wallet out of your pants), there’s enough totally cool stuff at AM&C that I could’ve spent a whole day just talking with the folks there about hi-fi, and I still wouldn’t have been bored. And that’s without listening to music—which was difficult to do with a grand-opening party going on, anyway. So I didn’t try that hard.

“Everyone complains that hi-fi is dying. But the way I look at it, people still like music.” —Jim Smith

Music and horns

“Speakers that need 40 or 50W to get ‘em going just can’t communicate all the subtleties that convey the emotion in music.”

Jim Smith, president of Avantgarde USA, is telling me why he thinks Avantgarde hornspeakers are destined for even greater success in America. I had asked whether he thought it was ironic—you know, the whole idea of building an audio shop in New York City around a type of loudspeaker that, until recently, most audio maven’s had written off, and that a great many reviewers still refuse to take seriously. “We’re on a mission to change your lives,” Smith says, and even as he deflates his own observation with a good-natured laugh, it’s plain to see he isn’t just joking.

“Everyone complains that hi-fi is dying,” he continues. “But the way I look at it, people still like music. They didn’t change: The dealers and the manufacturers are the ones who changed. That’s why hi-fi is dying; We killed it. The customers never left us, we left them.”

How does Smith plan to reach those people? “First of all, I will never, and I mean never, demonstrate hi-fi with an audiophile disc. It has to be on the shelf at Borders or I won’t play it. I want to reach people who love music, the way they loved it before hi-fi. I don’t want to just impress you with sound.

“Go to any hotel: It doesn’t matter where, or what kind of place it is. When you walk past the lounge, if there’s live music there, you know it’s live. And ‘liveness’ has nothing to do with soundstaging or slam or whatever.”

Smith says the key to believable music reproduction has more to do with dynamics than anything else—“dynamics and a little timbre, maybe”—and he believes that horns in general, and Avantgarde hornspeakers in particular, are uniquely suited to give music-lovers the realistic thrills they’ve been missing.

“But I know in my heart, this isn’t for everybody,” he says, observing that a great many audiophiles are too used to focusing on, say, soundstage depth in a hi-fi demonstration, and that most nonaudiophiles are in no position to pay the comparatively high prices his speakers command. “You need a large market for something like this, and there are only three or four places in the US where Avantgarde could do it: New York, Los Angeles, maybe Chicago…and after that, it’s anyone’s guess.

“I don’t know how this experiment will turn out, but we’re having a good time. You’ve heard people say, ‘If you want to end up with a small fortune in high-end audio, you have to begin with a large fortune.’ That’s true, and I wouldn’t be doing this if I wanted to make a killing. But I think it’s possible to do it right—do it this way—and make a living. And the biggest reward comes every time we connect with someone who respond to the music emotionally, the way we all use to. That’s what it comes down to: If you leave my system without laughing or crying, I haven’t done my job.”

I’m already a believer: Jim Smith and Bob Visintainer have their act together and they’re taking it on the road, and if you’re anywhere near New York City you ought to bring a few CJIs over to 27 West 24th Street and try an approach to music-making that’s both newer than new and as old as sound itself. You can make a listening appointment by calling (212) 229-1842, or by sending an e-mail to TheHornStore@aol.com. People in the rest of the country can call Avantgarde USA at (770) 777-2095, or visit them at www.avantgarde-usa.com.

Listening

Avantgarde Solo loudspeakers in Lake Silver Metallic.

Stereophile, February 2003
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Once upon a time, when I was a mere sprout in journalism school, there came the moment when everyone had to decide which sort of writing and/or editing he or she wanted to pursue in the workplace of the real world—a harsh reality that was then fast approaching. Most of my fellow students, who ranged in age from 23 to 62, chose one of two paths: murder or scandal.

Those who chose murder got hot and bothered by the prospect of reporting on human depravity and criminal activity of the foulest sort: domestic violence, sex crimes, La Cosa Nostra, homicide. Their general attitude seemed to be, the darker the deed and the more blood spilled, the better.

The other majority believed passionately that the next Watergate was there for the snooping. "To take out" was their favorite compound verb, to be used in such action-hero-flavored sentences as "The governor's sick and evil. We're gonna take him out." Arnold had nothing on them.

Neither route held any fascination for me. Murder is sick and evil. Though less venal, political scandal is still completely predictable and smarmy.

My choice of what to write about was widely derided at the time by both the murder and scandal sets. But music is a facet of human behavior that I did and do find worth believing in.

Believing in to the point of death? Having once been punched square in the face by an enraged drummer from a heavy-metal band I'd recently savaged in print—he tapped me on the shoulder, I turned around, and whoamnol—I can say I've sustained grievous wounds, if not full-on rigor mortis, for my love of music.

Which brings me to "Records To Die For." Believe it or not, picking two records for this annual feature is a lot harder than it looks, particularly when you have as many records and musical passions as the Stereophile staff does.
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The choices have to have been in print sometime during the last decade. The entries must be short and sweet. Most important (as I regularly intoned), there was to be no agonizing over the choices—spontaneity can be just as effective a filter as going through every record in your collection and weighing each disc's relative importance in the rich tapestry of human musical history.

It's also more fun. Which, along with information, is what we hope you, the reader, take away from the 2003 edition of Stereophile's "Records To Die For." — Robert Baird

Note: If a recording listed here has previously been reviewed in Stereophile, whether in "Record Reviews," "Quarter Notes," or past editions of "Records To Die For," the volume and number of the pertinent issue appear in parentheses at the end of the review. For example, a listing of "[XXV-10]" means that a review appeared in Vol.25 No.10 (October 2002).

**JOHN ATKINSON**

**J.S. BACH: Goldberg Variations**

Murray Perahia, piano

With all the fuss that is currently and justifiably being made about the late Glenn Gould's two historically important readings of the Goldberg Variations—it was Gould who rescued the work from the museum—it is easy to forget that other pianists can breathe life into them. Since his recovery from a hand injury, Murray Perahia has been exploring Bach's keyboard works, to critical and commercial acclaim. No, this set of 30 imaginative variations on the "Fundamental Bass" of the Aria that bookends them was not written for the piano, but Perahia's delicacy of touch, subtle use of dynamic slanders, clarity of line in the canons and Fugueetta, and effortless virtuosity demonstrate that the anachronistic instrument doesn't have to overpower the music within the notes. The sound is close, with the sound of Perahia's fingersnails on the Steinway's keys occasionally clatteringly clear, but the music is not the worse for it.

**ROBERT BAIRD**

**LOUIS ARMSTRONG: Satch Plays Fats**


In this latest reissue of one of the two albums generally thought to be Armstrong's last genuinely great records (the companion being Plays WC Handy), a variety of older recordings of the trumpet doing the same material are included for perspective. While that's nice, the original 1955 record, not the inferior outtakes that filled a box set 1985 reissue also titles Satch Plays Fats, is still a dark, rich jewel — perhaps the finest melding of Armstrong's singing and playing ever captured on disc. His affinity for Waller's material is otherworldly, making his takes on such tunes as "(What Did I Do to Be So) Black and Blue," and particularly "Ain't Misbehavin'," almost definitive. Driven by trombonist Trummy Young, the breakneck tempo on "Misbehavin'," which forces Armstrong to run verses together into jahwehrocky, never fails to make me smile.

**RY COODER: Paradise and Lunch**


The kind of record that would never be made today by any major record label, Cooder's 1974 masterpiece was the one time this heretofore sideman (from the Rolling Stones to Captain Beefheart), who's solo career on record had been variable, finally aligned the planets and cut a knockout album. Aided by ace players like drummer Jim Keltner and bassists Russ Titelman and Chris Etheridge, not to mention guest appearances by trombonist Plas Johnson (best known for the theme to The Pink Panther) and the great Earl "Fatha" Hines on piano, Cooder's distinctive guitar work leads a session of only highlights. All songs here meet at the crossroads of gospel, blues, folk, and country collectively known as American roots music. At the album's heart are two of the choicest moments from Cooder's solo career: the traditional call-and-response gospel classic "Jesus on the Mainline," and Cooder's own "I'm All Over Now," whose soundtrack work is fine, this remains the reetiest guitarist's magnum opus — so far.

Stereophile, February 2003
Future Sound of London has always been at the forefront of electronic music. In their latest album, *Papua New Guinea Translations*, they push the boundaries of electronic music, combining its diverse influences into an unique soundscape. The album is a testament to their commitment to exploring new territories in electronic music.

For their latest release, Future Sound of London have collaborated with a diverse range of guest artists, including Patrick Egido, Clive Wilson, and Brian Eno. The result is a compelling mix of electronic, ambient, and trance music that is both thought-provoking and musically satisfying.

The album opens with a powerful statement: "Who's Next?" This song sets the tone for the rest of the album, with its driving beat and soaring vocals. The following tracks, such as "Jumpin' and Pumpin'" and "CD TO S2", explore the full spectrum of electronic music, from upbeat dance tracks to brooding, atmospheric numbers.

"Papua New Guinea Translations" is a milestone in Future Sound of London's career, demonstrating their ability to transcend genres and create music that is both innovative and emotionally engaging. It is a must-listen for fans of electronic music, and a significant contribution to the genre as a whole.
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Dylan the counterculture poet laureate. "If You See Her, Say Hello," "Shelter from the Storm," and "Tangled Up in Blue" are my favorite cuts, but there's not a weak song in the bunch. Plus, the sound on my Columbia LP is clean and open, with solid, tangible images and a nice spacious soundstage. (XXXV-11)

NEIL YOUNG: Tonight's the Night

If ever there were an album tailor-made for late-night introspection, it's Tonight's the Night. Raw and emotional, this album represents Neil Young's own introspection in the wake of the overdose deaths of two friends. Crazy Horse guitarist Danny Whitten and roadie Bruce Berry. The songs—particularly the two versions of the title cut that bookend the album—are incredibly powerful in their ragged bleakness, and "Borrowed Time" is a crystal-clear window into the tired sadness that permeated Young's heart and soul. The musicianship is deliberately sloppy, which adds to the painful ambience, but the sound is anything but sloppy. It's first-rate—clear, clean, and powerful. Tonight's the Night is a mainline into darkness and despair—it isn't pretty, but it will definitely touch your soul. Be prepared: It's impossible to listen to this album and not pass judgment on yourself. (XIX-2)

ROBERT DEUTSCH
THE BAKER'S WIFE: Original Cast

Okay, I admit it: the sound quality isn't even close to being in the top 10% of recordings available today. The voices are actually well-recorded, but the orchestral accompaniment sounds canned, and if you listen carefully you can hear the occasional editing glitch. But with all that, The Baker's Wife is most assuredly a Record To Die For. The reason: The score of this 1976 musical, which closed before reaching Broadway, is about as richly melodic as that of any written in the past 30 years. Paul Sorvino, best known for playing mobsters, stars as the Baker, and turns out to have a lovely tenor voice. He's heartbreaking in "If I Have to Live Alone," Patti LuPone plays the title role, and does "Meadowlark" (which has become a musical-theater standard) with the involvement and emotional intensity that are her trademarks. The Baker's Wife has been reworked by its authors several times over the years—most recently in November 2002, at the Goodspeed Opera House's Norma Terris Theater, for a production starring Christine Noll and Lenny Wolpe—and, given the current drought of good musicals, it may get to Broadway yet. There is also available a two-CD set from Jay Records of the 1990 London cast, which is better recorded but singularly lacking in charm. If you want to experience the magic of The Baker's Wife, the recording to get is this one, from Bruce Yeko's Original Cast Records, keepers of the musical-theater flame.
with languages, and a strikingly attractive appearance, I think she would have had no trouble succeeding under the old rules. She makes an absolutely gorgeous sound, the voice darker in the middle and lower part of the range than that of, say, Caballé, Sutherland, or Sills, which normally means that the singer is not going to be at her best at the top. But not in Fleming’s case. It’s amazing how, after singing low-lying passages with a richness that approaches the sound of a mezzo, her voice opens up as it reaches the range around high C and beyond, and she’s able to toss off coloratura runs and floating notes with an ease that recalls Caballé in her prime. Recommended to all lovers of the female voice. Excellent sound. (XXV-12)

JED DISSLER
BILL EVANS: New Conversations
Bill Evans, piano, electric piano

Compared to its famous predecessor, Conversations With Myself, Bill Evans’ third volume of overdubbed piano improvisations tends to be underrated. By 1978, the achingly introspection and fragile beauty that characterized Evans’ earlier work had given way to a bolder, more assertive and uplifting mode of expression. Listen to his subtle key changes in “For Nenette,” his exquisitely timed out-of-tempo melody statements in “Song for Helen,” his ravishing reharmonizations of Duke Ellington’s “Reflections in D” and Cy Coleman’s “I Love My Wife,” and you’ll understand why Evans, by all accounts, considered New Conversations his finest album. If his use of the Fender Rhodes electric piano for extra color seems a tad dated now, at least he didn’t play Clarinet!

WAGNER: Orchestral Music
Leopold Stokowski, Houston Symphony Orchestra

It’s a bird, it’s a plane, it’s Super Wagner! Did Leopold Stokowski hire the 101 Strings to supplant his trusty Houston forces? Where did all those extra harps come from? Is that a female choir intoning “ahhh ahhh ahhh” like guardian angels during the “Magic Fire Music”? Has this music ever come across to such drop-dead gorgeous effect before or since? Mark Twain once quipped that Wagner’s music is “better than it sounds.” Not here, that’s for sure. Producer Burt Whyte’s 1959 sound, vividly captured on 35mm film and superbly transferred to CD, retains its freshness.

ART DUDLEY
THE KENTUCKY COLONELS: Appalachian Swing

The Kentucky Colonels were neither— the core members were young Californians of French-Canadian birth—but the brilliance of their musicianship remains influential among bluegrasers. In particular, Roland White (mandolin) and his brother Clarence (guitar) were gifted soloists whose phrasing and melodic ideas seemed endlessly fresh. Appalachian Swing, which was recorded in just one evening, without overdubs, is something of an accidental landmark: When they gathered to make the album, the Colonels—who were singers as well as pickers—had no idea the producer intended to cut costs by leaving off the vocals and making an instrument-only recording. Ironically or not, the songs they rearranged on the spot, including “Nine Pound Hammer” and “John Henry,” are standouts.

All has been reissued on LP (United Artists 29514, 1974) and CD (Rounder S531, 1993) and while all are presently out of print, the latter is not too hard to find.

MARTIN NEWELL: The Greatest Living Englishman

Ten years after its release, this intelligent, passionate record still stands as Martin Newell’s masterpiece, and one of the best pop albums ever made. It’s instantly accessible: catchy and hook-laden, but with melodic depth and a perfect balance between a signature sound (jangly guitar rock) and more varied instrumental settings (the latter thanks to producer Andy Partridge of XTC).

Martin Newell is nothing if not literate. Since the release of The Greatest Living Englishman he’s become one of England’s most widely read poets, thanks to his regular appearances in The Independent. His lyrics are moving and insightful, alternating autumnal regret with great, self-deprecating wit. You may enjoy his liner notes as much as his music.

Audio/Movie warning: This recording was made on a DAT machine in Andy Partridge’s garden shed, with all that that implies. The Greatest Living Englishman has been reassessed by various small labels. Currently, the easiest to find of these is Cherry Red (www.cherryred.co.uk).

DANIEL DURCHHOLZ
AEROSMITH: Rocks

When was the last time you heard a rock album that was all killer, no filler? A long time, I’m sure. Aerosmith’s mid-’70s heyday featured two such discs: Toys in the Attic and Rocks. They were much shorter than albums are today, but that’s not necessarily a bad thing. Rocks—an album title that’s an all-time high watermark for truth in advertising—finds the band at the height of its powers, leaning head into such songs as “Back in the Saddle,” “Last Child,” and “Lick and a Promise.” Rocks is full-tilt riff rock at its loudest, lascivious best.

PAT METHENY & LYLE MAYS: As Falls Wichita, So Falls Wichita Falls
Pat Metheny, electric & acoustic guitars, bass; Lyle Mays, piano, synthesizer, organ, autoharp; Nana Vasconcelos, berimbau, percussion, drums, vocals

If you’ve spent any time driving the back roads of the plains states, you know how essential good driving music is. On the one hand, you need the sort of mix tape that will keep you awake during especially long hauls. At other times, you simply want something that evokes the spirit of the land outside your windshield. The title track of this 1981 collaboration between guitarist Metheny, keyboardist Mays, and percussionist/vocalist Nana Vasconcelos is a Midwestern answer to Kraftwerk’s “Autobahn,” bringing to mind the tail end of an all-night drive, with the sun just beginning to color the Eastern sky and nothing for you to stare at but the road as it extends out to the horizon.

MICHAEL FREMER
THE HEART AND SOUL OF BERT BERNS: Various Artists

This 10-track disc spotlights the producer, songwriter, and Bang

When was the last time you heard that was all killer, no filler? A long time, I’m sure.
Records executive who, though born of Russian-Jewish immigrants, helped create some of the greatest 1960s soul records for such artists as Solomon Burke, the Drifters, Otis Redding, and Irma Thomas. He also produced Neil Diamond and Van Morrison, among others. Under his own or his pen name, Bert Russell (his middle name), Berns co-wrote "Twist and Shout" for the Isley Brothers, "Piece of My Heart" (with Jerry Ragovoy) for Irma Thomas, and "Cry Baby" (with Norman Meade) for Garret Minus. He wrote "Cry Me to" for Solomon Burke and "Are You Lonely for Me Baby," for Freddie Scott. These familiar tunes have been covered by Janis Joplin, the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, and many others, and that's only a small part of his unusual legacy.

A disc "to die for?" Friend and UNI executive Doug Morris compiled this odd, sly set — some of it mastered from old vinyl — as a tribute to Berns, who died of heart failure at 38. So yes.

HOWARD TATE: Howards Reactions
Gerry Thomas, Arthur Jenkins, arrangers

This one's really worth dying for. Its existence is more rumor than fact — only a few hundred copies were thought to have been pressed. Missing and presumed dead, the legendary 59-year-old soul singer surfaced a few years ago and quickly reunited with producer-songwriter Jerry Ragovoy, who wrote, among other tunes for Tate, "Get It While You Can," later covered by Janis Joplin, and "Look at Granny Run Run," re-worked by Ry Cooder. Depending on whether the jacket or the label is correct, this brief 12-song set, issued on Lloyd Price's Turntable Records, was recorded either in Jamaica or at Price's 1674 Broadway Turntable nightspot. Wherever, you can't have it anyway. But while we wait for the Ragovoy-Tate comeback album, you can have Get It While You Can: The Legendary Session — a 1995 CD compilation that's much better anyway, even if, unlike this rarity, it's just not to die for.

LARRY GREENHILL
DIVINE SECRETS OF THE YA-YA SISTERHOOD: Original Soundtrack

T Bone Burnett stirred the music world when his soundtrack for O Brother, Where Art Thou? took top awards, even though disc jockeys refused to play the album. Burnett's talents for blending different artists — Blind Uncle Gaspard, Bob Dylan, Mahalia Jackson, Ray Charles, Lauryn Hill, the Thompsons, Amii Stewart, Bob Selniker, Richard and Linda Thompson, and Alison Krauss — and musical genres (folk, Cajun, blues, jazz, alternative rock, rap) really pays off in the soundtrack to Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood. The album begins with "Sitting in the Window of My Room," sung in French and taken from a scratchy, lo-fi 78rpm recording of Blind Uncle Gaspard. This is authentic! Modern, audiophile sound values are evident elsewhere, when the same tune is sung in English by Alison Krauss. One can clearly discern the distinct musical character of the delicate harpist dulcimer from the lap-steel guitar and tuck piano in the opening of this track. I was pleased to find Richard and Linda Thompson singing a duet in "Dimming of the Day," producing the most beguilingly sweet, sad, and beautiful melody.

ORCHESTRA BAOBAB: Pirate's Choice
Rudolph Gomis, vocals; Barthelemy Attisto, guitar; Balla Sidibe, vocals, timbales; Charley N'Diaye, bass; Mountaga Kounde, percussion, tumba-tumba; World Circuit/Nonesuch 79643-2 (2 CDs). 1982/2002. Moussa Diao, prod.; John Hadden, Tom Leader, Adam Skeaping, remastering. AAD. TT: 94:49

Orchestra Baobab is a Senegalese band that began in the 1960s, playing for diplomats at the exclusive Dakar nightclub of the same name. Released on cassette in 1982, this studio recording has achieved legendary status among those who treasure West African music. Creating a fusion of Cuban rhythms and African folk melodies, Baobab's eight musicians transported me to that steamy nightclub, where I rode on Barthelemy Attisto's smooth, semipsychedelic guitar improvisations. The album opens with "Utrus Horas," a slow, sensuous, atmospheric Cuban tune. Superb imaging can be heard on "Werenpte Serenge." The percussion is on the left, a drooping blend of singers on the right, with the main singer and a syncopated tenor sax in the center. "Soldado," a song from the Cunassa region of Senegal, is sensuous and hypnotic, alternating a vocalist with a woeful tenor sax in the center channel. This is world music at its lightest and coolest.

JON IVESON
BUZZCOCKS: A Different Kind of Tension

There was a time when bands could create concise punk-pop tunes that poked at society's excesses without sounding as though the music had been contrived to reach a target market of "rebel youth." This disc is from that era (1979) and perhaps sounds a bit bright, but what a great batch of catchy, well-crafted songs full of caustic wit. For example, the title track takes aim at the mixed messages we're bombarded with in the media, coupling them so as to render each neutral: "I'm ambitious/ be modest, plan ahead/ be spontaneous, decide for yourself/listen to others, save money/spend money," etc. The Buzzcocks were a classic rock-punk quartet — two guitars, bass, and drums — their strength the result of tightly arranged bursts of music without indulgent solos or gratuitous ornamentation. Originally issued on CD in 1989; the 2001 remaster is the one to have.

STEVE TIBBETTS: A Man About a Horse
Steve Tibbetts, guitar, percussion; Jim Anton, bass; Marc Anderson, Marcus Wise, percussion

If there was a perfect album released in 2002, then to my ears, this is it. Guitarist-percussionist Steve Tibbetts works in that suspended space between music and noise, rendering sonic mindscapes both accessible and challenging. Supported by master percussionist Marc Anderson, Tibbetts' music is the perfect antidote to bland and safe audiophile fare. If you've never heard him before, here's a great place to start, and there are a half dozen more recordings from him that are just as good. The disc was brilliantly mastered by Morten Lund at Masterhuset in Norway, and will fill your room with ribbons of rhythmic sound. My only question: Why isn't this guy at the top of everyone's list? (XXVI-1)
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GLENN GOULD'S 65th BIRTHDAY ANNIVERSARY RE-RELEASE

GLENN GOULD, piano

Glenn Gould's stunning 1955 debut recording, of Bach's Goldberg Variations, clocked in at a nice, crisp 45 minutes. That this latest, 70th-birthday anniversary release has expanded to 2½ hours shows the extent to which Gould's artistry looms large in our imaginations. The reason for the additional time is that Sony's new edition also includes the more affecting, if somehow more affected, 1981 traversal, as well as a third disc of out-takes and interviews. The engineers have also returned to an analog master of the 1981 performance that was made at the same time as the original all-digital release. Count Kaiserling, who, according to legend, commissioned the work to soothe his insomnia with nocturnal performances by his harpsichordist, Johann Gottlieb Goldberg, would surely have loved all of this Gouldiana—assuming, of course, that Kaiserling's objective was not to fall asleep, but rather to stay awake and listen to electrifying music. Gould's performances are riveting from beginning to end, whether in his 1955 watershed recording or in the occasionally more introspective 1981 victory lap. (XXV-11)

GRIEG: Lyric Pieces
Emil Gilels, piano
Deutsche Grammophon 449 721-2

Like Glenn Gould, Emil Gilels took a hands-on approach to the recording process and the technology that would represent him for posterity. Gilels spent six days in 1974 recording this album of Edvard Grieg's Lyric Pieces, most of that time devoted to getting just the right sonority on tape. The effort shows: the atmosphere of this record, at once intimate and exotic, perfectly distills the flavor of Norwegian peasant life and folk music. While many piano students could easily handle the modest technical demands of these delicate works, the Lyric Pieces truly spring to life only in the hands of a great artist willing to try to capture all the subtle shadings and nuance in these miniature forms. A super-virtuoso like Gilels might seem an unlikely match for this repertoire, but, like Horowitz playing Scarlatti, it is an odd coupling so perfect that it's hard to imagine these pieces ever being more sympathetically rendered.

RICHARD LEHNER
LITTLE FEAT: Waiting for Columbus

Check out the December 2002 issue for a full review of this, but it can't be said often or loudly enough: Little Feat's Waiting for Columbus might just be the best live rock album ever released. No American band ever played with such looseness or nightly, or sounded as if they were having more fun, than the Feat at their best, and their best, with founder Lowell George at the helm, is what was captured here in 1977. Now the album is even better: on two well-packed CDs instead of one, now incorporating previously unreleased tracks and others that wound up on other Feat discs. The sound was always so vivid you'd swear you could see your speaker grilles bulge as the Feat struggled to bust loose. Now it, too, is even better: fuller bass, sweeter highs, and a mix that reveals even more of these thick rhythmic textures and dense instrumental interplay. This music will make you happy. (XXV-12)

TOMASZ STANKO QUARTET: Soul of Things
Tomasz Stanko, trumpet; Marcin Wasilewski, piano; Slawomir Kurkiewicz, bass; Michal Miskiewicz, drums.

"I've been playing the same song my whole life," says 60-year-old jazz trumpeter Tomasz Stanko. It's a song of deep feeling and graceful power. Supported by a young rhythm section from his native Poland that plays with the clarity and grace of the original Bobo Stenson Quartet, on the 13 meditations (numbered I-XIII) of Soul of Things Stanko evokes the spirits of the finest trumpeters, dead and living, while creating a mood and a voice uniquely his own. Yes, you can hear the influences of Miles Davis, Kenny Wheeler, and Chet Baker at their most introspective and profound, as well as hotter, more rasping traces of Lee Morgan and Clifford Brown. Imagine that Miles never went electric but just kept getting more achingly interior in the acoustic vein, and that we never had to make do with Wynton Marsalis. This disc stands shoulder to hiply slumped shoulder with Kind of Blue, and has even better sound—ECM's deep and finely burnished finest. A sleeper and a keeper. (XXV-7)

ROBERT LEVINE
APHX. TWIN: Selected Ambient Works V.2

At once disturbing and soothing, so passive it's aggressive, both barren and fertile, the work of Richard D. James (aka Aphex Twin) on these two CDs takes techno-electronics away from the dancing dopes and slows it down to almost Morton Feldmanian levels. The soundscape is haunting and hypnotic, it reminds you of everyone and everything else, but you can label none of it. All the components are unreliable—the rhythms, the patterns, the types of sounds —and yet it coheres. It's new-age stuff for the dissatisfied, and definitely not for children. Whatever it is, it defines its own art, as sheer sound, it's breathtaking.

DONIZETTI: Lucia di Lammermoor
Maria Callas, soprano; Giuseppe di Stefano, tenor; Rolando Panerai, baritone; Nicola Zaccaria, bass; others; Coro del Teatro alla Scala di Milano, Herbert von Karajan

EMI has done everything it can to clean up the "pirate" sound of this 1955 live performance, but those who still can't get past the sonic will miss out on what is, arguably, THE Lucia of the last century. Everything was in place—Karajan and Callas together had a fire that burns brilliantly, she is in amazingly secure and, yes, beautiful, voice, di Stefano's passion is under control and the voice at its peak, and the rest of the cast, down to the choristers, know that they're taking part in something special. The Secret is so thrilling it has to be repeated, and the Mad Scene is sad, inward, and spectacularly acrobatic. Overcome the sound—just this once —and treasure this performance.

JOHN MARKS
PETERIS VASKS: String Quartets 2 & 3
Riga String Quartet

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- Harry Pearson

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assertion that “They call it ‘contemporary’ music because it is
mostly a con, and all temporary.” Peteris Vasks’ String Quartet 2.
*Songs of the Summer* may constitute, in and of itself, an adequate refutation of
Hancock’s Dictum. Beyond that, you should audition this recording just to hear how absolutely wonderful a first-
class string quartet, playing in a space with fabulous natural
acoustics, can sound. (The space in this case is an exquisite 1727-
vintage Protestant — but Baroque — church in Riga, Latvia.) But
I’d like to think that, even in a quinton studio recording, the
freshness and sincerity of Vasks’ musical inspiration, and the self-
less organicity of his compositional technique, would shine
through. Vasks’ postmodern but entirely undaunting melding of musical Impressionism with the sounds of nature makes him a
worthy successor of Ravel, Debussy, and Messiaen.

Be not afraid!

**ENCARNACIÓN VÁZQUEZ: Cuando Dos**
Encarnación Vázquez, mezzo-soprano; Jaime Márquez, guitar
Terán, eng. DDD. TT: 51:29

No scare-off factor here. Encarnación Vázquez’ voice is bittersweet chocolate with a Côte
Truier classer. Just enjoy it. This collection of Spanish and Mexican
songs for female voice and guitar is entitled after the last track, the
first recording of Jesús Echevarría’s haunting contemporary
art song “Cuando Dos.” Entirely worthy of Fauré, this petite
masterpiece supports a neo-Classical tendril of melody with
delicately pastel harmonic shadings. Once you hear it, it will
stick with you. The rest of the program calls on such luminar-
ies as Falla, Revueltas, and Guastavino, and the singing and
playing rise to the occasions. Urruet’s favorite recording rig at
the time was a Nagra D and a stereo pair of Schoeps mikes, and
who am I to gainsay that? Excellent liner notes and first-
class packaging. Not to be missed.

**STEPHEN MEJIAS**
**THE FUCKING CHAMPS: IV**
AAD. TT: 38:52

No voices here. Just amazing music. IV is the kind of album that
will have you wondering how in the world such brilliance
could ever be possible.

Tim Green, guitarist and gearhead, has a house, and in
his house there is a basement, and in his basement there is Louder
Studios, where bands like the Melvins and Cherry Valence,
who can sing you with riffs and pummel you with bass kicks,
come to play. The entire album is marked by thick blankets of
virtual guitar playing (you’ll end up trying to count how
many guitars there actually are) and intense, precise drumming
skewed by strange time signatures. It tosses the listener around
with songs like “What’s a Little Reign?” and “Vangelis Again,”
forcing fists to fly in the air and heads to bang in some trium-
phant glory, complemented by songs like “Lamplighter,”
whose Mellotron, acoustic guitar, and shrieking crow create a
soundtrack for a medieval morning. You might also hear talk of
“indie,” “prog,” “math,” and “metal.” but not from me.

**MODEST MOUSE: The Moon & Antarctica**

Listening to Modest Mouse’s earlier collection, it’s not difficult
to trace their songwriting progression. Gradually, the albums
become more focused and complete, sonically more pristine
and adventurous. This, their major-label debut, produced and
mixed by Brian Deck of the Red Red Meat, is a very, very, very,
haunting concept album that documents a desperate man’s con-
stant, perhaps futile struggle to find the point where the circle
begins. Modest Mouse’s website says that the songs were sent
to them in “envelopes that had neither postage nor return
addresses” from a fan and follower who, apparently, had lost
touch with reality. Though the words and music within these
ruminations were “practically illegible,” the soul is cap-
tured and conveyed by the band.

But *The Moon & Antarctica* isn’t only about the manic
throes of a lonely wanderer. The music complementing
Isaac Brock’s thoughtful lyrics is just as well-developed. Along
with Brock’s playful and spring-like guitar riffs, producer Dack
layers Jeremiah Green’s disco rhythms and hypnotic breaks
beats with Eric Judy’s loopy, groovy bass lines, while integrating a
symphony of atmospheric sounds to create some sort of other-
worldly dance party. Violin, piano, banjo, lap steel guitar and an
assortment of swooshing, sprawling, echoing, backward-looping washes and sways

**“They call it ‘contemporary’ music
because it is mostly a con, and all
temporary.” — David Hancock**

**PAUL MESSENGER**
**ALISON KRAUSS & UNION STATION: New Favorite**
Rounder RRCD0244 (CD). 2001. Alison Krauss, Union Station,
prods.; Tony Fulkner, eng. DDD. TT: 45:09

Some of the best of today’s new music is coming out of Nashville,
Tennessee — Alison Krauss had to fight off stiff challenges from both Lambchop and Nickel
Creek for inclusion in my 2002 R2D4 selection. One of New
Favorite’s claims to fame is that part of it is used on the soundtrack of
the Coen Bros.’ film *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, that ent-
tailing country variation on Homer’s *Odyssey*. That might assist
familiarity but is otherwise irrelevant. What matters is that
Krauss is not only an excellent singer quite able to get the hairs
on the back of your neck going, she also fully understands the
importance of excellent recording quality. Her band, Union
Station, is right on the money too. It all adds up to an intense and
rewarding musical experience, regardless of genre.

**SHOSTAKOVICH: Symphony 11, “The Year 1905”**
Mstislav Rostropovich, London Symphony
Faulkner, eng. DDD. TT: 72:24

I’ve always struggled to enjoy recorded orchestral music, whose
complexity of dynamic range and texture give all the various
media a hard time: background noise in the case of analog vinyl
or radio, “digitins” on CD.

However, engineer Tony Faulkner has been leaving out the
digital filtering when recording in DSD the latest releases for the
London Symphony Orchestra’s own budget label, LSO Live
(www.lso.co.uk). That may be why they sound so good. He’s also
planning to release on SACD, once problems of pressing
capacity are resolved.

The recordings are genuinely live, with all the tension that im-
plies, and include thrilling dynamics and dynamic range along
with the odd watt. Shostakovich’s Symphony 11 might be strong
meat for daily listening, but the recording quality — the space,
depth, tension, and texture — is so beguiling you’ll find yourself
sucked into playing it just because the sound is irresistible.

**MICHAEL METZGER**
**SPIRIT: 12 Dreams of Dr. Sardonicus**

The first six “dreams” of Spirit’s mainman, Randy California and
Jay Ferguson, are pop constructions as tight and clever as any

*Stereophile*, February 2003
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water mark of Trane's recording career. The four-part suite
clocks in at just under 33 minutes and speaks with more
passionate power and eloquence than any other half-hour set of
jazz ever recorded. Coltrane blows dark tones of beauty,
delivering smooth melodic lines that explode with ecstatic blasts of
reverence. That alone suffices. But this brand-new Deluxe
Edition benefits from better sound quality (from a new master
recently unearthed), and features an extra disc comprising a live
performance and studio outtakes — including two runs through
"Acknowledgment" with an augmented lineup of tenor man
Archie Shepp and bassist Art Davis. (XIV-1)

STEVE EARLE: Transcendental Blues
E-Squared/Sherdan Square/Artemis 751033-2 (CD). 2000. The Twangtrust,
prods.; Ray Kennedy, eng.; Patrick Earle, asst. eng. ADD T: 49:54

With a copy of the Beatles' Revolver on hand in the studio as reference
for the drum and bass sounds, Steve Earle crafted this
brilliant melange of rootsy country, blazing rock, Beatles-esque pop,
Irish folk and up-tempo bluegrass. The melodies stand out and
stick as Earle exercises his expansive musical vision, weaving
his way through a collection of songs that cross-cut stylistic boundaries.
There's the catchy Irish jigging rocker "The Galway Girl," the country swinger "Steve's Last Ramble," the forlorn
ballad "Lonelier than This," the heavenly bluegrass breakdown "Until the Day I Die," and the poignant anti-execution song
"Over Yonder." But what puts Transcendental Blues over the top for
this Beatles fan's ears are such melodic gems as Earle's
"Rain"-like "Everyone's in Love with You" (with backwards tape at the end), the buoyant "Another Town," and the psyche-
delicized title track. (XXI:11-9, XXV:2)

WES PHILLIPS
CANTUS: ...Against the Dying of the Light
Cantus, male vocal ensemble; with David Hegedorn, tam-tam; Charles Kemper, piano

An hour-long meditation on dying may not be everyone's cup of tea, and the men of Cantus are young yet — these are not performances tempered by a lifetime's understanding or experience. But it would be churlish to hold the group's youth and ambition against it, especially when those very qualities generate this disc's most engaging properties: its passion and energy. That energy is mirrored in the disc's sound, which is immediate and vivid — more so than some listeners will find pleasing, I suspect. Too real? How could that be an audio sin? (XXV:12)

J.S. BACH: Goldberg Variations
Glenn Gould, piano
Howard H. Scott, prods.; Frank H. Decker, Jr., eng. ADD/ADD/ADD T: 233:10

It reads like fiction: A charismatic young genius records an obscure masterpiece and catapults it, and himself, to international renown. Twenty-six years later, he re-records the work, dying just before its release. Bummer — that final reconsideration was rendered in brittle, feeble sound that obscured many of the insights embedded in its icy brilliance. Two decades later, Sony employs a heretofore undisclosed analog backup tape to reconstruct that vitally important performance, revealing its profundity and crystalline brilliance. This three-disc set pairs both per-
formances (sounding better than ever) with a disc of extras for less than $20. A happy ending at last.

ROBERT J. REINA
THE DANA FUCHS BAND: Lonely for a Lifetime

Tired of being bombarded by talented female singer-songwriters overlaying the acoustic unplugged formula to death? Wish these chicks would plug in and turn the amps up to 11 once in a while? Look no further than the Dana Fuchs Band's first release, Lonely for a Lifetime (www.danafuchs.com), a collection of straightforward yet sophisticated arrangements of bluesy, hard-driving rock tunes written by vocalist Fuchs and guitarist Jon Diamond. Imagine a sultry, more emotive Janis Joplin backed by a higher-energy version of the late-'60s Rolling Stones and you'll get the idea. This intelligently engineered recording is punchy yet natural-sounding, without the excessive use of digital processing and compression so common to this genre. It will entice you to see the DBF live. Once you do, you'll be hooked. Rock'n'roll doesn't get any better.

GARY WILSON: You Think You Really Know Me

In 1977, a John Cage-influenced performance artist named Gary Wilson released a groundbreaking homemade pop album cherished by the few lucky souls (including Beck and members of Hisker Dil) able to score a copy. A few spins of this collection of impassioned love songs, sung by a seeming loser whining about all the high school girls who ignored him and set against slick jazz-rock arrangements with a hard funk backbeat, were all one needed to get hooked on this innovative master. I became obsessed. But after a few shows at New York's CBGB's in the late 70s, Wilson vanished. Motel Records located him, carefully remastered the album from the original master tapes, and reissued it on vinyl and CD. Hearing it again, I'm amazed at how fresh, current, and cutting-edge this music sounds. I enjoy it now as much as I did in 1977.

RICHARD J. ROSEN
BUZZCOCKS: Singles Going Steady

Don't be scared off by the band's nasty-sounding name — their music is pure joy. Inspired by witnessing the Sex Pistols in London in 1976, the Buzzcocks forged their own style of high-efficiency punk-pop and brought it home to Manchester. The happy result was a series of perfectly crafted, concise, super-melodic songs with catchy hooks and clever lyrics, mainly about girls or the lack thereof. The band's original UK 45rpm singles were collected here in 1979 to introduce the band to America. Reason dictates that the Buzzcocks can't be nearly as highly influential as they're almost universally touted to be; otherwise today's popular music would be a hell of a lot bet-

Stereophile, February 2003
"Landmark recordings... essential"
—The New York Times

"Deeply moving"
—Chicago Sun-Times

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Desperate to narrow down my objective, I listened to a track or two from each of a pile of contenders. When I found myself “accidentally” letting this one play throughout its entirety, I knew it had been chosen itself. This solo acoustic offering from versatile, self-taught French guitar genius Marc Ducret suits many moods, from intensive, focused listening to low-volume background. Some may prefer Ducret’s more aggressive and “out” electric work, especially in collaboration with saxophonist Tim Berne. I like it all, but Detail is decidedly more accessible, even mellow. This is music of ideas. Of these six pieces, Ducret explores and improvises on ideas in a way that is cerebral and logical, yet at the same time too soulful and personal to be considered mere exercises. It took many listenings to feel its depth, but now I put on Detail day or night. I’m listening to it now. It took many listenings to feel its depth, but now I put on Detail day or night.

I’m listening to it now.

KALMAN RUBINSON
THE CORONATION OF KING GEORGE II
Handel: Coronation Anthems.
With ceremonial music by Blow, Child, Farmer, Purcell, Talles, Gibbons.
Robert King, The Choir of King’s Consort, The King’s Consort

BUCKY PIZZARELL: Swing Live
Bucky Pizzarelli, guitar; Allen Vache, clarinet; Peter Appleyard, vibes; Michael Moore, bass; Bernard Purdie, drums

I’m using this forum as a bully pulpit to promote multichannel listening, and at last there are so many new surround recordings that my decision has become difficult: Benjamin Zander’s Mahler 5 (Telarc 60569) and the Michael Tilson Thomas/SFO Mahler 6 (8 21936-0001-2) SACDs are superb, but I can’t choose between them. The DVD-Audio discs of the Meindlsohn Octet (Tact DVD 94) and Handel’s opera Theodora (mdg 932 1019-5) are delightful performances presented in exciting and innovative audio perspectives.

The two recordings I settled on both use multichannel reproduction to present wonderful music with great presence, to re-create a realistic immersive ambiance, and to include appropriate extramusical sounds that perfect the illusion. I found neither suitable for background listening (unless from another room), since the presentation is so effective that I felt I was at a public event, not in my home. I just had to pay attention.

I wasn’t around in 1727, but The Coronation of King George II is so convincing that it justly wanted to be a monarchist shouting my acclamation for George II. This set is an audio re-creation of the entire event, beginning and ending with the tolling of bells and including trumpet fanfares, hair-raising drum processions, shouts of acclamation, and — oh yes, some marvelous music. The core of the set is the four Coronation Anthems that Handel wrote for the event, thrillingly performed by Robert King’s Consort and Choir with more richness, weight, and size than the classic Willock’s recordings on Argo. The musicians are placed toward the front of the simulated Westminster Abbey (actually, St. Jude-on-the-hill, Harpenden) in a quasi-concert position but acoustically integrated with the ambience and the added activities. Along with the Handel masterpieces, the added music for the occasion is dramatic, intriguing, and exciting. I doubt if any other album has as many ideas for the composer. In aggregate, the stimulating and fascinating event even for small-republicans. Again, two-channel listening is a poor shadow of multichannel. In stereo, I prefer the spine-tingling immediacy of the Willock’s/Argo, but the total experience of King’s performance in this, the perfect context, sweeps me away.

In the case of Bucky Pizzarelli’s Swing Live, I can speak with authority: I attended the recording sessions, sitting 6-8’ behind the SoundField microphone that picked up the direct and ambient sounds. Sitting back in my couch about 8’ from the front speakers, I am, again, some 20’ from Bucky and friends as they launch into “Lester Leaps In.” This is nice, but, as in most live performances, the players warm up as they go — the intensity increases with each succeeding swing classic. These guys are pros. It’s a delight to hear how, in his solo stunts, each transforms the melodies, even though the ordering of the solos may seem a bit formulaic. The audience, however, is energized from the get-go (off-mike, cheerleader David Chesky modulated the level of our contributions). The sound is as remembered: tight, direct, and impactful, with the confines of the bandbox ever-present. I found the 4.0-channel SACD and 6.0-channel DVD-A mixes equally thrilling though the DVD-A was significantly more spacious. The two-channel mix was disappointingly lacking in presence. Of course, that could be a question of contrast alone, but I got no kicks from just two channels, and can’t include the regular CD in this recommendation. (XXV-3)

LELAND RUCKER
BOB DYLAN: Self Portrait

The only real problems with Dylan’s most misunderstood and unheard album were the timing and the title. Had it been released as The Bootleg Series, Vol.6 in 2002, it might not have disrayed critics or confused most of the rest of his audience. Dylan has long claimed it was his response to bootleg recordings, and that description fits — from the scattershot sequencing to the wildly eclectic repertoire. Given Dylan’s current penchant for unpredictable covers in his live shows, this mix of country ballads, folk standards, contemporary favorites, and a sprinkling of his own songs scenes downright rosy. I’ve always loved Self Portrait, but most interesting is that, except for the country-crooner voice on some tracks, this record isn’t much different from his stage act today. When was the last time you listened to it? Did you ever? What goes around comes around. Self Portrait takes us full circle. (XXV-2)

DOUG SAHM: The Last Texas Blues Band

The first time I saw Doug Sahm onstage, I had to be coerced. I knew only the Sir Douglas of “She’s About a Mover” and “Mendocino,” and there he was playing ringmaster for the most eclectic, and perhaps the finest, three hours of live music I can remember: a veritable phantasmagoria of pop nuggets, polkas, soul, R&B, tejano, and big- and small-band blues. With no boxed sets or serious collections of Sahm’s diverse canon even three years after his death, you have to enjoy what you can on CD. Along with Jake Box Music (the soul version of this big-band collection), this is how I most like to remember Sahm: with that bemused grin underneath the cowboy hat, wandering among the ghosts of Texas music past and present, recalling T-Bone and Guitar Slim, mimicking Fats Domino, and leading the band to ever higher plateaus. The definition of Texas music.
There is always more to hear — HOVLAND

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62
Stereophile, February 2003
David Sokol
Rhino R2 70770 (2 CDs) 1990 Terry Adams, Joey Spampinato, others, prod.; Bill Inglot, CD prod.; various engs. ADD TT: 107:26

The world's best club band has been thrilling crowds for more than three decades with its quirky but wonderfully tuneful blend of rock, country, R&B, you name it. Like the Beatles, NRBQ comes across as more than its individual parts. The foursome's lineup was stable throughout most of the nineteen-frame-covered here, so it's a blast to compare keyboardist Terry Adams' elegant songs with those of bassist Joey Spampinato and guitarist Al Anderson (who left in the 1990s and has become one of Nashville's most hit-worthy songwriters). While Q songs on this collection have been recorded with class by Bonnie Raitt, Dave Edmunds, the Fabulous Thunderbirds, and even Charlie Robison, the band's own albums have never been particularly well received. Honestly, now, how many do you own? Peek-a-Boo is the place to start.

Shaver: Tramp on Your Street

My all-time favorite alt-country album has become even more poignant in the past few years with the deaths of two of its principals, Waylon Jennings and Eddy Shaver. Eddy's dad, gray-haired honky-tonk hero Billy Joe, continues to soldier on, and he's never resonated more soundly than on this uplifting, spiritually rich collection. With his crack band, this native of Corsicana, Texas rocks one minute, and in the next, he'll swing or make you cry. No wonder his songs have been covered by everyone from Jennings and John Anderson to Party Loveless, who reworked Tramp highlight "When the Fallen Angels Fly" and made it the title song of her best album, back in 1994. And when Billy Joe sings "Live Forever," the irony is heartbreaking.

David Patrick Stearns
Beethoven: Violin Concerto
 Mozart: Violin Concerto 5, K.219, "Turkish"
Leonid Kogan, violin, Andrei Vandernoot, Orchestra de la Societe des Concerts du Conservatoire

The Testament label has long deepened into the EMI vaults, but in 2002 they unearthed performances of particular historic and artistic importance, including the first CD releases of pianist Germaine Thyssens-Valentin, and long-unavailable recordings by conductor Désiré-Émile Inghelbricht. The single most notable disc, however, is this previously unreleased 1957 recording of the Beethoven Violin Concerto by Leonid Kogan. His radiant tone and relatively demure manner was somewhat overshadowed by a more heroic fellow Russian, David Oistrakh. But only on hearing Kogan's interpretation does one realize what a respectful distance other violinists maintain from this great score. Both Kogan and conductor Andrei Vandernoot perform it as if its many emotional shades are precisely what they were personally feeling that day. That's in addition to the profoundly graceful phrasing and aristocratic refusal to oversell any aspect of the music, which were Kogan's hallmarks in all repertoire. There are other Kogan recordings of the Beethoven concerto, but this one has a uniquely appealing combination of clean, focused mono sound and an emotionally confiding performance.

Saariaho: Ulike du songe, Lascinisme de l'âme
Camilla Hoitenga, flute; Amin Maalouf, narrator, Finnish Radio Symphony Orchestra, Jukka-Pekka Saraste

Finnish composer Kaija Saariaho is creating a sensation in city after city with performances of her opera L'ami de loin, which might be described as Debussy's Pelléas et Mélisande a century later—with an electronic element. A recording of that work, however, has been slow in coming, as the composer awaits the ideal cast and further development of surround-sound recording technology. In the meantime, there's her flute concerto, L'ami du songe, completed in 2001. Already on disc, its virtues are similar to those of the opera. The ethereal harmonies are perfectly content not to telegraph their ultimate destination, or even what lies in the next minute. It's more dreamy and buoyant than the holy minimalist school of Arvo Part, and is full of such purposefully manic and enigmatic interactions between the solo flute and individual instruments of the orchestra that the concerto seems to arise from a parallel musical universe. It's a spacious universe that allows plenty of leeway for the listener's emotional reactions. I doubt that there is another flute concerto more substantial, poetic, and up-to-the-minute, or with such a textbook succession of modern flute-playing techniques. Much of the rest of the disc is devoted to Saariaho's distinctive style of poem settings: not sung, but read to an electronic backdrop.

I doubt that there is another flute concerto more substantial, poetic, and up-to-the-minute, or with such a textbook succession of modern flute-playing techniques.

Chip Stern
Howard Roberts: Antelope Freeway
Howard Roberts, electric & acoustic guitars, Bobby Bruce, violin; Mike Deasy, electric guitar; Pete Robinson, Larry Knechtel, Mike Wofford, keyboards; Brian Garofalo, Max Bennett, Fender bass; Bob Marin, John Guerin, drums

From the earliest days of electronic gimmickry and 16-track, 2 recording comes this fusion curiosity, replete with all sorts of quiant psychedelic touches that were probably intended to garner radio airplay in some better world than this. As I recall, the reviewer in Down Beat burned poor Howard Roberts at the stake. A pity, because this fun recording has all sorts of great blues-inflected jazz-guitar showcases, humorous tangents, and audiodile sound effects to recommend it—assuming your tastes run to concluding an acoustic guitar transition with a stereo-panned motorcycle zooming through your living room. While it's something of a stretch, at many points Antelope Freeway suggests Edgard Varèse's use of processed tape effects and found sounds to create a spiky aural collage. A closer antecedent is the Firesign Theatre, whose influence is self-evident in "Five Gallons of Astral Flash Could Keep You Up for Thirteen Weeks," a hilarious sendup of late-night journeys down the radio dial. None of this would mean a damn if it weren't for a dynamic Record Plant multitrack recording, a hard-grooving "Bitches Brew-lite rhythm section, and Roberts' devilishly funky phrasing on such virtuoso workouts as "Sixteen Track Firemen" and "Roadwork"—or, in a luminously lyrical mood, on the Echoplex-added harmonic balladry of "Dark Omnious Clouds" and "Santa Clara River Bottom."

Edgard Varèse: The Varèse Record
Editions Denoix, Intégrales 21.5. Interpolations from Déserts, Octandre, Intégrales
Frederic Waldman, Julliard Percussion Orchestra, New York Wind Ensemble; Rene Le Roy, flute

Stereophile, February 2003
"Within seconds of the first strains of ‘Down on the Corner’ from Willy and the Poorboys, I knew that Chad, Steve, Kevin and company had done the real thing! The SACD had the feel of a master tape written all over it. The case! The classic feel of tubes and tape! Analog galore!...I went from cut to cut in a kind of excited daze. I had grown up with this music from about 1969 and knew it inside and out. And yet, despite owning two different CD issues...I felt that I was really hearing the music for the first time!...We’ve ordered the entire Analogue Productions SACD reissue series...all twelve titles! If you’re smart, you’ll do the same. You can thank me for the recommendation later!”

— David W. Robinson for Positive Feedback Online, Issue 2

“Chad, I simply can’t BELIEVE how good ‘I Heard It Through the Grapevine’ sounds!!! It is impossible to sit still through it. Hell, it’s impossible to sit, period. I am SO impressed. All the others are great too (especially ‘I Put A Spell On You’), but ‘...Grapevine’ just blows my mind. (And I had NEVER heard those congas before...) Thank you sincerely for sharing this with me.”

— Art Dudley, editor of Listener Magazine

“I’ve just listened to the first two CCR test pressings mastered by Kevin Gray and Steve Hoffman at AcousTech Mastering (at RTI) and let me tell you: when the bass kicked in on ‘I Put A Spell On You’ I thought I was playing a 45 at 33 1/3 it was so deep and THICK but it was 33 1/3 and when the guitars kicked in, it was WOWIE!!!! The transparency, transient SNAP and overall clarity without brightness or edge is phenomenal! This is as close to listening to a master tape as I’ve heard from vinyl – not hyperbole. Based on this, I think Kevin has put together the best-sounding lathecutting set-up I’ve heard yet – better than what they were using at Future Disc for the DCC cuts and without the hum — and those were good of course... the top end is just right – dynamics, depth, detail, the whole ball of wax. I was cautiously optimistic having heard how great the EllaGershwin box cut there came out, but I was not prepared for THIS...congrats to all.”

— Michael Fremer, senior contributing editor of Stereophile, music editor of Listener Magazine

To order, or for a FREE catalog, call 1-800-716-3553 or order online at www.acousticsounds.com
These compositions by Edgard Varèse, keepsakes of tomorrow originally conceived way back in the 1920s and ’30s, offered the aspiring young composer Frank Zappa a sense of life-affirming danger and mystery amid the suffocating cultural conformity of his 1950s upbringing. Having gotten religion from Steveophiel’s own Sam Tellig regarding the sonic joys of classic mono recordings, I was thrilled to uncover this 1977 LP compendium of the original 1950 EMS release, recorded under the composer’s supervision, and let me tell you, the sound couldn’t possibly be more vivid or more terrifyingly alive. There’s a curiously eastern ambience to Varèse’s haunting melodic visions of solo flute on "Density 21.5, an effect he expands on in the gripping chamber voicings of Octandre, where his mastery of the overtone series is such that he makes acoustic woodwinds suggest analog synthesizers. Likewise, on his famous percussion work, "Imaginist, Varèse’s layered, chanting polyrhythms achieve a perfect balance between tribal communalism and modernist disjunction. The previously unreleased recording of Interpolations is a jarring hard-left, hard-right, no-center-fill stereo collage of “organized sounds” recorded on magnetic tape in Paris in 1954. The work anticipates a host of musical milestones we now accept as commonplace—everything from techno and industrial to turntable back-spinning and radical hip-hop sampling.

ZAN STEWART
ART BLAKEY: At the Café Bohemia, Vols. 1 & 2
Art Blakey, drums; Roni Donham, trumpet; Hank Mobley, tenor sax; Horace Silver, piano; Doug Watkins, bass
So what if these recordings are less than sonically ideal, from a tad too much stereo separation to Horace Silver’s out-of-tune piano? There’s so much ageless music and atmosphere — on one intro, Art Blakey tells the listeners to “Come on in and wail!” — that you just can’t miss. This music, heralding the burgeoning hard-bop genre, was recorded in a single evening (November 23, 1955) at a great Manhattan jazz joint, and folks, this joint was jumpin’. Notoriously fast numbers like “Minor’s Holiday,” emotive ballads like “Yesterdays” and “Alone Together,” and blues-rich cookers like “Soft Winds” and “Avila and Tequila” are all lit up by Mobley’s buoyant sound and fluent, hip ideas, Kenny Dorham’s like-minded crackle and zip, Silver’s inherent blues-funk, Doug Watkins’ agreeable thump, and Blakey’s delicious bashing. Like the man said, come on in and wail.

GEORGE FAME: Poet in New York
George Fame, vocals; Bob Malach, tenor sax; David Hazeltine, piano; Peter Washington, bass; Louis Hayes, drums
UK-born George Fame is mostly known as a rock’n’roll/R&B guy who had pop hits in the 1960s and later toured with Van Morrison. But he’s also a deep, informed jazz singer with a very open, plaintive tenor voice who is a master of vocalise — affixing words to jazz solos, usually those previously recorded. On this delicious under-ground treasure, Fame writes two of his own: the moving tribute to jazz prince Benny Golson, “Tuned In to You,” in which tenorman Bob Malach plays as George sings; and “Declaration of My Love,” a ballad that tugs the heart. Elsewhere, Fame’s words give life to telling Chet Baker solos on Tadd Dameron’s “On a Misty Night” and “That’s the Way It Goes” and he roars through Lester Young’s “Jumpin’ with Symphony Sid,” regaling listeners with King Pleasure’s original vocalise and some of his own lines, too.

JOHN SWENSON
RONNIE AND THE REX: Return of the Fabulous Poodle
Ronnie and the Rex, a bizarre and wonderful combination of roots rock, R&B, Brit-pop, and comedy, is one of the most in-demand party bands in London, with residencies at the King’s Head in North London and the 100 Club in Soho. Led by former Fabulous Poodles leader Tony De Meur, aka Ronnie Golden, the Rex play crackling soul grooves with lyrics that make you bust a gut on tunes like “5 Minutes” (a delicious turn on “Midnight Hour”), “Let’s Have Sex” ("I’ll love you later," promises Golden), and the anthemic ‘Drinking at Home’” (“I know it’s only alcohol but I like it”). The cleverness extends to a terrific medley of the “Perry Mason Theme” and “Town Without Pity”; a cover of Dr. John’s ‘Poncus tune “The Night is a Hunter”; and the newest version of ‘Yellow Ribbon’ you’re ever likely to hear. De Meur is a conceptual genius, and this recording wraps all his talents together in one nifty little package.

SCHWAGGERT: Schwaggert
Out of the blue of the western skies came Schwaggert, the apotheosis of the Austin rock sound in the go-go 1990s. Emerging from the ashes of the Neptune and discovered by Joe Ely, Schwaggert was the best bar band in Austin for the first half of that decade. Pete Gordon on piano, Steve Watson on guitar, and Mike “Wild” Middleton on drums joined forces with Chris Miller and Matt Eskey to make this rock classic in one day at the legendary Continental Club. “Take a Little for Yourself,” “You Ain’t Nothing But Trouble,” and “I Didn’t Think About That” are three of the greatest rock songs ever written. Ask Watson—he still plays ‘em in New Orleans’ favorite roots-rock band, $1000 Car.

SAM TELIG
BERLIOZ: Symphonie Fantastique
With: Overture: Béatrice et Bénédict
Sir Colin Davis has long been associated with Berlioz, and first recorded the Symphonie Fantastique with the London Symphony Truly talented conductors almost always improve with age, and Sir Colin Davis, born in 1927, is no exception. (Good thing conductors tend to live long!)
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MUSICAL SURROUNDINGS
love banished!) that thrill — the quieter moments do, too. (The LSO is a tidier ensemble today than it was 40 years ago.) There are so many fine moments here — especially in "Un bal," where the music shifts from dreamy to glittering to garish; and in Sow aux champs, where two shepherds (English horn and oboe) engage in a melancholy duet. I 'suggest John Eliot Gardiner's 1991 performance, with the Orchestre Revolutionnaire et Romantique playing period instruments. But my first choice has to be this new recording by Sir Colin Davis. If I were a classical music reviewer, I might call it "indispensable." You might want to wait to see if this recording is among the first batch of SACDs that appear on LSO Live. By the way, Berlioz is John Atkinson's favorite composer — first in his heart, even over Elgar. [Stuart — JA.

ELGAR: Symphony 1
Sir Colin Davis, London Symphony Orchestra

This performance was recorded in concert at the Barbican Center, London, in October 2001. Three years earlier, the liner notes tell us, conductor Sir Colin Davis re-studied the composer's music "in great depth" for an Elgar Festival with the same orchestra, the London Symphony Orchestra. The effort shows, as does the orchestra's close connection with the composer (Elgar was Principal Conductor from 1911 until shortly before his death in 1934). Elgar's music, like Mahler's, must be extraordinarily difficult to conduct. Symphony 1 is so long, for one thing — it takes special talent to hold it together, to make the performance flow and build toward a climax. There are so many changes in tempo, phrasing, and dynamics — not to mention a dramatic key change from A-flat major to D minor in the first movement. This is an exhilarating performance superbly recorded, despite the difficult acoustics of the hall. I listened in rapture as the exhilarating theme of the first movement returned triumphantly in the fourth — the ethereal scoring for the strings, the trumpets in a blaze of glory. I recently had the opportunity to hear Davis conduct the symphony with the New York Philharmonic, a reading that was very close to this recording. There's something very special here — uplifting, powerful, and, dare one say it, heavenly. My wife, Marina, who had never heard the work before, was deeply moved. This recording is on LSO Live, the orchestra's own label. Some of the recordings are said to be forthcoming on SACD. Surely this should be one of the first.

DAVID VERNIER

MICHEL LEGRAND: Les Parapluies de Cherbourg
The Umbrellas of Cherbourg: Original Soundtrack

There's just something about the music from Jacques Demy's 1964 "jazz-opera" film. It features the screen presence of the then unknown Catherine Deneuve and Nino Castelnuovo and the real voices of a couple of the then-popular Swing Singers (including Christiane Legrand, sister of composer Michel), and ideally captures a uniquely French sensibility regarding love, romance, and tragedy. To fully appreciate this, you probably had to have been there in 1964, when the film won the Palme d'Or at Cannes — or lucky enough to have caught the film at one of the few "art" theaters in the US that happened to show it. Although a single disc was briefly available in North America on Philips, Sony in France later issued this two-disc complete version, remixed and containing six bonus tracks.

SCHUMANN: The Songs of Robert Schumann, Vol. 7
Dorothea Röschmann, soprano; Ian Bostridge, tenor; Graham Johnson, piano

What could be more satisfying than hearing two voices perfectly suited to the repertoire, totally in command of technique, confident in style, utterly communicative at every phrase, performing extraordinary music, accompanied by one of today's most sympathetic, masterful collaborators? Dorothea Röschmann is simply one of the world's finest singers, and Ian Bostridge proves an equal partner, whether in their several duets or in their shared solo contributions. The rarely heard duets are especially fine, but Röschmann's lovely solo singing in songs such as "Der Nussbaum" and "Lieb der Braut" is more than worth the price of this CD.

BARRY WILLIS

CESARIA EVA: Cesarita Eva

Burned out on Big Music production values? Cesaria Evora is the cure for what ails you. The Cape Verdean contralto brings her melancholy sweetness to songs of mystery, love, regret, advice, and hope, singing primarily in her native Kabuverdianu, a Portuguese-based Creole. Fans of Buona Vista Social Club will find the mood familiar; the music ideal for languid afternoons and long, balmy nights.

THE SONGS OF WEST SIDE STORY: Various Artists

This version of the American musical treasure was a philanthropic project organized by the Grammy organization to benefit the NARAS Foundation, the Leonard Bernstein Education through the Arts Fund, and Nashville's Bernstein Center. The performances range from heartbreaking (Trisha Yearwood's "I Have a Love") to hilarious (Little Richard's sendup of "I Feel Pretty"). Natalie Cole, Sheila E., and Patti Labelle team up with a top-notch show band to give "America" the full gospel treatment, and a star-studded hip-hop crew reveals the eternal truth in "Gee, Officer Krupke." The unlikely pairing of Kenny Loggins and Wynonna works surprisingly well on "Tonight," and Chick Corea battles Steve Vai in "The Rumble." Aretha Franklin sings "Somewhere" like you've never heard it; the late Tejana star Selena shines on "A Boy Like That." This amazing compilation has it all: great variety, great recordings, great performances.

Stereophile, February 2003
The very last review I wrote for Hi-Fi News & Record Review (these days just plain Hi-Fi News)—before crossing the Atlantic to take up the reins at Stereophile in May 1986—was of KEF’s then-new flagship speaker, the Reference 107. That rave review appeared in the English magazine’s July 1986 issue, and was followed by equally positive reports from Stereophile’s writers. (You can find our complete coverage of the 107 in the magazine’s online archives: www.stereophile.com/showarchives.cgi?362.)

Soon after my review of the 107, KEF introduced its Uni-Q driver: a tweeter powered by a powerful but tiny neodymium magnet that enables it to perch on the front of the midrange unit’s pole piece, the midrange cone forming a waveguide for the high frequencies. The advantage of this is that the dual driver’s dispersion remains constant with frequency. The disadvantage is that a waveguide vibrating at low frequencies is not necessarily the optimal environment for a tweeter, while reflections of the tweeter’s output from the termination of the midrange cone can affect its response. If you look, for example, at Tom Norton’s March 1996 review of an earlier KEF Reference design, the Model 4 (www.stereophile.com/showarchives.cgi?362), you can see some treble peculiarities that result from the tweeter’s non-optimal acoustic environment.

KEF’s engineering team, led these days by Dr. Andrew Watson, has used the latest design technologies such as Finite Element Analysis and Laser Vibrometry, to optimize the drive-units and their environments to enable the company’s new flagship, the Reference 207, to be based on a Uni-Q module.

Referential

The handsome Reference 207 consists of the gloss-finished, cast-aluminum pod that carries the new Uni-Q drive-unit, mounted atop a wood-veneered cabinet with an elliptical plan section and complex internal bracing to minimize cabinet resonances. The coaxial tweeter uses a titanium dome with an elliptical profile. The profile of the Uni-Q pod continues the flare of the upper-midrange cone via a unique flat surround to optimize dispersion and minimize the production of standing waves in the cone. The tweeter is mounted in a chrome-plated steel “bullet” mounted atop the pod and covers the range above 15kHz. Basically a scaled-down version of the Uni-Q tweeter, it too uses a low-mass titanium dome with an elliptical profile. It’s claimed to have a flat response up to 50kHz and useful output up to 80kHz!

To avoid excessive motion of the Uni-Q midrange cone and to maximize the system’s dynamic range, a separate lower-midrange driver is used in its own sub-enclosure. Covering just the two octaves where instruments and voices have their fundamental energy, this 10” unit has been engineered for low distortion. It uses a low-mass paper cone with a central phase plug instead of a dustcap, and its motor is of the short-coil/long-gap topology, which, in conjunction with twin shorting rings on the voice-coil former, should give very linear behavior. Each of the two 10” woofers is mounted in its own sub-enclosure and has its own flared reflex port. One port is mounted on the front baffle beneath the lower woofer, the other, for the upper woofer, vents upward from the top panel behind the Uni-Q pod. The woofers again use linearizing Faraday Rings but this time with a long coil mounted in a short gap to give constant drive force regardless of cone position. The reinforced paper cone is terminated in a half-roll rubber surround.

The speaker’s fit’n’finish are superb. The story of the Reference 207’s design is far too long to do justice to in the space available. Those interested in learning more can download a White Paper from the KEF website, www.ken.com. Suffice it to say that the 207 appears to embody everything the English company has learned about drive-unit and speaker-system design in the 40 years since it was founded by the late Raymond Cooke.

Systematics

Vinyl was played on my Linn Sondek/Cirkus/Transpolar/Lingo/Ekos/Arkiv LP player sitting on a Sound Organisation table and amplified by a Linn Linto. CDs were played on a Musical Fidelity Nu-Vista 3D CD player and a Mark Levinson No.315 CD transport driving a Mark Levinson No.306
KEF Reference 207 loudspeaker
D/A processor via a Kimber Illuminations Orchid AES/EBU datalink. I also used an Accuphase DP-85 SACD player, a Technics D-V10 DVD-Audio player driving the Levinson DAC via an AudioQuest SVT-4 S/PDIF link, an Ayre D-7x DVD-V player, and a Z-Syscoms mlp-1 digital equalizer.

A Mark Levinson No.380S preamp fed Mark Levinson No.33H 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 were Synergistic Research Designers' Reference and PS Audio Lab Cable. A PS Audio Power Plant 300 running at 90Hz supplied power to the preamp and digital players. AC power came from two dedicated 20A circuits, each just 6' from the breaker box. A No.33H was plugged into each.

**Sonics**

Setup was straightforward, the 207s working at their best when toed-in to the 10°-distant listening seat and positioned a few inches farther out in the room than the Canton Karat Reference 2 DCs (reviewed last month) — the front of the Uni-Q pods were 40° (left) and 64° (right) from the side walls and 58° from the wall behind them. With the speaker standing on its feet, the superwoofer is a high 50° from the floor, meaning that unless a tall listener sits in a director's chair, his ears will be well below the superwoofer's axis and would indicate the presence of panel resonances. In fact, neither listening to the walls of the elliptically curved bass enclosure with a stethoscope nor measuring its impulse response with an accelerometer revealed any problematic modes. Even the cast-aluminum Uni-Q pod seemed dead to the touch.

The individual outputs of the six drive-units and two ports are shown in fig.2. Looking first at the higher-frequency behavior, assessed in the farfield on the Uni-Q tweeter axis, the crossover between the upper-midrange unit and the tweeter is set as specified at 2.7kHz, but is disturbed by a small peak in the former's output almost exactly at crossover. The tweeter shelves up by a couple of dB in the region where it is about to hand over to the superwoofer, but the range nominally covered by the superwoofer actually appears suppressed. (As I mention in my auditioning notes, the superwoofer appears to come in earlier than the specified 15kHz.) The acoustic crossover slopes are actually a little steeper than the specified 24db/octave, presumably because they consist of a fourth-order electrical slope to which must be added the acoustic rolloff of each drive-unit.

Lower in frequency, the responses were all taken in the nearfield, with the relative levels calculated according to the ratio between each driver's effective diameter. As the two woofers are independently loaded by their own ports, I've plotted each separately. This gives a false impression of
regarding the lower crossover frequency, as the summed output of the woofers will be 6dB higher than either on its own. I'm not too bothered by apparent crossover discrepancies, however, because this graph is more useful in showing how each driver behaves both within and outside its passband. The upper woofer (black trace) has a slightly more restricted upper-frequency limit than the lower woofer (red), but its port is tuned lower, to 26Hz compared with 32Hz, judging by the two minimum-motion points. Similarly, the front port (blue) has a more extended passband than the one behind the Uni-Q sub-enclosure (black). The upper-midrange unit hands over smoothly to the lower-midrange below 400Hz, with the latter covering a limited two-octave range. Slopes appear close to 24dB/octave.

Fig.3 shows the 207's overall response averaged across a 30° horizontal window on the Uni-Q axis, spliced to the complex sum of the low-frequency nearfield responses. (Both acoustic phase and the different distances of each driver to a nominal farfield point are taken into account.) The 3dB rise in the midbass level will be due to the nearfield measurement's assumption of a 2pi (hemispherical) environment. The balance is fairly even over the audioband, but salient features are the slight energy excess in the middle of the midrange, the peak at the top of the Uni-Q midrange unit's passband, and the slightly elevated tweeter level. (The HF adjust jumper was in place for this measurement, as that is how I preferred it for my auditioning—but see below.)

The KEF 207's horizontal dispersion (fig.4) was narrower than usual above 800Hz but remarkably even, presumably because the Uni-Q drive-unit arrangement ensures that the tweeter and midrange radiation patterns are matched through the crossover region. The top-octave dispersion is also wider than I usually
nature of so much big-speaker bass back then. The 107's coupled-cavity bass loading produced low frequencies that were both extended and well-defined. The 207 builds on that legacy. The low-frequency warble tones on Stereophile's Test CD 3 (Stereophile STPH006-2, available from the secure "Recordings" page on our website) were reproduced in full measure down to the 25Hz 1/8-octave band. Although the 20Hz band was down in level, there was still useful output coming from the speakers' ports, and the 207 reproduced the "pat" of a close-miked kick drum with satisfying weight but without any boom.

The 207's combination of LF extension and clarity made it one of the best speakers I have used for reproducing electric bass guitar. Phil Lesh's instrument on "Attics of My Life," from the DVD-A re-release of the Grateful Dead's American Beauty (Rhino 8974385, front channels only), was reproduced with its delicate texture apparent, yet Pino Palladino's thunderous, live-sounding instrument behind Joe Cocker on "With a Little Help from My Friends" (Parlophone at the Palace, Virgin 8 128332 5, CD) didn't descend into soggy boom. Every detail of Marcus Miller's much-lighter-toned instrument on Donald Fagen's "The Goodbye Look" (The Nightly, Warner R9 78138, DVD-A!), and his percussive picking and popping underneath Miles Davis' trumpet on the title track from Tutu (Warner 9 48429-9, DVD-A), was revealed via the KEFs.

At the other end of the spectrum, what about that super tweeter? The specification mentions a crossover point of 15kHz, which, as my hearing is pretty much shot above 16kHz, means that it shouldn't produce anything I can hear. Yet when I stood close to the speakers, I could hear quite a lot of high-frequency information coming from it with instruments like brushed cymbals. In fact, nearfield spectral analysis of each of the two HF units' outputs, with my hand over the other unit during the measurement, suggested that the top unit takes over considerably lower in frequency, above 10kHz, which in turn means that the lower tweeter covers just two octaves.

Notwithstanding these observations, the 207's high frequencies were clean and grain-free. While plentiful top-octave "air" was apparent, it wasn't exaggerated in the manner of the Cantons. In the mid-trebble, however, a faint touch of hardness could sometimes be heard. Cantus' recent ...Against the Dying of the Light CD (see December 2002, p.63) is very critical in this respect, and I ended up auditioning it at lower SPLs than usual. This was also true for my choral recording on Test CD 3. The 207's superbly extended low frequencies also allowed me to hear much more of the traffic passing below the Uni-Q axis are due, I assume, to interference between the two widely spaced tweeters.

Fig.5 shows how the speaker's quasi-anechoic behavior adds up in my listening room. (I average 120 measurements, with each speaker driven individually, across an area centered on my ear position in my listening chair.) The 1/8-octave balance is remarkably flat. Though the slight excesses in the middle of the midrange and the mid-treble that were revealed in the earlier graphs can be seen in fig.6, the overall variation from 100Hz to 10kHz lies within ±1.5dB limits. It's no wonder I found the KEF's tonal balance so neutral. Again, this graph was taken with the HF adjusting plug in place. However, removing the plug dropped the level of the octave below 8kHz and 16kHz by about 0.4dB. Though a small difference, the region covered is wide enough for this to be audible.

The speaker's step response (fig.6) indicates that all the drive-units are connected with positive acoustic polarity, but that, even with the stepped-back placement of the tweeters, the speaker is not overall...
the centuries-old English church in which I made the latter recording.

On recordings that themselves sound hard, such as the DV13-A of Yes's *Magnification* (Rhino R9 78250), the KEF was unforgiving. (Both this album and *Tutti* have rather gritty-sounding highs—is this due to a heavy hand on the watermarking knobs?) Anne-Sophie Mutter's Brahms Violin Sonatas (EMI CDC 7 49299 2, CD) sounded definitely "scratchy," the violin jumping forward out of the soundstage on some high-treble notes but not on others. However, comparing this 1983 recording with Arrigo Delmoni's superbly sounding but more cautious 1996 performance of Sonata 1 (John Marks JMR 2), which was also mixed quite closely, indicated that the scratchiness was more likely due to early digital artifacts being more clearly revealed than to anything the speaker was doing wrong.

In fact, trying to identify what the KEF was doing wrong proved a frustrating experience in the month I used the speaker for everyday listening. It was both remarkably uncolored and neutrally balanced. "Midrange to die for!" I remarked when I was finalizing my choices for this issue's "Records To Die For" feature. And time and time again, I found myself marveling at the broad, stable, and deep picture the 207s offered into the recorded soundstage.

**Summings up**

The $15,000/pair Reference 207 was the latest in a series of high-performance speakers to grace my listening room, following on the heels of the Canton Karat Reference 2 DC ($10,000/pair, January 2003), the Mission Pelastro ($35,000/pair, December 2002), the mbl 111B ($17,000/pair, August 2002), and the Wilson Sophia ($11,000/pair, July 2002). Each had its strengths, none had significant flaws, yet I continue to be surprised at how different excellent, expensive speakers can sound from one another.

KEF has always been very much an engineering-led company, and its original Reference 107 was, in my opinion, a milestone. As I wrote last November, in my tribute to the most important audio components of the past 40 years (Vol.25 No.11, p.73), it "finally rammed home the lesson that speaker design primarily involved engineering rather than art. Yes, art is still an essential part of designing a musically satisfying speaker, but only when that art rides on a platform of solid engineering." As I remark in this issue's "As We See It," good measured performance doesn't tell you how a product sounds, but it does let you know that its designer knows what he's doing. KEF's Reference 207 is as well-engineered as you'd expect from a company with such a distinguished pedigree, and it does sound excellent, particularly when it comes to its clean, powerful, extended low frequencies, uncolored, natural-sounding midrange, and its stable, precisely defined stereo imaging.

The 207 is the best-sounding design to use KEF's Uni-Q driver array that I have heard, and competes head-on with such high-performance designs as the speakers listed above, as well as B&W's Nautiks 801 and 800 and the Revel Ultima Studio. While my ultimate preference would be for the slightly less expensive Wilson and Revel designs, the big, beautiful-looking KEF is still a speaker I could live with for a long time. Highly recommended.

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I preferred its additional clarity, for example, to the Lehmann Black Cube. The Tango’s balance of strength allows the gist of the music to come through and I never found myself musically frustrated by any aspect of its performance. Quite the contrary: the experience of the old “chils down the neck” - Gordon Holt’s test of musical realism... occurred again and again in my listening tests. www.stereolines.com

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Thirty years ago, the upstart audio company NAD revolutionized the manufacturing of consumer-electronics components by “internationalizing” the process. Instead of physically making products, NAD hired a project team in one location to design a product that was then built at a sub-contracted factory located elsewhere. The arrangement allowed NAD to go into business with relatively little capital outlay and low overhead. Other companies have since copied this ingenious business model, and, as transportation and communication have improved, doing so has become easier and more efficient. It has brought prices down and quality up — mostly in the low and middle segments of the high-end audio and video markets.

I haven’t studied San Francisco-based Parasound Products’ business or its books, but the NAD model has clearly been an influence on Parasound, which was founded in 1982. The Parasound Halo JC 1 — a powerful, sophisticated premium product — was designed by a team headed by audio legend John Curl, and built for Parasound by a factory in Taiwan. It takes the outsourcing concept way upscale while keeping the amplifier’s price down to a remarkable $3000 each. The 5-to-1 ratio of cost to retail price that is the norm in the audio industry suggests that the “raw” cost of the JC 1 is about $600 — a number almost impossible to believe, given the superb build quality and sheen heft of this powerhouse monoblock.

For you youngsters, John Curl has been designing high-end gear since the early 1970s, including the classic Mark Levinson JC-2 and Demesene JC-80 preamplifiers, the much-revered Vintage phono preamplifier, and lots of electronic gear for the Grateful Dead.

Curl has designed Parasound products since 1989, most to specific price points and aimed at the very competitive middle of the high-end market. By ultra-high-end standards, $6000 is not a lot for a pair of monoblock amplifiers, but it’s a big enough step upmarket for Parasound that the new Halo moniker distinguishes the line from other Parasound products.

**Design**

The JC 1 is a brawny brute weighing 81 lbs. It outputs 400W into 8 ohms, 800W into 4 ohms, 135 amps of peak current, and 25W of pure class-A power into 8 ohms. According to a blurb by John Curl that accompanies the amp, the design is “based on a complementary differential J-FET input stage followed by two stages of selected push-pull MOSFETs ultimately driving nine pairs of the most powerful complementary bipolar power transistors that are available today.”

Curl describes the JC 1 as an outgrowth of his Parasound HCA-2200 from 1997. The JC 1 has much larger heatsinks, twice the power supply, better internal componentry and layout, and its range of operation in class-A has been extended to 25W, which should be enough to keep it from class-AB operation on all but the most demanding musical passages. Even at idle, the JC 1 puts out plenty of heat, so ample ventilation is critical. A switch on the rear allows users to drop class-A operation down to 10W for placement in tight spaces. The direct-coupled design uses a fast-acting DC servo circuit to keep DC from ever reaching the output. Protection for both amplifier and loudspeaker is also provided by a gold-plated relay, and by current-sensing transistors that will open the relay if the current draw exceeds a predetermined amount, whether due to the impedance dropping below 1 ohm or a short at the speaker terminals.

Curl designed the circuits; Bob Crump and Carl Thompson, his partners at CTC Builders (makers of the
custom-built Blowtorch preamplifier), did most of the hands-on work. Thompson engineered the boards, Crump chose the parts and "voiced" the finished product. According to Crump, the JC 1 grew out of a CTC-modified Parasound HCA-3500 called the CTC BBQ, which was demoed at the 2001 Consumer Electronics Show. Among the upgraded parts used in the JC 1 are a 10-amp toroidal transformer enclosed in a steel canister filled with epoxy resin. Sunken output transistors, Harris hyper-fast soft-recovery diodes, Nichicon Muse DC and local bypass capacitors, Nichicon Great Supply raw DC capacitors (for a total of 132,000μF capacitance), and VanuPIre continuous-cast copper wire and gold-plated OFC RCA jacks. Separate power supplies for the input, driver, and output sections are said to make the JC 1 totally immune from AC-line voltage fluctuations.

The physical plant is a handsome chunk of gleaming, heavy-gauge aluminum fitted with large heatsinks on either side. Rear-panel fittings include balanced and single-ended inputs, two sets of five-way binding-post outputs, a ground "lift" switch for when there are hum problems, and a bias-level switch allowing for reduced bias current, and thus cooler operation if needed. There are also facilities for automatic turn-on (by an audio signal or an external trigger voltage), which can be daisy-chained to turn on other components. While no audiophile would want to listen to this or any solid-state amp from a cold start,
the JC 1 has been designed for home-theater use—five of these beasts left running continuously could generate an enormous amount of heat and large electric bills. In fact, the JC 1 is certified THX Ultra2—which means it meets certain amplifier standards set by THX for home theater.

**Setup and Use**

In its unusually detailed instruction manual, Parasound recommends using the Halo JC 1 in balanced configuration. But my Hegel HP-100 preamplifier is single-ended, so that’s how I used the Halos, with their Bias Level switches set to High, which configures the amp’s output stage to operate at up to 25W in class-A. I placed the JC 1 on a pair of Finite Elemente Pagode amplifiers and plugged them into the Shunyata Research Hydra power distribution center with Anaconda AvX power cords. I used both Harmonic Technology Fantasy 10 and Wireworld Silver Electra AC cords.

The THD content at moderate levels is almost pure—and sonically benign—second harmonic (fig.4). There was no significant difference between the amplifier’s distortion performances in its two bias states.

As the output power increased, the second harmonic rose in level and the third, fourth, and fifth harmonics made appearances (fig.5) — but these fell in level with increasing order, something that tends to correlate with good sound quality. Intermodulation distortion was also acceptably low (fig.6) — with the 1kHz difference component lying at -94dB (0.0015%). Note that these last two graphs were taken at 635W and 600W into 4 ohms.

With continuous drive, the Parasound clipped at 545W into 4 ohms (27.4dBW) — way above the specified 400W. (“Clipping” is defined, as usual, as the power level where the measured THD figure reaches 1% and is shown in fig.7 as the horizontal magenta line.) With a low-duty-cycle 1kHz toneburst more representative of music, the Halo was a powerhouse. Its clipping power increased by 0.3dB into 8 ohms, reaching 586.5W at 1% THD (27.6dBW, black trace), with 1154W available into 4 ohms (27.6dBW, blue), 2255W into 2 ohms (27.5dBW, green), and no less than 4.2kW into 1 ohm (27.2dBW, magenta). The latter is equivalent to an output current of 64.7A!

This is excellent measured performance. The Halo JC 1 is not only the best amplifier to come from Parasound, it ranks up there with the best high-end heavyweights.

—John Atkinson

![Fig.4 Parasound Halo JC 1, balanced, high bias, 1kHz waveform at 40W into 4 ohms (top), 0.0155% THD+N; distortion and noise waveform with fundamental notched out (bottom, not to scale).](image1)

![Fig.5 Parasound Halo JC 1, balanced, high bias, spectrum of 50Hz sinewave, DC=1kHz, at 635W into 4 ohms (linear frequency scale).](image2)

![Fig.6 Parasound Halo JC 1, unbalanced, high bias, HF intermodulation spectrum, DC-2kHz, 19+20kHz at 600W into 4 ohms (linear frequency scale).](image3)

![Fig.7 Parasound Halo JC 1, distortion (%) vs 1kHz burst output power into: 16 ohms (red trace), 8 ohms (black), 4 ohms (blue), 2 ohms (green), 1 ohm (magenta).](image4)
The Sound of Speed, the Speed of Sound

It took but a few seconds for me to absolutely fall in love with the Halo JC 1. I first used them to drive the Kharra Midi-Grande Ceramique 10s, then my reference Audio Physic Avanti IIIs, which they controlled brilliantly, with the kind of relaxed ease you'd expect of a pair of powerhouse amps. If big amps are said to be slow to react, the JC 1 disproved that myth: it was lightning-fast, delivering transients and sibilants with a speed and clarity that were positively addictive.

On the UK edition of Eva Cassidy's Songbird (CD, Didgeridoo G2-10045), the vocal sibilants were cleaner and faster than I remembered them being through my reference Musical Fidelity Nu-Vista 300, itself no slouch in that department. The JC 1's ability to separate the vocal from the subtle artificial reverb, both in time and layered behind in space, was a revelation. And it was done without spotlighting or added brightness.

The overall lack of smear helped create an impressively coherent, transparent, and detailed soundstage, with the kind of air and reverberant presentation I usually associate with tubes. Reverberant trails emanating from centrally placed vocals radiated away in space farther toward the side of the stage than I remembered hearing them with my reference amp.

Audio Fidelity, a new audiophile label founded by former DCC Compact Classics head Marshall Blonsstein, sent along some hybrid SACDs mastered by Steve Hoffman, including the Zombies' Greatest Hits (AFZ 001). With no previous reference for the disc, I found the sound of very familiar material (from vinyl and older CDs), decoded by Musical Fidelity's new Tri-Vista SACD player and amplified by the JC 1s, to be nothing short of stupendous. I wondered how my reference Nu-Vista 300 amp would present it, but this combo delivered tonal richness, palatable 3D images, and resolution of inner detail that had me cranking up the volume to ridiculous levels without sacrificing any of the picture's intense delicacy. Cymbal strokes rang with convincing slimmer, free of unnatural grain, grit, and hardness, and vocals had that "in front of the microphone" dimensionality that makes you feel as if you're in the studio instead of on the receiving end of a recording.

The bottom end was equally impressive and subtly drawn. I expect extension and definition from a solid-state amplifier, but what I often hear is bass that's overdamped, overly constrained, and mechanical. Not with the JC 1 — though for this I had to wait until my Avanti IIIs were reinstalled in the system. The Kharra Midi-Grandes' lack of bass definition—at least in my room—limited my ability to draw any conclusion about the amp's bass response.

Classic Records' long-awaited 200gm Quiex SV-P pressing of Norah Jones' Come Away with Me (Blue Note/Classic LP 5004) arrived after the JC 1s were installed. The presentation of this superbly recorded disc left nothing to be desired. No doubt the amp remained in class-A operation throughout this acoustic set, which may have contributed to the combination of speed, liquidity, delicacy, transparency, and intoxicatingly clean purity that had me listening to Jones' unique jazz-country stylings over and over. When she sings "Come away with me," I want to go! The focus and three-dimensionality of her voice on that title track, combined with brilliant integration of the head/body combination and the absolutely smear-free delivery of most sibilants, and aided by a daringly dry and close-up recording, constituted one of the most convincing re-creations of the female voice I've heard at home.

On Jones' sparse, languid arrangement of Hank Williams' "Cold Cold Heart"—just her piano, acoustic bass, and a sprinkle of percussive accents on electric guitar—the picture was so clean and exquisitely drawn that I found myself playing it again and again, even though such repeats don't give the grooves a chance to cool down and almost certainly cause damage. (Can I have another copy, Hobson?)

Admittedly, the insertion of the SME 30 turntable added an unknown variable to the mix. The only way to discern the JC 1's contribution to the super sound I was getting was to put my reference Simon Yorke 'table back in the system, but that had to wait until I'd played dozens more discs—LPs, CDs, and SACDs—and sorted through a host of other sonic qualities that contributed to the overall picture. In the end, and without comparison to my reference, the JC 1 was actually on the subtly warm and rich side of the sonic spectrum—but not at the expense of transient speed and resolution of detail.

I usually find solid-state amps too bright and hard on top, or—when designers go overboard in their attempt to cure this problem—too soft and unfocused. The JC 1 was just about right: neither etched nor softened, but just far enough on the right side of "sily-smooth" to sound tonally natural and texturally complex. Good tube designs have a much easier time in this region, but, as the JC 1 proved, it is pos-

**Associated Equipment**

**Analog sources:** Simon Yorke, Nottingham Audio Analog. SME 30 turntables; Graham 2.2, Immedia RMM2 tonearms; Lyra Helikon SL and Helikon mono, Transfiguration Temper Supreme Lyra Titan (prototype), Audio Tekne MC-6310, Sumiko Celebration cartridges.

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

**Preamplifiers:** Hovland HP-100; Manley Steelhead.

**Power amplifiers:** Musical Fidelity Nu-Vista 300.

**Loudspeakers:** Kharra Midi-Grand Ceramique 1.0, Audio Physic Avanti III.

**Cables:** Phono: Hovland Music Groove, Audio Tekne. Interconnect: Harmonic Technology Pro-Silway II, Audio Zen, Analysis Plus Solo.


**Accessories:** PS Audio Power Plant P300, Shunyata Research Hydra power-line conditioners; Sounds of Silence Vibraplane active isolation platform, Symposium Rollerblocks (Tungsten, Grade 3 Superball), Finite Elemente equipment stands, Audiosharna Cable Cooker 2.0, Walker motor drive, ART Q dampsers, Walker Valid Points, ASC Tube Traps, Shakti Stones & Onlines, RPG BAD & Abuffer panels.

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*Michael Fremer*
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 the exotic hi-fi 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
sible to get the balance just right with transistors. I’ve reviewed a tube amp that was brighter and harder.

When I reviewed the Musical Fidelity Nu-Vista 300 in November 1999, I thought its midrange was slightly cool. Over time, I’ve decided it was the midbass that was a bit pronounced, which gave me the mistaken impression that the mids were somewhat recessed. The JC 1 struck me as being tonally more neutral and somewhat more supple and detailed in the midrange. Its rendering of a mint RCA Living Stereo LP of Jascha Heifetz’s recording of the Sibelius Violin Concerto (LSC-2435) demonstrated to me that the JC 1’s midband purity and delicacy left little to be desired. Still, if you prefer a typical tube amp’s midband lyricism, you might respect the JC 1 in this regard without falling in love with it.

When I listened recently to violinist Arturo Delmoni playing, in person, just a few feet in front of me, at an intimate speaker demo given by Aerial Acoustics, I noted the violin’s combination of edgy sweetness and soft clarity. Too much midband bloom and an amp can make a well-recorded violin sound too warm and silky-soft. Too dry and analytical, and the instrument can sound creaky and “grindy,” with too much of the literal physical act revealed and not enough of the act’s intended effect. The same applies to the piano.

The JC 1 was tonally and harmonically convincing on well-recorded violin and piano performances. I played the Classic LP and JVC XRCD (JVC HR 0223-2) reissues of the Heifetz/Sibelius recording and was impressed by how revealing the Halos were of the differences between these reissues and the original. On the Living Stereo LP, the violin sounded harmonically intact and physically “feathery” — delicately textured and palpably real. Both the reissue and the XRCD CD had the violin sounding dry and screechy — though not at all bright — and harmonically truncated. The reissue and the XRCD made the violin sound the way doctrine tube lovers think solid-state always makes violins sound. Yet the original LP, played back on the same solid-state JC 1’s revealed the “tubey” nature of the original LP’s electronic chain.

With this much honest power available, it was hardly surprising that the JC 1 handled major-league dynamic swings with ease.

But after five weeks of more than pleasant listening, it was time to compare what my ears had become accustomed to against my reference. And there were a few other variables in the chain to be considered: the SME 30 turntable with Celebration cartridge, the Tri-Vista SACD player, a re-tubed Howland HP-100, the substitution of Analysis Plus Solo Crystal Oval 8 interconnect and speaker cable, and the addition of the Shunyata Research Hydra power distributor and Anaconda AxV cable.

As I switched out the amps, I tried to sum up the experience I’d just had: I wondered whether the JC 1 is or the other changes — or a combination of all of them — were responsible for the phenomenal transparency, resolution of low-level detail, and overall tonal neutrality I’d been hearing. More than that, the system was unusually “at ease” — a quality that kept me listening long into many nights.

A day-long warmup preceded any serious listening. In fact, I purposely stayed out of the room while the system played. Next evening, I played the Norah Jones, Sibelius, Zombies, the Quixx SV-P of Muddy Waters’ Folksinger (Classic), Beethoven’s Piano Concerto 3 (Ashkenazy/Solti/CSO), the 45rpm edition of Bill Evans’ Waltz for Debby (Analogue Productions), and other discs I’d particularly enjoyed during the review period.

The presentation was much different, and quite instructive. The Nu-Vista 300’s overall presentation was bigger — bigger images on a more expansive stage — but the JC 1’s was more finely featured, more refined, and clearly more transparent — I could “see” farther into the stage. Images sounded smoother and less mechanical, and therefore somewhat more convincing.

My conclusion following the switch? The improved resolution of low-level detail, macrodynamic texturing, and transient and sibilant awesomeness were almost all the JC 1’s doing. I thought I could now more clearly hear the subtle midbass warming effect of the nuvisor tube’s insertion in the Nu-Vista 300’s signal path. The midrange wasn’t thin; the midbass was a bit pronounced. There also seemed to be a bit of spot-lighting in the very top end, which nicely complemented the midbass.

The JC 1’s bottom end had slightly greater extension and clearly more focus — not that the Nu-Vista 300 sounds lightweight or unfocused! The JC 1 clearly trumped the Nu-Vista 300 in terms of transient speed and clarity — one of the factors giving the former a smoother, more refined sound.

Which was “better” overall? I don’t know. I enjoyed listening to both. The Nu-Vista had a richer, bigger, more dramatic presentation; the JC 1’s was smoother, more controlled, more organized.

Just to be sure that some kind of cable interaction wasn’t skewing these results, I put my reference Harmonic Technology Pro-Silway II interconnect and Magic Woofer speaker cable on the Audio Dharma Cable Cooker to warm up for a day, and then into the system. I was surprised by a slight loss of transparency and a slight coarsening of the very top end compared to the Analysis Plus, which costs far less. I removed the Shunyata Hydra power distributor from the system and plugged the amps directly into the wall. The sound got less coherent and even coarser, so back in the Hydra went. Whatever it is and whatever it does, that thing really works.

With the JC 1 back in the system for one last go-round, I got the same results comparing cables and listening with and without the Hydra. For now, I’m not
sure what to make of this, but, as they say on Fox News, “We report, you decide” (except that I really mean it). I may switch reference cables, but I’m not sure yet. As for switching amps, had I not already owned the Nu-Vista 300 and had to choose between it and the JC 1s, I’d have had a difficult time deciding. But whether it’s the novelty or whether they’re genuinely more refined, neutral, and revealing, I’d probably go for the JC 1s. Hardly the results I expected when I unboxed them!

There was nothing solid-state-sounding about the Parasound Halo JC 1.

Conclusions

Measured performance doesn’t always correlate with actual sound, but in this case, assuming the Parasound Halo JC 1’s published specs resemble what John Atkinson measures, there’s a strong connection. The specs show ultra-wide bandwidth, high-current capability, low, low noise, a high signal/noise ratio, and a fast slew rate, among many other indicators of outstanding amplifier performance.

That’s what I heard. There was nothing solid-state-sounding about the JC 1 — either on top, where it was anything but “hard” or “etched,” or on bottom, where it didn’t serve up one-note, overdamped bass. If the Halo JC 1 committed any sonic errors, they were on the subtractive side and easily missed. Perhaps some listeners will find the JC 1 too refined and perhaps a tad polite, but I didn’t.

There was an honesty to the overall tonal and harmonic presentation that transcended technological stereotypes. Powerful, refined, smooth, organized, dynamic, transparent, and rhythmically supple, the JC 1 offered a combination of attributes that added up to many weeks of listening pleasure. I’d be happy to have it go on indefinitely — as, no doubt, will many of you. If you need to spend more than $6000 for 800W of stereo amplification, by all means do so, but I’m not sure you’ll get much more measured or audible performance — or pleasure — than what Parasound’s superbly built Halo JC 1s delivered. A bargain, and highly recommended.
The World's Most Advanced Amplifier?

Three years in the making, Perreaux's new R200i stereo integrated power amplifier is one of the most advanced audio products in a generation.

A Highly "Intelligent" Amplifier

"Intelligent" is rarely a word used to describe a high-end audio amplifier, yet the word defines the R200i. Inside the compact marine-grade aluminum chassis is a powerful microprocessor that controls all the functions of the amplifier. This processor lets you program the R200i's input labels, balance, volume gain slope, maximum volume and dozens of other parameters. You can even program the speaker binding posts to drive two pairs of speakers or bi-wire one pair!

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Separate oversize transformers and a massive storage capacitance bank offer instantaneous power for spectacular dynamics. Thermal sensors and six levels of circuit protection — all outside the signal path — ensure the R200i will not overheat or damage your speakers.

Truly Upgradeable

Inside the R200i is a slot for adding additional input modules. The first module to be released will be a software-controlled MM/MC phono stage, followed by a wide-band USB computer interface. More modules will be released as new audio formats are invented.

Bottom Line: The Sound

Sonic purity — that is neutral, uncolored yet incredibly revealing sound has been the hallmark of Perreaux amplifiers for twenty-five years. Perreaux's R200i exceeds all its predecessors. "This is the best sounding amplifier we have ever made," reports Perreaux's Managing Director, Martin Van Rooyen. One listen and you'll agree.

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Some people believe that high-end audio is mostly fluff whose cost, compared to standard professional studio electronics, is not justifiable. Moreover, they argue, if the music has been piped through any number of studio devices before it gets to your home, you can’t expect to get music out of it than the studio devices will pass. Just as the argument is made about the final 6' of power cord, how can one Over-The-Top device make up for the foibles of those that precede it?

But how good, really, is studio equipment? Although most professional components are not readily available to the average audiophile, *Stereophile* has reviewed a few of them. I’ve reviewed the Z-systems rdp-1 digital EQ and the Nagra PL-L preamp, which are equally, if not more, useful in the recording studio than in a home system; and a respected studio monitor speaker, the B&W Signature 800. The Weiss Medea digital/analog converter has a professional audio heritage, and made an immediate impression on me at the 2002 Consumer Electronics Show. Its provenance and construction shouted “Studio Professional!,” but its sound quality and sleek design whispered “high-end audio.” As soon as Weiss opened US distribution, I jumped on the Medea.

Daniel Weiss, an alumnus of Studer/ReVox, founded Weiss Engineering Ltd. in 1985 to make digital audio equipment for mastering studios. His clients include Telarc, Sony, BMG, Abbey Road, Gateway Mastering, Sterling Sound, Bernie Grundman Mastering, and Masterdisk, among others. Weiss decided to enter the high-end hi-fi market in 2001, and the Medea is his first such product. The Medea’s ultra-clean lines are the result of good design and a minimum of controls. In fact, the Medea is the least interactive component I’d used in a long time.

There are five buttons on the front. One, on the left panel facet, is the power switch; the other four select inputs. Above each input button, a blue LED blinks as the Medea attempts to lock on to the selected input, and remains illuminated when lock is achieved. The outputs are muted until lock is achieved. On the far right facet are two trim potentiometers for adjusting output level; a precision ceramic tool is provided for the purpose.

The rear panel is nearly as simple. Each digital input channel has two jacks, although only one jack at a time can be used. Inputs 1–3 have both RCA and TosLink connectors, while input 4 has both RCA and TosLink. Two pairs of analog outputs, RCA and XLR, are provided, along with an output-level switch. There is a 12dB difference between the level switch’s High and Low positions.

Weiss’s distributor, Damoka LLC, recommends using High as long as the following input device can handle it. The manual, however, suggests sticking with Low unless one cannot achieve enough drive with the trimmers turned all the way up. The High and Low outputs are adjusted with the front-panel trim potentiometers. The states of all buttons are stored in non-volatile memory when the unit is powered down. Finally, there’s a dual-voltage IEC power panel.

Its external simplicity aside, the Medea is no plain-vanilla DAC. In addition to accepting up to 24 bits and sample rates of up to 96kHz at each input, inputs 1 and 2 can be used simultaneously to process rates of 176.4kHz and 192kHz, though I had no sources that could take advantage of those higher rates. All inputs are automatically upsampled to 352kHz or 384kHz (depending on the original sample rate), and all inputs are subject to two jitter-reduction schemes.

The first such scheme is Weiss’s scrupulous attention to internal design. This includes electrical and magnetic shielding, good grounding, power-supply decoupling, and correct signal transmission from the clock generator to the D/A.
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chip itself. I confirmed the care given to this when I removed the heavy top and bottom plates of anodized aluminum, only to find the circuitry still completely shrouded by heavy copper-clad steel plates, with many "finger-grounds" to the main circuit board. The board itself was scrupulously clean and well-labeled, its different sections shielded by dividing walls and interconnected by ribbon or shielded wires. Very impressive.

The other part of the anti-jitter battle is fought by careful feedback control of the PLL, which locks the DAC clock to the input signal. Weiss says the PLL's action is analogous to that of a "very slow-reacting flywheel" in that it can follow long-term variation in input frequency but resists any short-term fluctuations; i.e., jitter. This is not a new idea. I recall a similarly named off-the-shelf device, the Digital Flywheel, 1 offered more than 10 years ago as a tweak for studio digital equipment. The trick, of course, is in the adjustment of the parameters of the adaptive circuitry to achieve the goal of jitter reduction and to be able to lock to a somewhat unpredictable input signal.

Signals are upsampled partly in the digital filter and partly in the DSP, to ensure a minimum of phase-shift and ringing. This also permits the addition of shaped dithering of the signals presented to the D/A stage. The analog reconstruction filter is a third-order filter at 176.4kHz or 196kHz. The output stages are class-A, with an extremely low output impedance to achieve very low distortion (even when operated open-loop) and to isolate the DAC from the load.

My first sample of the Medea DAC took more than 10 seconds to lock on to a new input. After I'd spent a weekend away, it failed to lock without multiple cycles of power on/off. Another week, and it wouldn't lock at all. Weiss sug-

The hot-running Weiss Medea DAC locked to sample rates from 44.1kHz to 192kHz (the latter using inputs 1 and 2 in parallel), though as Kal noted, its narrow PLL acceptance window means that it takes a long time to lock. With the analog output set to High, the maximum output level at 1kHz was 8.44V from the unbalanced outputs, 16.89V from the balanced. These figures dropped to a more sensible 2.13V and 4.26V, respectively, when the output was set to Low. The DAC didn't invert absolute polarity from either set of outputs — the XLRs are wired with pin 2 hot — and the source impedance was well below 1 ohm.

With CD, the rolloff below 10Hz is due to the AP System One, and there was a very slight rise at the top of the audioband (fig.1, top pair of traces), though I doubt this will be audible. It was not apparent playing back pre-emphasized data (fig.1, lower traces). It was also absent when the Medea decoded data sampled with a 96kHz sample rate (fig.2), the response falling off smoothly above 40kHz. At 192kHz sampling, the response extended to 80kHz before rolling off. Channel separation (not shown) was superb, any crosstalk being buried beneath the noise floor in the midrange. Though separation diminished slightly in the treble — due, presumably, to a small amount of capacitive coupling — it was still superb 110dB in both directions at 20kHz.

Fig.3 shows spectral analyses of the Medea's analog output while it decoded data representing a dithered 1kHz tone at −90dBFS. The top pair of traces are with 16-bit data — there are no spuriae visible, and the noise floor is actually the dither with which the data have been encoded. Increasing the data word length to 24 bits (lower traces) drops the level of the noise by 20dB. This is one of the best DACs I have measured on this test, and it is the best at low frequencies: almost 20-bit performance is implied, which is superb. This very low audioband noise was also apparent when the Medea decoded 16-bit data representing a 1LSB DC offset (not shown), and although this graph revealed a rise in ultrasonic noise — presumably due to noise-shaping — this peaked at just −93dBFS at 88.2kHz.

As expected, the Medea's linearity error with 16-bit data was vanishingly small, to well below −100dBFS (fig.4). As a result of both this superb linearity and the low analog noise
gusted that the lock window might be too narrow for my Meridian 508.24 CD player, California Audio Labs CL-20 DVId-Audio player, and Sony SCD-XA777ES SACD player, and that I should try to adjust the internal trimmer that sets the acceptable lock window. When this didn’t work, Weiss sent me a replacement sample, which is the subject of this report. It sounded identical to the first sample, and has functioned flawlessly now for months.

**Will a class-A CD player benefit from an external DAC?**

My favorite reference disc is one of my 2002 “Records To Die For,” Sena Una Niehe, by vocalist Pedro Aznar and a small tango group (M-A Recordings M052A). The extension and delineation of low bass was a marked distinction of the Medea through its coax or balanced inputs. There was then simply more low end, and it was better defined, but not when I used the TosLink input. Pedro Aznar’s voice seemed slightly fuller, as if the Medea had a tilt that favored the lower portion of the voice’s frequency range. Yet Aznar’s characteristic nasality and sibilants were not suppressed. To complete the triad of felicities, the ambience of the recorded space (a small stone church) was larger, and the instruments and voices were more clearly distinguishable within it. Female voices on other recordings, such as those of Alison Krauss and Patricia Barber, were also more rounded without being masculinized.

All of that might make you think that the Medea sounded dark and perhaps a bit hooded. It was exactly the opposite. It seemed that the Medea’s transparency and resolution simply avoided emphasis in favor of natural space and balance. For example, in the opening of the last movement of Leonard Bernstein’s later recording of Mahler’s Symphony 6 (Deutsche Grammophon 27697), powerful and spacious though it remained, the Medea made it clear that there’s not much deep bass, and that the Vienna Philharmonic’s violins on this disc are quite steely. Contrast that with Glen Cortese’s recording of the work (Titanic Ti-257), and, for all the difference in experience and reputation, the student violins of the Manhattan School of Music Symphony floor, the DAC’s reproduction of an undithered 16-bit/1kHz sinewave at -90.31dBFS was essentially perfect (fig.5). Increasing the data’s bit depth to 24 bits resulted in a pretty good sinewave even without dither (fig.6).

The Medea’s output was virtually free from harmonic distortion, even at maximum level into a punishing 600 ohm load (fig.7). The same was true for intermodulation (fig.8), the 1kHz difference component resulting from maximum-level 19kHz and 20kHz tones lying at -106dB (0.0005%).

I tested the Medea’s susceptibility to word-clock jitter using the Miller Audio Research Jitter Analyzer. This drives the DAC with an analytical signal comprising an undithered high-level, high-frequency sinewave at exactly one quarter the sample rate, over which has been overlaid a low-frequency squarewave with a peak level of just 1 LSB. This maximally stresses the DAC’s rejection of data-link timing errors. The Analyzer obtains a high-resolution spectrum of the DAC’s analog output and searches the FFT bins for symmetrical sidebands around the HF tone.

With the test data generated on a PC and transmitted via a long plastic TosLink optical connection — very much a worst-case situation — the

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**Figures**

- **Fig.5** Weiss Medea, waveform of undithered 1kHz sinewave at -90.31dBFS, 16-bit data.
- **Fig.6** Weiss Medea, waveform of undithered 1kHz sinewave at -90.31dBFS, 24-bit data.
- **Fig.7** Weiss Medea, balanced, spectrum of 50Hz sinewave, DC-1kHz, at 0dBFS into 600 ohms (linear frequency scale).
- **Fig.8** Weiss Medea, unbalanced, HF intermodulation spectrum, DC-25kHz, 19+20kHz at 0dBFS into 8k ohms (linear frequency scale).
The differences among the DACs were almost disappearingly small, but, when apparent, always in the Medea's favor.

Reference 800 DVD-Audio players. Most impressive was the sound of John Lee Hooker's Mr. Lucky (24/96, Virgin/Classic DAD-1007) and the stereo DVD of Leon Russell's Leon Russell (1i-Res HKM2013). Of course, I've been enjoying Mr. Lucky for many months, but the Medea gave Hooker's voice even more grip, and the bass incredible clout, without sacrificing clarity. The Russell reissue showed the age of its master tapes (more than 30 years) only in the soft carpet of tape hiss, but that faded from conscious awareness as the electricity of Russell's performances and the momentum of the music swept me up. Presence and impact to spare!

Why don't you pick on someone your own size?

Given the Medea's pedigree and its $9800 price, you'd expect it to be good enough to beat out built-in DACs, and it did indeed do so. But how did it fare against other heavyweight, standalone DACs?

On hand for this shoot-out were the highly praised Musical Fidelity A324 (reviewed in April and July 2002, www.stereophile.com/showarchives.cgi 7561) and the MSB Platinum Plus (review to appear next month). Near the end of my listening sessions, I also received the Mark Levinson No.360S, upgraded from the No.360 I've used for years. All of these devices were excellent and eminently satisfying; none, in isolation, would give a listener cause to think that further improvement was possible. In other words, the differences among them were almost disappearingly small, but, when apparent, always in the Medea's favor.

All meaningful comparisons were based on coax S/PDIF connection via the Illuminati D-60, as TosLink obscured many distinctions, particularly in the bass. I preferred to use the balanced outputs with the High output-level setting, since that permitted me to reduce the gain in the preamp and take advantage of the Medea's very low level of noise. I could confirm that preference with my car to the speakers, but it was less than obvious from the listening position. Nonetheless, the Medea seemed quieter and more dynamic with this setting. Let you suspect that this put the other DACs at a disadvantage, they—particularly the MSB—had output levels much higher than normal; I always readjusted the system gain to equalize listening levels.

The MSB had just a bit more presence and proximity than the Medea, and more than was absolutely ideal in my setup—as if the tilt in the male vocal range noted above had been cor-

Stereophile, February 2003
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rected. Although this character was much less noticeable than with, say, the PS Audio HCA-2 power amp, it was a recurring distinction between the DACs. The remarkable—and, at $1200, remarkably priced—Musical Fidelity A324, too, seemed a bit lightweight compared to the Medea, but that's a consequence mostly of its inability to match the Medea's prodigious low end. The MF also showed a little bit of graining, but only in direct comparison to the Medea.

Overall, the MF A324 was not out-classed by the other pricey DACs. One could argue that it would be the best investment, freeing up thousands for music, other equipment, or simply stuffing under the mattress in this parlous economy.

The Mark Levinson No.360S, directly out of the shipping carton, was almost indistinguishable from the Medea. If anything, it offered an even wider stage, though not a deeper one. While I formed the impression that the Levinson was somewhat warmer-sounding than the Medea, I could not confirm that reliably with a level-matched comparison. I preferred the Medea to the recently arrived Levinson in its revelation of such things as soft, distant cymbals and offstage sounds, but that might change as the ML continues to break in.

**Conclusions**

From the first turn-on (sic), the Weiss Medea D/A converter was the epitome of clarity and balance, and totally devoid of any digital nasties nor the fault of the source. Independent of comparisons, the Medea impressed me with newly discovered solidity and definition in the bass, a smooth, full presence in the midrange, and silky, extended highs.

If your system already pushes the envelope, the Medea could push you past another sound barrier.

Through the Medea, my CDs, DADs, and DVDs sounded as or more satisfying than they ever had.

The Medea was clearly superior to the DACs built into my three digital sources. The improvements varied, but typically took the forms of: 1) tighter, more potent bass; 2) greater vocal presence, particularly with male voices; and 3) a deeper stage/soundstage with less highlighting of treble instruments.

No one component can define the relative merits of high-end vs professional audio components, but Weiss's Medea showed me that true quality is equally at home in both categories. I found nothing to criticize about the sound of the Medea with any of the hardware and software sources I tried. That doesn't mean that it's perfect, only that I haven't heard anything better. It was always the one I chose to use whenever a new CD arrived. This DAC ratchets up my anticipation for a digital interface standard for SACD and DVD-Audio.

Before running out and ordering a Medea, readers should consider their systems, their degree of satisfaction with those systems, and the relative values of first-rate DACs. Some may demand a more engaging sound, whether for reasons of personal taste or because their present system needs the juice. Those who already have very good digital components might gain more overall enjoyment by upgrading other components before indulging. Some may simply find the small but satisfying superiority of the Medea over the much less expensive Musical Fidelity A324 a poor use of limited resources. But if your system already pushes the envelope, the Medea could push you past another sound barrier.

**Associated Equipment**

**Analogue source:** Heybrook TT2 turntable, SME III tonearm, Ortofon SME30H cartridge.

**Digital sources:** Meridian 508.24 CD player; California Audio Labs CL-20 DVD-V player; Meridian Reference 800 DVD-Audio/CD player; Sony SCD-XA777ES SACD player; Mark Levinson No.360S, Musical Fidelity A324, MSB Platinum Plus DACs.

**Preamplification:** Sonic Frontiers Line-3, Audiolab 8000PPA phono stage.

**Power amplifiers:** Bel Canto eVo2, Sonic Frontiers Power-3, Classé CAM-350 monoblocks, McCormack DNA-1 Rev-A.

**Loudspeakers:** Revel Ultima Studio.

**Cables:** Interconnect: AudioQuest Anaconda & Python balanced, Cardas Cross unbalanced. Speaker: AudioQuest Gibraltar. AC: PS Audio Lab, JPS Aluminata.

— Kal Rubinson
Ayre Acoustics D-1x DVD-Video/CD player

Looking at the current digital scene is enough to confuse and confound just about anyone this side of Stephen Hawking. One can choose from standard “Red Book” CDs (16-bit/44.1kHz), DVD-As, DADs (24/96 DVD-Video), SACDs, combination audio-video players and changers, upsamplers, oversamplers, and every possible agglomeration of the above. As the audiophile-grade universal player remains vaporware, if you want to keep moving forward you have to choose among the various format combinations. Ayre Acoustics, a pioneer in the digital audio field, worked on the D-1 from early 1997 until 1999, and in 2001 the D-1 was upgraded to “x” status with significant changes to the power supply.

The degree of flexibility possible in these days is illustrated perfectly by the D-1x. The base D-1x is a D1D-Video transport (sans DACs) priced at $5250. From that point, the range of available options veers from the dizzying: video only ($6000), audio only ($8000), audio and video ($8750), video only with VR2 progressive scan ($8750), or audio plus progressive-scan video ($11,500). My review sample was audio-only, but even there, things are not so simple. Optioned as a pure CD player, the Ayre plays back both 16/44.1 CDs and 24/96 DADs. Unlike some other D1 players, the D-1x also plays CD-Rs. About the only things you can’t have are HDCD decoding and SACD playback.

Innards
The D-1x uses a Pioneer DVD-Video manufacturing kit, which comprises the transport, the display, the remote control, and the MPEG decoder board which decompresses the DVD video data. Seven additional circuit boards are required before the D-1x performs all of the available functions at a level Charles Hansen finds acceptable. The motherboard distributes power and signals to the other PCBs, and an Ayre-designed master-clock board carries the audio DACs on a plug-in daughtercard, which provides the shortest possible path from master clock to DAC chips. Separate audio and video cards (for whatever configuration you’ve ordered) are also provided, as is an independent board handling all front-panel functions. Like its sibling, the Ayre K-1x preamplifier, the D-1x is accompanied by a sizable external power supply, and contains 10 separate supplies to reduce modulation interference and provide the cleanest possible power to each independent section of the player.

What’s on all of these PCBs is worth a close look. Ayre’s proprietary solution to the eternal problem of clock jitter consists of a custom quartz oscillator to minimize phase noise; the clock signal itself is constructed entirely with single-gate devices, facilitating the use of individual, zero-feedback voltage regulators at each stage, resulting in the “elimination of jitter-inducing modulation effects.”

The D-1x’s digital filter is a Burr-Brown DF1704. This 24-bit/96kHz-capable chip provides selectable filter algorithms, one of which provides flat frequency response through the audio passband (labeled Measure on the rear-panel switch), and another which, according to Ayre, offers “a mild rolloff in frequency response at the extreme upper end of the audio band, but offers significantly improved response in the time domain.” This latter position is labeled Listen on the rear panel. (Switching between the algorithms had no effect on the digital audio output.) I never heard any lack of top end in the Listen position, and so did all of my auditioning in that mode.

Four specially selected Burr-Brown PCM1704K chips provide balanced digital-to-analog conversion. The DACs are capable of 8x oversampling at 96kHz and 4x oversampling at 192kHz. Following D/A conversion, the audio signal is sent to a proprietary differential current-to-voltage converter, constructed with zero-feedback FET circuitry.

The power supply features individual transformers for audio and video/digital circuitry, and six isolated secondary windings are further subdivided into the 10 separate power-supply sections. The primary analog supply uses inductor-input

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**Description:**

**Dimensions:**
Player: 18" W by 5 1/2" H by 11" D. Weight: 25 lbs. Power supply: 13" W by 3" H by 8" D.

**Weight:** 15 lbs.
**Serial number of unit reviewed:** 5K0003P.
**Price:** $8000 as reviewed (see text). Approximate number of dealers: 30.
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filtering to eliminate transient charging currents to the filter capacitors, and several Ayre Conditioner noise filters are applied at strategic points to further reduce noise and interference on the power lines.

Like Ayre's K-1x preamplifier, on which I wrote a "Follow-Up" (June 2002) the D-1x's upgrade to "x" status has come with no increase in price. As outlined above, the power supply has been a primary beneficary of the upgrade, but the D-1x also includes major revisions to the ground-partitioning scheme. The individual grounds for the main chassis, power-supply chassis, AC mains, and transformer shielding have been optimized for maximum isolation from outside interference. And last but not least are the new, high-density polymer feet.

Measurements

Because the review sample of the Ayre D-1x didn't have a video output, I couldn't access the analytic signals on the Chesky test DAD (CH1DV171) to examine its behavior with 96kHz-sampled data. However, as the sample's primary role was as a CD player, I don't feel this to be a problem.

Like other machines based on DVD transports, the Ayre offered excellent error correction, coping with gaps in the data of up to 1.25mm in length without audible glitches. The maximum output at 1kHz was 3.04V RMS from the balanced XLRs, and half that from the unbalanced jacks. This is 2.34dB lower than the CD Standard's 2V, which will work against the player in A/B comparisons unless this is allowed for. The balanced source impedance was 560 ohms across the audio band; the unbalanced impedance was exactly half that at 280 ohms. Neither output inverted absolute polarity (the XLRs are wired with pin 2 "hot").

The Measure/Listen switch on the D-1x's rear panel affects the nature of the reconstruction filter. With this switch set to Measure, the Ayre's frequency response is perfectly flat from 10Hz up to 10kHz, with then a slight top-octave rolloff apparent of -0.4dB at 20kHz (fig.1, top pair of traces). With the switch set to Listen, there is no change below 1kHz, but the output above that frequency drops. While this in-band rolloff will have no significant subjective downside, it allows the reconstruction filter to be better behaved in the time domain, which some commentators believe to be associated with better sound. (Wadia, Pioneer, and Sony all offer players with filters optimized in this manner.)

The response was identical from the balanced outputs (not shown), but does not feature the 0.2dB channel imbalance seen in fig.1, which was peculiar to the unbalanced outputs. Pre-emphasized CDs were played back correctly, with no de-emphasis error. Channel separation, also not shown, was excellent from both sets of outputs, any crosstalk remaining below -100dB over most of the audio band.

Fig.2 shows the audioband spectrum of the Ayre's balanced output while the player decoded dithered 16-bit data representing a 1kHz tone at -90dBFS. The traces are free from harmonic spurious or idle tones, and the smooth noise floor is basically that of the dither used on the data. Extending the measurement bandwidth to 200kHz and repeating the analysis with "digital black" (not shown) revealed a very clean noise floor, with power-supply spurs around the -130dBFS level.

The D-1x's DACs offer excellent resolution, any linearity error (fig.3) remaining below 2dB to below -110dBFS. As a result, the player's reproduction of an undithered 1kHz tone at -90.31dBFS, which is described by just three voltage levels, was superb (fig.4).

Though the Ayre's distortion performance was never less than excellent, its behavior was different from the unbalanced and balanced jacks. From the balanced outputs into a high 100k-ohm load, the dominant

Ayre Acoustics D-1x

In spite of the fact that the D-1x bristles with advanced engineering, it retains Ayre's trademark tasteful, minimalist design, and was easy to live with and use. The Pioneer-sourced remote control offers the full complement of video-related functions, and while it was at first a bear to find the one button I was looking for amid the clutter, I soon learned where the most vital functions were. Unlike the
And the Answer Is... Some companies try to answer the question, "What's the best sports car?" For others, the question is, "What's the best speaker?" For us, it's, "What's the best headphone amp?" We know it's not rocket science, but hey—we don't have NASA's budget either. So we just spend our 8 hours a day focusing on headphones and headphone stuff, and accept the fact that we're professional geeks. Besides, geeks can earn a good living these days. This is the point where we typically use our ad space to talk about headphones and products from other manufacturers. We figured this time we'd focus on our own headphone amps. So let's get to it.

The Total AirHead $159
The Total AirHead is our low-cost, portable headphone amp. It runs on two AA batteries for about 20 hours. Its main purpose in life is to help you get your money's worth when using expensive headphones with portable players. The AirHead acts as a buffer between the headphones and the player, allowing the player to sound its undisturbed best while driving the headphones with the authority needed for articulate and dynamic audio reproduction. It easily pumps up the gutless output of most portable CD, MP3, and MiniDisc players, and delivers sound quality on par with a good mid-fi system.

The Little $249
The HeadRoom Little is our entry-level home amp. It's a perfect way to add a headphone jack or to greatly improve on the jack built into your home system. Even better, it has a monster upgrade path so you can start small and build it up. First, get the Little all by itself for $249. Then buy the More Power Upgrade to get the dynamics nice and tight—another $249. Then get a $800 upgrade to the premium electronics module for a sonic cleaning that allows it to articulate effortlessly. By the time you get to the fully hot-rodded Little you've got an amp that's 90% of our Maxed Out Home.

The Max $1555
The Max is "the max." In our opinion this is the world's best headphone amp... for a normal pair of dynamic headphones (more on that below). The Max includes separate left- and right-channel electronics all the way back to a pair of Avel-Lindberg toroidal mains transformers. It comes standard with our reference electronics module, Matched polyphenoline sulfide film caps, matched metal resistors, and super-quick Burr-Brown 687 op-amps make this amp clear and articulate like no other. Get the optional stepped attenuator for the ultimate in clarity.

The BlockHead $3333
Finally, the BlockHead is an amp in a class of one. It's the world's only fully balanced, mono-block, dynamic headphone amp. Only a few of the best dynamic headphones are available with the modified cabling required by this amp. But oh, man — put those cables on and does this thing sound good! Though they share a common faceplate, the left and right channels have separate enclosures, making the amp a true mono-block. The two phases of each channel have completely separate electronics, including the mains transformers. The parts matching in the BlockHead is superb; all parts are matched to within 0.1%. The final result of all this craziness is simply the clearest, most articulate, punchiest, Adam's Apple-wobbling sound you've ever heard on headphones.

So, what was the question, anyway?
How about this one: "Who makes the best headphone amps?" The answer: "The geeks at HeadRoom." (Did I just say that with a straight face? Man, I gotta get a life.)

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rock-solid D-1x itself, the remote feels a little cheap and cheesy...but it’s perfectly functional, so big whoop.

Optimizing

Getting the best sound out of the Ayre D-1x meant dealing with its almost catlike fussiness about what it liked to sit on. Perched atop my Target TT5 stand, long-time home to my digital components, its bass was fast and very well-defined, but quite light in character. Peter Kruder’s “Domination” (Peace Orchestra, G-Stone G-CD004) just didn’t have the room-shaking potency that I know is on the CD; it sounded a lot more diffuse than through the Classé Omega SACD/CD player. There was also a slight accentuation of the lower treble that occasionally slid into a glare in that band.

The D-1x much preferred the wonderful Grand Prix Audio Monaco modular equipment stand. Even there, it was happier perched atop the Monaco’s optional F1 carbon-fiber/Kevlar shelf. So ensconced, the Ayre’s low-frequency heft was greatly enhanced, with no loss of fine definition. Nearly all of the lower-treble emphasis vanished as well, though the D-1x retained a gently forward character in this region.

I also had to experiment to find the cable that made the D-1x happiest. Whatever other cables the system was hooked up with, the Ayre consistently gave its best only when I used Cardas Golden Reference to connect it to the line stage. This isn’t surprising—Ayre uses Cardas wire as its reference. But after playing around with a number of power cords, I found that the D-1x formed a locked-in synergy with the Acoustic Zen Gargantua II that I reviewed last month.

Sound

It was readily apparent at first listen that the D-1x was an Ayre product, and that was a good thing. Listening to Murray Perahia’s fabulous CD of Bach’s keyboard concertos 1, 2, and 4 (Sony Classical SK 89245) put all of the D-1x’s strengths on parade. Perahia’s piano stood in realistic, well-proportioned balance to the orchestral forces, with rich and convincing tone. The top end had the correct balance of treble sparkle and mellow hall sound, and the bass was solidly grounded without being overprominent.

Nor did the Ayre skip a beat with the more Technicolored music of Ravel. The tentative, diaphanous strings at the beginning of Rapsodie espagnole’s “Prelude à la Nuit,” from The Reiner Sound (RCA Victor 61250-2), had a deliciously feathery and ethereal quality that made the orchestra’s mezzo forte entrance genuinely surprising. The D-1x served Reiner’s extraordinarily transparent orchestral balances with a deft, enchanting grace.

**Measurements**

distortion harmonic was the third, at -84dB or 0.006%, with other harmonics hovering around the -100dB level (fig.5). This picture changed only slightly when the load was drastically lowered, to 600 ohms, suggesting the D-1x has good drive capability. But from the unbalanced output into 100k ohms (fig.6), the second harmonic rises from -100dB to -73dB (0.02%), and a power-supply artifact at 120Hz makes an appearance at -90dB (0.003%).

The Ayre offered basically superb performance when asked to decode data representing 19kHz and 20kHz tones, each at -6dBFS. (These sum to give a combined waveform that crests at 0dBFS.) The 1kHz difference tone from the balanced outputs remained below -96dB (0.0015%), even with a 600 ohm load. However, this did rise to a still low -82dB from the unbalanced output. This was with the left channel; the right channel was slightly worse at -74dB.

The picture was also different when the rear-panel switch was changed. With it set to Measure (fig.7), the only components that can be seen above the noise floor are the difference tone at 1kHz and the higher-order products at 18kHz and
Andy: "Luke, when it comes to high powered triode/pentode amplifiers there is nothing like VTL. I mean like, you da-man!"
Luke: "Thanks, Andy"
Andy: "But I gotta tell you something"
Luke: "Yeah?"
Andy: "The Water? The MB 750's? Even the MB 450's? None of your preamps can touch them."
Luke: "I know. We have been working on something for a while. We will have it for you soon."
Andy: "When?"
Luke: "Soon"

...Three years pass – nothing!

April 2002

Luke: "Hi Andy, it is here!"
Andy: "What is here?"
Luke: "THE VTL REFERENCE 7.5 LINE STAGE CONTROL CENTER ($10,000)"
Andy: "Well I hope it was worth the wait!"
Luke: "IT WAS!"
Andy: (Listening, mouth opened and salivating) "Luke this is the best sounding preamp I've heard under, Well, I'm not sure under what, maybe, period? But certainly under $15,000, no $20,000 – oh – I just don't know – it just sounds amazing! How did you do it?"
Luke: "Take a two box design. Box A is the "clean audio box" – only sound goes in and out of it. AC power, power supply, digital controller, inputs, outputs, volume, etc., in short all the noisy yucky stuff goes into box B. Box B tells box A what to do. Tubes in the gain stage, mosfets for output, high current, low impedance, fully balanced (or single ended) ins and outs, separate power supplies for each gain stage oh – and RS 232 control, too."
Andy: "So what took you so long?"

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Speaking of transparent balances, Eiji Oue's almost mystical conception of Aaron Copland's *Appalachian Spring* (Reference RR93-C1) is graced with some of engineer Keith O. Johnson's most seductive sound. Despite his full symphony orchestra, Oue's textures have the subtlety and delicacy of a chamber ensemble; the Ayre vividly brought the sound of Minneapolis' Orchestra Hall into my listening room. (Here, at least, I know whereof I speak: I was present at the recording sessions.)

After the D-1x had settled in on the Grand Prix Audio stand, things got interesting down in bass-land. The organ pedals in the third movement of Vaughan Williams' *Sinfonia Antarctica* (Naxos 8.550737) rumbled and groaned to appropriate effect, their pitches easily discernible. Monumental bass-drum shots remained a bit less imposing than with the Classé Omega, but the differences were now much smaller.

Ray Brown's double bass was its big, warm, bearish self on *Some of My Best Friends are the Piano Players* (Telarc CD-83373), and the D-1x never let me forget that this bear could dance — and how. Brown's generosity of tone was matched only by his supreme sense of swing and flawless articulation, and the Ayre let it all shine through. The D-1x neatly captured the sound of Brown slapping his bass, Milt Hinton style, and clearly separated the *smack* of hand on bass from the big, earthy tone that followed. Nice!

Power for its own sake was also now served well. Kruder & Dorfmeister's dub remix of Bomb the Bass's "Bug Powder Dust" (EU CD, *The K&D Sessions, CD K7 K7073*) had much of the slam and control displayed by the standard-setting Classé Omega.

The D-1x's strongest tonal suit was its 21kHz. Set to Listen (fig.8), the slower ultrasonic rolloff associated with the reconstruction filter's better time-domain performance results in aliasing products appearing in the audio band, even though the true intermodulation products are slightly lower in level. These will probably be at too low a level to have any subjective effect, however.

Finally, the D-1x produced a fairly low level of word-clock jitter: 415 picoseconds with the analytical signal used by the Miller Audio Research analyzer. This was almost entirely due to two pairs of sidebands (fig.9), the first power-supply-related at ±120Hz (blue "2" markers), the other data-related (red "3"). The former was not affected by the various grounding arrangements I tried with the test setup (this test was performed using the unbalanced outputs) and could well have an effect on the perceived nature of the Ayre's low frequencies. Note the higher-than-usual noise floor in this graph, which to some extent is due to the D-1x's lower-than-usual output level from its unbalanced output. However, the noise is smoother, with far fewer spectral spikes, than I have found with other DVD-V players I have assessed with this test.

The Ayre D-1x's measured performance was superb by any standard, though it does suggest a difference in character between the unbalanced and balanced outputs. —John Atkinson
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exceptionally detailed and transparent midrange. *Sinfonia Antartica* features a multitude of woodwinds in the “Penguin” section of the second movement. The D-1x cleanly differentiated all of the instrumental colors, free of smear- ing or the sort of timbral indecision that some CD players exhibit with woodwinds. Voices had a free and easy sound with a natural and expressive character. On her *Live at Blues Alley* (Blix Street 10046), Eva Cassidy’s voice was full and luscious, beautifully focused and floated. Ol’ Blue Eyes sounded wonderful on “The Shadow of Your Smile,” from * Sinatra at the Sands* (Reprise 46947-2).

The acoustic guitars on Tiny Island’s “Vaquero” and “Black Sand” (Tiny Island, Opus 3 CD 19804) had a naturally resonant warmth, if perhaps just a bit of extra energy present in the pluck of the strings. And I’d be remiss if I didn’t mention how special Charles Lloyd’s *The Water is Wide* (ECM 1734) sounded via the D-1x. Lloyd’s incredibly pure sound — so graceful that his alto sax often sounds like a soprano — was bewitching, and Brad Mehldau’s incredible palette of piano sounds had as seductive and whole a sound as I have heard from CD.

Up on top, the D-1x was very extended and, apart from that small low-treble “glamour bump,” open and nearly grainless. On some recordings there was a faint hint of fine, silvery, powdered-sugar grain in the top octave. Don’t interpret this as coded language for the Ayre being “bright” or “aggressive.” It was no such thing. The Minnesota Orchestra’s string sections on Rachmaninoff’s *Symphonic Dances* (Reference RR96-CD) and on *Appalachian Spring* had the special sheen I’ve heard in live performance. The D-1x’s treble balance leaned to the lighter side of perfect neutrality, a presentation that will particularly complement tube electronics, but it sounded anything but thin or bleached.

The Ayre’s dynamics were excellent. The Chicago Orchestra’s seamless rushes up and down the dynamic scale on *Rapsodie espagnole* were effortlessly handled. There was no “ratcheting,” where dynamics seem coarsely quantized, only a coherent and unforced soaring through Ravel’s high-contrast score. The suddenness of the closely recorded brass and woodwind crescendos on Miles Davis and Gil Evans’ *Concierto de Aranjuez,* from *Schatze of Spain* (Columbia/Legacy CK 65142), had a particularly accurate scale and forcefulness. Well-recorded per- cussion, like that on *Tiny Island,* had just the right speedy initial attack and immediacy. The words for the Ayre’s handling of dynamics are “left” and “agile.”

Soundstaging was consistently very good. Particularly when used in its up- sampling mode, the $12,000 Classé Omega squeezed even more depth from the best recordings, such as the Minnesota Orchestra CDs, but the Ayre spun a lovely tapestry of Orchestra Hall’s deep stage and lively acoustic. When I listened to small groups, such as Eva Cassidy’s band, each musician was cleanly and clearly located in a natural-sounding space, with elbow room for all. Nor did big-scaled rock fester the Ayre. Roger Waters’ *In the Flesh* (Columbia C2K 85235) remained cohesive and focused while providing an impressive sense of scale; and Porcupine Tree’s live *Conus Divine* threw a spacious and expansive stage, with Richard Barbieri’s deep-space synthesizer backdrops wide and well behind the bass, guitar, and drums. I had few 24-bit/96kHz DAD discs on hand, but the results with those I did have was impressive. The high-resolution format brought out the best in the Ayre’s sound. The lower-treble elevation vanished, and bass dug in with a rich solidity. Muddy Waters’ *Folk Singer* (Classic Records DAD 1020) had true reference-quality sound. Acoustic gui- tars had a shivery, lifelike sparkle and resonance, and commanding immediacy. Willie Dixon’s booming, ominous bass and Muddy’s witchy-sounding slide guitar on “The Same Thing” were nothing short of fantastic. The *booming* reverb trails echoed slowly away into the background, and Muddy’s voice was uncan- nily present and palpable.

*Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington* (Classic DAD 1031) is such a musical delight that sound per se takes a back seat... unless it’s as captivating as it was through the D-1x. The Duke’s piano was fine and mellow, Buddy Bayard’s clarinet on “Mood Indigo” as buttery-smooth as could be. Armstrong’s papa- bear growl had a delectable intimacy, and his singular, bright-as-a-new-penny trumpet tone popped authoritatively into the room. It has become apparent that 24/96 and SACD are both capable of delivering performance well beyond the “Red Book” norm. The D-1x made a very impressive case for the former.

**Coda**

The Ayre D-1x was a bit more temperamental about placement and cables than most other CD players I’ve used, and would not be my first choice for a forward or lightly balanced system. Those minor caveats aside, the Ayre’s performance was consistently musical and satisfying; it offers excellent overall performance in an elegant and thought- fully designed package. And the fact that the buyer can configure a D-1x in so many different ways, before or after purchase, and that it can serve as the primary source for a superb audio-video system, make it a uniquely flexible and attractive component.

Whether DVI-Audio or SACD proves the winner in the current format war remains to be seen, but until the dust settles, there’s no question that the Ayre D-1x will provide first-rate CD performance.

---

**Associated Equipment**

**Digital sources:** Classé Omega SACD/CD player, Krell KPS-28c CD player.

**Preamplification:** Manley Labs Steelhead, Boulder 2008, Jeff Rowland Design Group Cadence phono stages; Krell KCT, Jeff Rowland Design Group Synergy II line stages; Ayre K-1x preamplifier.

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

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


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

— Paul Bolin

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VPI Aries Scout turntable & JMW-9 tonearm

Oh, I talk a good game when it comes to the whole music-lover-vs-audiophile thing. But I admit that when it comes to record players, I'm just another hardware junkie. I love turntables and tonearms for more than the musical enjoyment they give me. Turntables and tonearms are my favorite toys.

I'm endlessly fascinated with the science behind them—at least partly because, as with theology and frankfurters, the real essence of the thing I'm trying to know is in fact unknowable. Given the subjectivity we bring to music appreciation and the fact that we can't see what's really going on in the groove during record play, theories and guesswork are all we have to go on in the world of phonography, notwithstanding some tedious and unintentionally funny claims to the contrary. Like it or not, wherever two or more people gather to write or read reviews of record players, faith is always close at hand.

So here goes:

How It's Done

Designer Harry Weisfeld has whapped the ball so far out of the park with this one, it isn't funny. There's a glorious sense of completeness—of wholeness and rightness—in the way the Aries Scout/JMW-9 combination of turntable and tonearm plays music, echoed and underscored by those same qualities in the player's appearance and ease of use. The Scout and JMW-9 are serenely well-designed, as opposed to being just a frantic collection of the latest analog fads and follies, and their construction quality is nothing short of astounding for the price.

The solid-plinth Scout starts life as a sheet of 1\%/16"-thick MDF, machined to shape and finished in semigloss black. Most of its underside is covered with a thin steel plate for rigidity and damping, the latter thanks also to a thin layer of silicone sealant. The right-rear corner is drilled with a 1"-diameter hole for VPI's standard arm-mount collar. A Rega RB-300, with its pillar diameter of 22mm (or just over 7/8"), will fit, but the VPI's platter is way too tall for the Rega arm by itself, even with the usual 3/16" spacer: If that's what you have in mind, you'll have to get a machinist to make you something special.

Four aluminum cones support the plinth, although these aren't quite as simple as they appear: A steel ball is pressed into each point, à la Bic, for enhanced isolation from outside vibrations, and the thick, spongy washers—made of something called Poron—between the cones and the underside of the plinth ensure that the feet can be adjusted for height without losing contact.

The Scout has an inverted bearing, the well of which is machined from sintered bronze (a graphite-based lubricant is contained in pores in the alloy itself) with a Teflon thrust disc on top. This is a departure from VPI's recent standard practice of making bearing wells out of a thermoplastic called Rulon; designer...
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To check my impressions, I referred to the ever-popular Test Record, from the UK's Hi-Fi News & Record Review. Using an exemplary cartridge — the medium-compliance Miyabi 47, which nominally tracks at 2gm—I found that a small increase in downforce and just the right twist in the lead-out wire could be combined to coax a satisfactory antiskating performance from the JMW-9 tonearm. The Naim Aro and Rega RB-300 are both better in this regard: They can, with careful adjustment and a little luck, handle the tortuous track 9 (the left and right channels combined in a spirited 300Hz test tone at +18dB), which the VPI could not at all. In fact, the VPI barely kept the stylus in the groove during track 8 (+16dB). But those two tests are unrealistically severe; I believe that a properly set-up JMW-9 will play most, if not all, LPs with no more distortion or record wear than you'd experience with other players.

Now, for the records in my collection that actually contain music...

**Listening to Actual Music**

I started with a simple, direct song: "Bury Me Beneath the Weeping Willow," from Ricky Skaggs' and Tony Rice's 1980 duet, *Skaggs and Rice* (Sugar Hill Records 3711). (For those of you not familiar with this LP, it's a wonderful collection of 10 bluegrass, old-time, and gospel standards featuring only Rice and his voice and guitar and Skaggs and his voice and mandolin, with no overdubbing or trickery of any sort.) One song was all it took, however; if you want to know the truth — to know that the Scout/JMW combination did an excellent job of getting the notes off the record and weaving them into believable, convincing, rhythmically involving music. This player had a fine sense of flow, and did an equally fine job of conveying the way the two musicians lean into the beat on some numbers, as well as the more rhythmically intricate and unexpected temporal shadings in the solos that both of these masters perform.

In other words, the VPI combo did something that I used to consider the sole province of such generally low-mass, generally undamped British record players as the Linns, Roksans, Pink Triangles, and Regas: The VPI played music, and did so convincingly.

How did the sound of the VPI record player compare to that of my Linn LP12 turntable with Naim Armaggeddon power supply and Naim Aro tonearm? In general, the Scout/JMW combina-

I wrote down a few thoughts while comparing the players with the Krips/LSO recording of the Schubert Ninth (Decca) — and, again, there's much to admire with both. My Linn does somewhat better job of conveying the distinct leading edges of note attacks — the sudden burst of air at the beginning of each note — in the famous horn opening. String tone sounds stringier with the Linn/Naim, too, although whether that's more or less to your liking — or more or less realistic — is forever open to debate. For its part, the VPI sounded a little more open and spread-out, and just plain bigger, while being just as involving and emotionally convincing.

I kept hearing the same differences between the VPI and my Linn with many, many other records. Take the well-known Barbieri/Philharmonia disc of Elgar's Symphony 1 (Seraphim): This 1963 recording sounds rather old even for its day, and the Linn makes it more so while the VPI made it less so. The Linn gives a more midrange presentation — although its midrange is more textured than that of the VPI, even at its best — and the Linn's presentation is spatially smaller, closer to sounding like a mono mix. The VPI seemed to broaden the response curve in both directions, and the soundfield was much bigger — man-on-the-street bigger, not something I had to strain my audioweenie ears to hear.

The VPI combo also sounded different from the Linn in its sense of scale and space. The Scout and JMW-9 did a better job of separating voices and instruments from one another, and overall created a bigger "stage" between the speakers. The Linn/Naim combo sounds smaller, with more of a chunky, mono-like focus that some may or may not prefer.

One more observation: Some hi-fi reviewers, myself included, are anxious to tell you when a product makes a musical performance sound tighter, more together, whatever. That judgment may well be true a lot of the time, but neither should you want a product to homogenize your records in that sense — to make things sound more upbeat, or even more together, than they really are.

Well, don't sweat it, Harry Weisfeld: Your record player made music as interesting as it really is, but no more. The members of the Vienna State Opera Orchestra, under the otherwise beloved (by me at least) Hermann Scherchen, still played the first movement of Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade* as if they'd never met (Westminster), and lis-

**Associated Equipment**

**Analog sources:** Linn LP12 turntable with Naim Armaggeddon power supply and Naim Aro tonearm; Rega Planar 3 turntable; Miyabi 47, Supex 900 Super, Lyra Helikon Mono, and Rega Exact phono cartridges.

**Preamplifiers:** Fi, Audio Note M3; Audio Note AN-S2 moving-coil step-up transformer.

**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, plus homemades. Speaker: Audio Note AN-SPX, Nordost Valhalla, Nordost Flatline.

**Accessories:** Mana stands under turntables, Loricraft PR3 record cleaner, Shun Mook Mpingo discs.

— Art Dudley
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tening to Uncle Tupelo's "Graveyard Shift" (from Uncle Tupelo 89/93: An Anthology), Sundaazed 5153) on the VPI didn't make it any easier for me to imagine country musicians who have less feel for country music than Jeff Tweedy and Jay Farrar.

**Final Comparisons & Conclusions**

I wrote about the more expensive VPI Aries turntable/JMW-10 tonearm a little over two years ago in *Listener*. I liked the combination, with only minor reservations, and thought it offered good value for the money. Today, I think the less expensive Aries Scout and JMW-9 actually play music better, and I feel that way within a minute of first hearing them. At the very least, this is the best value among VPI's record players, and to some listeners it may be their best period.

I can only guess why this should be. One guess revolves around the fact that this is simply Harry Weisfeld's latest creation, and Harry keeps getting better at what he does, kind of like Tom Petty.

Maybe it's part luck. I believe that one of the keys to good record-player performance is to make sure that the major parts of it—the tonearm, the platter, and whatever structure connects them—all behave the same way. Rather than trying to keep everything from resonating, the good designer makes sure that everything resonates to more or less the same extent, so there's no relative movement of those parts. (That's one reason a damped tonearm like an SME doesn't sound good on a Linn, an undamped arm like a Linn Ittok doesn't sound good on a SOTA, the application of damping substances to the underside of a Linn LP12's subchassis makes it sound much worse, and so forth.) So perhaps, with the Aries Scout and JMW-9, Harry has found a combination of parts that work especially well together.

Perhaps it's just me—or, more to the point, my system. Maybe the cartridges I used—the aforementioned Miyabi 47, plus Supex 900 Super, Lyra Helikon Mono, and no fewer than two Rega Exacts—just happened to lock in. Or maybe the VPI just really, really loved the Mana Reference Table I sat it on. I don't know.

I own two turntables these days: a Linn LP12 and an older-style Rega Planar 3, which I've upgraded with the motor from the new P3. The Linn and the Rega sound more like one another than they do the VPI, but all three get the essentials of music right, and at one time or another I have cried in response to music with each. Bingo. Stop there if you want to.

The $750 Rega P3, with its clever economics and fine, singing voice, sounds tentative and small by comparison with the more substantial VPI combination. Adding a Naim Armageddon power supply to the Rega's AC motor restores its comparative edge in this regard (don't laugh—I've actually done this), but that alone is a $1350 option, and is also a pain in the ass to do. The Rega remains a superb bargain—you can't take that away from it—but it's no longer the only great bargain in the house.

This is a flat-out, unconditional, "Holy Mother of Crap, I can't believe how good this thing is" recommendation.

The Linn/Naim/Naim combo retails for something like $5770. Although I've had the financial luxury of starting out with the LP12 Basik/Rega RB-300 and of upgrading it to its present level over time, and while I paid retail for the turntable and the arm, I did so at times when they cost a lot less. (I recall the Aro costing closer to $1000 than $2000.) I had the further luxury of buying the power supply at cost, as a reviewer's "accommodation." The Linn/Naim/ Naim's musical prowess is second to none, and its textured and downright organic sound is very much to my liking. I also just plain like it as a "thing," if you know what I mean.

But if you're just starting out in analog or upgrading an existing front-end, and if you can spend $1500 on a turntable and tonearm, here's some advice: Go hear VPI's new player right away. This is not a cautious, conditional, "for special tastes only" recommendation. (No offense to those things that are: Hey, I love my Lowthers, but God knows they're not for everyone.) Rather, this is a flat-out, unconditional, "Holy Mother of Crap, I can't believe how good this thing is" recommendation. It's hard to imagine another way of spending $1500 that will add this much to your system.

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For the past half century, Deutsche Grammophon has released roughly one cycle of Beethoven's violin sonatas per decade, from Wolfgang Schneiderhan's mono edition and Yehudi Menuhin's stereo remakes (both with pianist Wilhelm Kempff) to the partnership of Gidon Kremer and Martha Argerich to, most recently, Anne-Sophie Mutter's cycle with Lambert Orkis, on CD and DVD. While each of these cycles boasts unquestionable virtues, all are markedly surpassed by the extraordinary standard set by violinist Augustin Dumay and pianist Maria João Pires in this new set.

In an interview printed in the CD booklet, the artists talk of how their interpretations are the net result of more than five years of intensive preparation and rehearsal. It shows. Each performance reveals levels of ensemble refinement, attention to detail, dramatic momentum, and emotional intensity that make many other recordings of these works sound generalized in comparison. Take, for example, the frightening degree to which Dumay and Pires match their rapid passagework in the first movements of Op.12 No.3 and Op.24, or their flawlessly matched trills in the "Kreutzer" and Op.96 sonatas. If they launch into Op.30 No.3 like the proverbial bats out of hell (suggesting that Beethoven scribbled out Allegro assai and substituted Allegro assairo), they pay equal due to the composer's lyrically contrasting material. And rarely have the quirky phrase displacements in the little Scherzo of the "Spring" sonata sounded so supple, playful, and natural.

Dumay embodies the best qualities of his DG predecessors and none of their shortcomings. When he chooses, Dumay can ripen the tone of his violin to Anne-Sophie Mutter's pulsating dimensions while avoiding her cloying mannerisms. He dives into Beethoven's frequent, sudden dynamic shifts as fervently as Gidon Kremer, albeit with more secure intonation in exposed, high-lying passages. In addition, Dumay mirrors Schneiderhan's terse, unvarnished style and Menuhin's lyrical strength and spirituality, with the advantage of a superior, more flexible technique than either of those artists. Dumay's timbral portfolio contains a huge collection of vibratos, from the sweet, rounded brand that colors the "Spring" sonata's outer movements, to the fragile, achyching lines in the slow movement of Op.30 No.1. Nor does Dumay's tone lose focus or definition when he eschews vibrato altogether, notably when the violin part takes on an accompanying role. His sustained double-stops in the variations movements of Op.96, underscoring Pires' ravishing cantilenas, will take your breath away.

For all her renown as a soloist, Maria João Pires' artistry seems to flourish best in chamber music. The occasional lassitude and lack of rhythmic bite that characterized her recent solo Beethoven disc for DG are nowhere to be found here. She commands all of Martha Argerich's forward-moving energy and thrust, yet channels her virtuosity into fully supporting and blending in with her partner, matching his varied palette of articulation phrase for phrase. Many cases in point substantiate these claims. Pires takes special care to shape bass lines so that their harmonic destinations are not only clear but inevitable. Even such galvanic passages as the relentless accompanying triplets throughout the finale of the "Kreutzer" emerge with rare melodic purpose, drawing your attention to the music rather than to the immense virtuosity and control it takes to play Beethoven this way.

DG's engineering clearly and vibrantly captures the duo's incredibly subtle balances and wide dynamic range. Some listeners might prefer the warmer, more ample, more intimate ambience suggested by Max Wilcox's production in the Beethoven cycle for MusicMasters recorded by Pamela and Claude Frank. But whereas the latter requires four CDs, DG manages to squeeze these performances onto three generously filled discs (CD 2, clocking in at 81:40, may not track well on older players). In all, a landmark release that reveals more with each hearing, and is likely to be the reference edition of Beethoven's violin sonatas for years to come.

-Jed Distler
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Six Sonatas for Violin and Continuo: No.III in f, No.IV in D, No.81 in A, No.VI in c, No.VII in G, No.84 in E.

John Holloway, violin; Lars Ulrik Mortensen, harpsichord; Alyssa Assenbaum, organ.


Performance *****

Sonic *****

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**H**

H. Ignaz Franz Biber (1644-1704) was one of the great violin virtuosos of the Baroque era, and recently, his difficult but glorious sonatas have sparked the interest of some of the newer violin acrobats. Andrew Manze recorded some a few years ago, and now along comes David Holloway, who is certainly Manze’s equal. In his hands, virtuosity becomes hypnotic rather than attention-grabbing; he gets so close to the music we can feel it.

Two of the six sonatas recorded here are unpublished; the others are from a 1681 collection that made Biber’s contemporaries pay attention to him. Four contain arias and variations, and Biber builds the variations in ways that make them seem improvised; they’re never predictable. Elsewhere are dance movements—a Gavotte or Gigue: Almost invariably, in each sonata, there’s a beautiful tune one can latch on to, and Biber is not one to torment or fascinate us with Gesualdo-like dissonances; the harmonies are direct and comforting, even within their fantastic rhythms.

Sonatas IV and VI employ a technique called sonatina, in which one or more of the violin’s strings is tuned differently from the normal fifth away from the one next to it. This allows the violinist to play chords otherwise unavailable on the instrument. Whether or not you can hear the difference in the tuning isn’t important; it just allows for more colors to emerge. Throughout, we’re treated to just about everything the instrument can do, and it’s quite an experience.

The sound is remarkably rich—bright without shrillness, the violin forward enough to gleam but the continuo always audible beneath. And deciding to use the continuo harpsichord and organ, separately and together, keeps the textures interesting; just listen to how the solo organ darkens the mood about eight minutes into Sonata III. Take a break between sonatas (they average 13 minutes apiece); you’ll probably need to prepare yourself for the next round. This disc will take your breath away.

— Robert Levine

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**BÖJRK**

Greatest Hits & Family Tree

Greatest Hits


Performance *****

Sonic *****

Family Tree


Performance *****

Sonic *****

Björk has emerged as one of the most ferociously incomparable, distinctive, and critically acclaimed experimenters in electronic music. Along with her award-winning videos, website (www.bjork.com), and critically acclaimed acting performance in the film Dancer in the Dark (and its accompanying soundtrack, Selmasongs), the Icelandic singer has established herself as one of the most innovative artists of the past decade.

The nostalgic, fan-picked Greatest Hits collection documents the former Sugarcubes frontwoman’s solo artistic evolution over the past nine years. The 15 tracks, culled from her four previously released studio albums and including one new recording, “It’s In Our Hands,” revisit all of the absolute highlights from Björk’s triumphant 1993 breakthrough, Debut, through the sublimely rapturous grandeur of 2001’s Vespertine. “Human Behavior,” “Hyperballad,” “Joga,” “Venus as a Boy,” “Possibly Maybe,” and “Hidden Place.”

The Family Tree boxed set is a much more self-indulgent affair and a sort of personal musical diary. The exquisitely packaged, comprehensive set comprises six CDs’ worth of Björk’s favorite songs, many previously unreleased and spanning her entire career.

The collection is broken down into four groups, or “chambers”: Roots and Strings (each two discs each), Beats, and Björk’s own selection of a dozen Greatest Hits. The 10-track Roots discs represent Björk’s musical development from age 15 to the present. Disc 1 covers her early work—traditional Icelandic folk and avant punk-rock—and includes two Sugarcubes tracks, “Anmaelt” (the original Icelandic version of “Birthday”) and “Manma.” Disc 2 uncovers early demo versions of more recent tracks such as “Immature” and “Joga.”

The nine-track Strings discs highlight Björk’s classical training with collaborations with the Brodsky Quartet recorded in 1995, featuring reconstructions of such songs as “Possibly Maybe,” “Hunter,” “I’ve Seen It All,” and “Bachelorette.” The four tracks of Beats spotlight some of Björk’s first electronic experiments with British beat innovators Graham Massey and Mark Bell in 1990; “The Modern Things,” “Karvel,” “I Go Humble,” and “Nature is Ancient.”

Family Tree is a bit of Björk overkill—scenically endless versions of some of the same songs spread across six discs. However, the set is a benchmark—the ultimate homage to a sparkling oeuvre of boundless musical pioneering. Both collections are essential overviews for the diehard Björk fan and the newcomer alike. They signal the end of the first chapter of her cutting-edge career, and hint that the next phase should prove as engaging as the first.

— Craig Roseberry

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**GUY CLARK**

The Dark


Performance *****

Sonic ****

As songwriters go, there aren’t many working today as talented as Guy Clark, who’s now the granddaddy of Texas Troubadours even though he’s lived for years in Nashville. As adept at lyrics as he is at music, and a damned fine live performer, Clark writes what have to be called modern folk songs: by turns profound and/or silly, yet easily identified from the first bar as Clark tunes—the sure sign of a great songwriter.

Here the gruff-voiced Clark, assisted by a drumless threesome of mostly gutiarists and fiddles, works his way through a mix of new originals, some upbeat (“Arizona Star”), some spooky and evocative (“The Dark”), some deliberately traditional (“Soldier’s Joy”). And, as on every Guy Clark record, one melody ranks with his best: “Dancing Days.” There are also stanzas to savor: “She made real an oxymoron / She made mirrors / She made smoke / She had a curveball that wouldn’t quit / She had a girlfriend for a joke.” Ignore Guy Clark at your own risk.

— Robert Baird

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**TOM PETTY & THE HEARTBREAKERS**

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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.

Upscale Audio retubes more high end gear than anybody. Strong attention to detail, including a $21,000 FFT Siemens, Svetlana... you name it. See pictures on our website! And remember... we DO NOT use your amp as a tube tester.
Remember rock’n’roll radio? Tom Petty does—the wide-reaching AM stations of the ’60s, the freeform FMs of the ’70s—even the border-radio mavericks that spanned all eras. “He got himself a station / Down in Mexico / Remember how it was back then,” sings Petty in “The Last DJ,” a eulogy to the titular jock of memory and a tune that, despite its stern indictment of Radio 2002, is more bittersweet than outraged. No mistake that trangy chords, either: they’re a deliberate composite of the Hollies’ “Bus Stop,” the Searchers’ “Needles and Pins,” and the Beatles’ “Help”—echoes from a bygone era beaming in from the ether.

It would be nice to report that the rest of the album maintains that opening tune’s high standard. But The Last DJ is neither Petty’s best album (that would be Southern Accents) nor his worst (Full Moon Fever). What it is is a diversely patterned, great-sounding disc undermined by a few egregious missteps.

The surface theme, of course, is the sorry state the music biz finds itself in today. There’s “Money Becomes King,” a sing-songy talkin’ blues with a Motown vibe sung in the voice of a disillusioned music fan; and “Joe,” whose hackneyed man-with-the-cigar storyline, leaden arrangement, and painfully shrill vocal conspire to earn it the status of Worst Ever Petty Song.

More broadly viewed, The Last DJ is about the erosion of idealism and hope. The orchestral grandeur of “Dreamville” is as inspiring as its lyrics are nostalgic: “Light years from here / And the air smelled good…” Likewise the overtly Beatles-esque (don’t miss the guitar nods to George Harrison) “Can’t Stop the Sun,” which defiantly concludes, “You may think it’s all over / [But you] can’t stop a man from dreamin.” Speaking of the Fab Four, the edgy, swampy “A Kid Goes Bad” recalls John Lennon at his most acerbic.

The Last DJ could have been a Petty classic had he ditched “Joe” and an embarrassing piece of British dancehall fluff, “The Man Who Loves Women.” It’s still a good record—just don’t overlook your disc player’s Program feature.

—Fred Mills

THE SOFT BOYS

Nextdoorland

Stereophile, February 2003
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certain. Its 10 taut, punchy gems don't seem earnest, heavy-handed, or out of time, probably because jangly, harmonic, sometimes-psychedelic, sometimes-spiky pop has marched along quite nicely in the Soft Boys' absence, whether you're talking R.E.M. and Oasis or cult bands like the Green Pajamas and the Orgone Box. Nextdoorland sounds like the Soft Boys a little tighter and a little brighter—but it could just as easily be the latest Robyn Hitchcock disc, where he re-indulges his jones for rock'n'roll.

Still, it took Hitchcock's fellow almost-fiftysomethings to make that happen, most notably Kimberley Rew. Best known as the man behind Katrina and the Waves, Rew is a genuine guitar hero, a wavy soloist who plays Richard Lloyd to Hitchcock's Tom Verlaine, or Billy Brenner to Robyn's Edwards/Lowe. Spiritually, he also has some Nigel Tufnel in him. Rew slices right in and around Windsor and Seligman's bubbling groove on "Pulse of My Heart," and is all over the place on "Mr. Kennedy," a swirling little anthem adorned with sonic portents that slowly spark a full-blown guitar-duel coda.

As Hitchcock sings elsewhere on Nextdoorland, "I've got my mojo and I am a piece of the action, oh strings." One suspects the Soft Boys are gonna be around a while. Now if we can just get the Rolling Stones to stop. — Jason Cohen

**JAZZ**

**VON FREEMAN**

The Improviser

Von Freeman, tenor sax; Mike Allemana, guitar; Jason Moran, piano; Jack Zara, Mark Helias, bass; Michael Raynor, Nasheet Waits, drums


It's risky to open a record with a solo tenor sax rendition of a ballad. If the performance doesn't grab you immediately, odds are you won't stick around for the rest of the collection. But, as with all gambles, if the long shot succeeds, the payoff can be high indeed. Such is the case with Von Freeman's masterful CD, simply titled The Improviser.

The 80-year-old tenor saxophonist, renowned in his native Chicago but largely unrecognized in the greater jazz sphere, begins the disc with a striking interpretation of "If I Should Lose You" that is transfixing in its heartfelt expression and outside-the-lines improvisation. It is, all at once, a classic track. The rest of the CD pales in comparison but is nonetheless top-shelf. Recorded live in three different Chicago venues—the Chicago Cultural Center, the New Apartment Lounge (where Freeman plays weekly), and the Green Mill—the Improviser features Freeman on familiar turf fronting his working band of guitarist Mike Allemana, bassist Jack Zara, and drummer Michael Raynor in four numbers, and, on two tracks, showcases him in unheralded settings with young pianist Jason Moran.

Freeman's dark-roast solos are expansive and, given his wealth of experience, always find him with something to say—a rarity in these days of verbose saxophonists. He's warmly lyrical and ecstatically jagged, reflective as well as jovial. Though the bass is consistently mixed too high, Freeman's quartet excels on excursions that are swinging (his original "Ski-vec"), spirited (a fast run through "What is this Thing Called Love?"), sublime (the ballad "I Dream That Dream"), another intimate show-stopper in which Freeman beautifully floats the melody, and voluptuously soulful (the indigo-shaded "Blue Bossa").

The meetings with Jason Moran are likewise noteworthy. On Freeman's "Blues for Billie," the pair—with bassist Mark Helias and drummer Nasheet Waits in strong supportive roles—dip into deep blues, Freeman setting the song's feel with a moving solo intro, and Moran, as he does when collaborating with other jazz elders, romping on the keys at the top of his game. The finale is a wistful Freeman-Moran duo on Duke Ellington's little-known "I Like the Sunrise," which concludes the CD with a sigh.

Blue Note Records has a working agreement with Chicago indie label Premo for releasing Patricia Barber's CDs. The major label should pursue doing the same with Von Freeman. The saxophonist and this gem of a recording deserve a wider audience. — Dan Ouellette

**MICHEL PETRUCCIANI**

100 Hearts & Live at the Village Vanguard

100 Hearts
Michel Petrucciani, piano

Live at the Village Vanguard
Michel Petrucciani, piano; Palle Danielsson, bass; Eliot Zigmund, drums

When he was very young, shortly after he came to America to seek out the elusive Charles Lloyd and persuade him to play again, Michel Petrucciani was an astonishing pianist. He died at 36 in 1999, and he never realized the enormous promise of his youth. His last years were limited by ill-advised projects with incompatible and/or inferior musicians, and by the fact that his playing—always extraverted—came to rely too much on bombast.

What is more remarkable is that he lived to play at all. Petrucciani was born with Osteogenesis Imperfecta, a crippling bone disease that stunted his growth (his adult weight was less than 60 lbs) and led to more than 200 bone fractures during his lifetime. But once he was helped to the piano bench, his disability became irrelevant. His hands and arms (and his imagination) were not only unimpairred, they were capable of suggesting Art Tatum reborn with Bill Evans' intellectual romanticism and Cecil Taylor's daring. To witness a Petrucciain performance in person—to see him grinning ecstatically, his tiny body bouncing, his hands a blur over the keyboard as music rained forth in torrents—was to partake in a unique affirmation of the invincible creative human spirit.

The Blue Note label made an important decision to acquire the master tapes of 100 Hearts and Live at the Village Vanguard, and to reissue these albums with Kurt Lundvall's superb 24-bit/96kHz remastering. They were Petrucciaini's first two American appearances on record, from 1983 and 1984, respectively, when he was barely out of his teens. The solo recording 100 Hearts has never been previously released on CD. Live at the Village Vanguard is simply Petrucciaini's finest hour, and one of the permanent piano-trio recordings of the 1980s.

The solo pianist of 100 Hearts overwhelmings Sonny Rollins' "St. Thomas," concurrently playing the theme and several variations, like a jazz cubist who sees a subject from multiple angles at once. The centerpiece of the album is a wildly inventive 14-minute epic medley (if "medley" is the term for such a nonlinear process) called "Pot Pourri." Petrucciaini intermingles four songs ("Some Day My Prince Will Come," "All the Things You Are," "A Child is Born," and Bill Evans' "Very Early") in a whirling, dizzying galaxy. Four distinct melodies emerge, recede, resurface, and finally become one another.

The live album was recorded less than a year later, but it presents a deeper, more
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Mission Pilastro

Editor:
It is always a pleasure to read a good review, but even more so to see the design described almost exactly as we see and hear it at Mission!

John Atkinson might have expressed astonishment at how quickly we could set up the Pilastros in his room (December 2002, p.113), but this is largely due to the even-handed performance of this speaker. With a less than perfect design you often have to struggle to make the most of room acoustic benefits. The Pilastro is so clean and controlled that setup in any room is a lot simpler than most speakers.

Our goal was to produce a monitor-class domestic speaker. Doesn’t everyone have that goal in the high end? Well, apparently not. As the review says, most high-end speakers don’t measure the way they sound. This isn’t necessarily a bad thing—some speakers designed for euphonic results are very enjoyable—but we have found that when we design speakers subjectively to deliver the maximum clarity over a wide bandwidth, they automatically generate flat measurements.

One of the keys to good performance is off-axis response that is identical in character to that of the on-axis. This not only benefits listeners no matter where they sit, but also means that wall, floor, and ceiling reflections do not disturb the tonal balance in-room. The Pilastro was designed to give the same clarity at 30Hz as it does at 50kHz and everywhere in between. This meant no compromises in the design, and we believe the result fully justifies the cost in investment and design hours, as well as that of the final product!

A lot of theories have been put forward as to why it is preferable to extend high-frequency range. Although JA couldn’t measure it, the Pilastro’s treble unit extends perfectly smoothly to 50kHz and beyond. The advantage for the loudspeaker designer is that we can push the primary diaphragm resonance more than an octave beyond the upper limit of human hearing. Our own tests have indicated that the “oil-can” resonances of so-called super tweeters in the 24-28kHz area produce audible ripples in the passband at half that frequency. The Pilastro’s tweeter is free from such artifacts, which partly explains why JA found such outstanding definition of cymbals, etc.

At the other end of the spectrum, yes, the bass is extended and powerful, yet it’s not the fat, bloated bass of many systems that extend this low. The reason? No cabin coloration and no port distortion, so you can hear exactly what is going on in the bass. Enough said!

We are really pleased that JA noticed the true benefits of high-sensitivity speakers. Whilst the 94dB sensitivity does make the Pilastro suitable for tube amps, nearly every amplifier changes character as it approaches its output limits. The Pilastro gives the amplifier an easy time—at a typical listening distance, you need only a 60W amplifier to generate 105dB. As JA found, there is no sense of compression when playing wide-dynamic-range material, either from the speakers or the amp. And mini dynamics within the music are more easily resolved.

When the tech talk is finished, we come down to the real nitty-gritty. Sometimes it is easy to lose sight of what hi-fi is really all about. We have a slogan at Mission: “Music is the Master, Technology is the Slave.” Our belief is that if the hi-fi system can reveal clearly how musicians are singing and playing, then the musical message can be transmitted to the listener in exactly the way the performers intended. The key is in the listener’s emotional reaction to the music. JA touched on this when he described how the Pilastros “opened a superbly clear window into Eva Cassidy’s handling of Sting’s ‘Fields of Gold’...that was intensely communicative.”

“Pilastro is sounding as it should. Enjoy.” That’s exactly what we want you to do.

Peter Conneau
Director of Acoustic Design, Mission

Kirksaeter Silverline 60

Editor:
Thank you for the positive review regarding the Kirksaeter Silverline 60 minimonitor (January, p.91). The design philosophy of all Kirksaeter products has always been one of creating a very natural, open sound. Comments such as “the Kirksaeters... were getting it right,” “woodwinds sounded like woodwinds,” and about Suzanne Vega being “right

Canton Karat Reference 2 DC

Editor:
Canton would like to thank John Atkinson for his excellent review of the Karat Reference 2 DC loudspeaker (January 2003, p.72). We appreciate the thoroughness and objectivity of John’s evaluation and it is particularly gratifying to read a review that so clearly shows an appreciation for the extensive engineering effort that went into creating this loudspeaker system.

Each company has its own special personality, Canton’s being perfectionist in nature. For over 30 years, the company’s engineers have taken an evolutionary approach to design, engineering, and manufacturing, continuously refining proven transducers, crossovers, and enclosure designs. We feel the Karat Reference 2 DC is our ultimate effort to date.

Regarding driver materials, while our metallurgists in Germany certainly appreciate the differences between manganese and magnesium, let’s just say we are considering a remedial chemistry course for some of our marketing staff. The review correctly states that the tweeter dome is an alloy of aluminum and magnesium; however, the midrange is actually an alloy of aluminum and magnesium.

Paul Madsen
President, Canton USA

Manufacturers’ Comments
there in front of me” validate Kirksaeter's 45 years of speaker-building experience.

In our opinion, to “get it right” in one’s listening room has always been to get a big sound out of a small speaker. Estimating that a speaker may lose 0.7dB/m of treble in a typical room, we have tailored the speaker to give a very flat response at a distance of 3-4m. Both the measurement test and, then, listening tests show that this technique works quite well, and allows one to simply get lost in the well-balanced, natural-sounding music.

Ray Kingaid, Kirksaeter USA

Rogue Audio Magnum Ninety-Nine

Editor:

Thank you for the wonderful review of the Magnum Ninety-Nine preamplifier (January, p.109). At Rogue Audio, we strive to engineer equipment that is both musical and engaging. To that end, we believe that Kirksaeter's glowing assessment of the Ninety-Nine captured the spirit of our design goals completely.

While we were also generally pleased with the test results, I would like to address the somewhat low channel separation that was measured. The preamp under test contained an optional processor loop board to accommodate Chip’s passive equalizer. I believe the additional tracks and relays on this optional board to be the culprit, as our measurements without the processor board are significantly higher.

Mark O'Brien
President, Rogue Audio

YBA Intégré Passion

Editor:

While so much of our industry reinvents itself every year to stay ahead of the competition, we're pleased to hear that the esteemed Mr. Tellig recognizes the higher value inherent in designs that start from a well-thought-out position in the first place. YBA has never been part of the “Design of the Month Club,” in fact, most of Yves-Bernard Andre's original design concepts — minimizing parasitic vibrations, using only the finest semiconductor parts (even if that means having to build them himself), reducing stray magnetic-field distortions, stringent power-supply regulation, and the low biasing of amplifier stages for increased longevity and reduced thermal noise — are gaining support among other high-end manufacturers years later. While Yves-Bernard is a bit picky, some would say obsessive, we think the fruits of his visionary labor are evident in the musicality and durability of his products. To own YBA is to experience music, and after all, music is what we each pursue with such, well, passion!

Sam mentioned the unfortunate failure of the amplifier's output stage after speaker leads were accidentally touched together. It’s true that other brands offer shorting protection, but Yves-Bernard has yet to find a solution that doesn’t degrade the sound quality beyond his stringent expectations — you just lose too much transparency. Rarely do we see consumers having issues like this; it’s one of the curses of being a highly sought after reviewer and having to sub in and out so many pairs of speakers over the course of a loan period. Better to short the amp by crossing speaker leads than by accidentally knocking a glass of fine French Bordeaux into the chassis — that would be a horrible waste of great wine!

We're very excited and proud of the YBA Passion Intégré, an integrated amplifier that offers the music-lover more than just a glimpse of the design acuity found in the YBA Passion series of preamps and power amps. All YBA-built music systems embody a commitment to their owners that supports long-term enjoyment and pride of ownership. Thank you again for taking the time to experience what we are all so happy to offer.

Daniel Jacques
President, Audio Plus Services
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-Galen Carol

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The songs of Radiohead transcribed for solo classical piano? When I first heard it, my reaction was twofold: first, disgust that the endless ideas for "crossing" classical music "over" to a new and potentially life-saving audience had reached a new low; second, I shook my head at the thought that the influence of Thom Yorke's cracked vision of rock music had spread so far.

This is not the first time Radiohead has swayed another musical genre. Jazz pianist Brad Mehldau has been playing his own versions of "Paranoid Android" and "Exit Music (For A Film)" for some time now, to generally favorable reviews (see my feature on Mehldau in the October 2002 Stereophile).

But Mehldau is a jazz cat, an improviser. This new rock-meets-classical project was to feature 60 pages of Radiohead melodies and guitar lines reduced to a pianist's two hands. Ambitious? Yes. Destined to fail miserably? It had to be.

That was until I heard a demo that classical pianist and brave adventurer Christopher O'Riley sent me. Recorded quickly one afternoon at his home in Los Angeles, the disc's 15 Radiohead pieces all work. Still in the form of songs rather than extended forms, it's a swirling, lush flurry of notes. If there's a downfall to what is in its original form extremely varied music it's that there is an undeniable sameness about O'Riley's transcriptions, a similarity in treatment and mood, that pervades the arrangements. Then again, you could say the same thing about Chopin's 24 Préludes.

By playing rock music on acoustic piano, O'Riley risks being caught in a no-man's-land: too hip for classical listeners, too stuffy for the rock crowd. It's a limbo he's aware of, yet willing to risk.

A touring classical solo artist for two decades, O'Riley has recorded for the RCA Red Seal, Image, Elektra, and Stereophile labels. He's transcribed such works as the duet from Delibes' Lakmé, and a tango by Argentine bandoneón player and composer Astor Piazzolla. But Radiohead's music inspired O'Riley to think big. Besides the risk to his career, he's also aware that this project will engender doubt in both the rock and classical audiences; that Radiohead on solo piano will rightly be placed in the "cross-over" swamp, a term and a mishmash of styles that is currently seen as a silver bullet by the music business and often as a dirty word to music fans.

"There are a lot of good reasons for skepticism and a sense of irony about a lot of the stuff that goes out — Metallica with the San Francisco Symphony is a good example.

"[Radiohead] has the two things that I find most fascinating about any music that I play, which is harmonic and textural interest. None of the players in Radiohead are what you'd call virtuosos, but with a five-piece ensemble, they each somehow are able to contribute a specific and usually fairly simple motif — even when they get into their late electronic stuff — that contributes to the whole and makes a really full and interesting and varied texture."

O'Riley began playing around with the idea during the NPR radio show he hosts, From the Top, which is syndicated to 250 stations across the US. The show features pre-college-age kids playing classical music. As a goof and to see their reactions, O'Riley began tinkering with "Karma Police" and other Radiohead tunes.

"It's been funny. I've been getting e-mail from the show saying, 'Who is this Mr. Head? I really like his music.'"

Such responses convinced him to set to work transcribing some of the band's songs. A live performance of an hour's worth of this material on NPR's Performance Today led to a buzz on Radiohead websites around the world. There followed a first recording session this past summer in Athens, Georgia, but problems with the tapes from that session made them unusable. O'Riley then decided to make a home demo tape and shop it around to labels. EMI and Harmonia Mundi had already passed on the project before Peter Gelb and Sony Classical jumped in. The as-yet-unreleased album is slated to be released in spring 2003.

"Okay, there are all these pieces that I love. Some of them are really just plain old guitar-oriented, and how the hell do I transcribe them without sounding cheesy? I was trying to find something that would have the same sort of kinetic energy of the guitar, the strumming, the rapid-fire sort of thing, and translate that to the piano.

"Each piece is its own thing. For instance, 'Like Spinning Plates' [from Amnesiac] was released in a totally electronic way, but when they do it live, it's basically Thom Yorke playing piano and singing. So that was pretty easy, except for the fact that the stuff he plays with two hands I play with my left hand. Then, when the melody comes in, again somebody's singing — what do you do with the human voice? You can plunk out the melody notes, but it just isn't that interesting. The way I tried to get the plangency of his voice into that probably goes back to Thelonious Monk: You play the note, but you surround it with something that in his case was trying to approximate the sound of a saxophone. There's a kind of between-the-cracks feel about his playing that contributed to my trying to find a solution to transcribing the vocal line."

In November 2002, after a long wait, O'Riley heard that Radiohead had reviewed his scores and listened to the demo, and that they and their management were fine with the project going forward. He hasn't yet had any personal contact with the band, but hopes to after the record's release, when he takes this material on tour.

"In the long run, [these arrangements] will probably end up being something that will be best for all concerned in mixed programs, in context with other forms. In other words, doing Radiohead songs as encore after concerts or putting 'Polyethylene Pt.II' on the same program as Brahms' Handel Variations."

"I guess I'm crossing over, but at the same time, the way it does the most good is in context with other things, both ways — inviting both sets of the audience into the other world."
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