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It's only a CD-R with a self-adhesive label and computer-generated inserts, but it's what the major record labels are really scared of.

No, I'm not talking about downloaded MP3s of the latest pop hits, or pirated music stolen by offshore crooks and manufactured in the tens of millions. It's an "instant record," recorded in an afternoon at a professional studio and released a week later by the artist himself. It will never qualify as platinum—or even gold—and it scares the pants off the major labels. But if it truly is the future, then the majors aren't needed.

This all started at the gym. I kept running into Andy Gravish, a professional jazz trumpeter, in the sauna or steam room. We'd idly talk about where he was playing, music we liked, and mutual friends. On September 24, he told me he'd just recorded a disc; one week later, he handed me a CD.

Now, that's what you call an instant record! I took the disc home, brewed a pot of coffee, cued the first track, and very nearly did a classic coffee-spooling double take. New York/Rome Hook-Up is good. Actually, it's great. It sounds liquid, relaxed, and precise, and the playing is extraordinary. It's not "almost as good" as a major-label release. It's better.

I'm not saying that just anyone could have pulled this off. Andy's a working musician who has been playing professionally since he was 12. And the disc wasn't recorded in a project studio, but at Jim Clouse's Park West Studios (ban dol@aol.com), which offers a full range of facilities, including leak-proof isolation chambers and a panoply of microphone choices.

There's a reason New York/Rome Hook-Up sounds so good: It features great players and was recorded with care by an engineer who is committed to excellence. (Clouse: "I don't record with any compression—or even a limiter. I don't like squishing anything unless a rock group says, 'We want the vocalist to sound like a little gnat.' ") The band recorded the entire disc in about five hours, Clouse and Gravish spent about three hours mastering the final product, and it was in my hands within a week of the time the group walked into the studio.

For $10 plus S&H, you can have one too (www.andygravish.com).

That's what has the major labels running scared. Ten bucks doesn't leave any money for the middlemen—no agents, no label executives, no record stores, no promoters—but Andy reckons he can reach people who like his music and still make a couple of ducats on the deal.

"I've had friends asking me when I would do a record for years," he told me. "But I don't have a lot of spare cash, and I'd look them husting to get on labels so they could release records that would get them booked into clubs with a $15 cover charge, and I'd think, I'm already playing in those places. Why go broke to boot?"

Technology has changed the cost of admission to the record business...That may be really scary for big music.

Technology has changed the cost of admission to the record business. It doesn't take hundreds of thousands of dollars to set up a studio that produces great-sounding recordings any more. You don't need a record label fronting you a six-figure advance to record.

In the October 13, 2003 installment of his "This Media Life" column in New York magazine (www.newyorkmetro.com/nymetro/news/media/columns/medialife/n_9313/), Michael Wolfe argues that the biggest threat to the record labels and movie industry is the change that has occurred in the distribution chain: "Movie studios and music companies achieved their wealth and monopoly because they offered a more efficient distribution system." Peer-to-peer sharing, he argues, puts big media in the same position as Detroit, the schnata business, or the steel industry—it's not lack of consumer loyalty that's killing them, "simply, somebody else is doing [the] job cheaper and better."

Up to a point, I agree. The Internet has certainly made distribution universal, even affordable. And yes, there is the whole downloading thing. But that's not the whole story.

It's not just changes in distribution or digital shoplifting that have altered the landscape. The big change is the lowered cost of the means of production—which can have a huge impact on the purity of intent. Andy Gravish made a superior-sounding disc of tuneful, elegant jazz because that was his only agenda, and because he could afford the services of Park West Studios, which is capable of producing a master that is technologically indistinguishable from the product of a million-dollar studio.

It's not that Sony isn't capable of doing that—it can, if it wants to. But Sony can't make money on it—not in the quantities Andy will sell. Because of that, Sony couldn't afford that simplicity of intent—it would have to consider the commercial implications, and that would mean that Andy would have to produce a very different disc. Or, more likely, not produce one at all.

Because the big boys must generate immense sales numbers, they tend to play to the lowest common denominator. Individual musicians now have the means to release the records they want and get them directly to the people who want them—which means the musicians can create recordings of music they are passionate about, rather than records they hope won't offend anyone. I know which type of music I want to hear—and support.

And just everyone what it costs a major record label to produce a disc, it wouldn't be possible for a cappella men's chorus Cantus to release Deep River (Cantus CTS-1203, www.stereophile.com/shownews.cgi?1747), or Analogue Productions' Chad Kassem to produce his Acoustic Sounds recordings, or any number of independent labels to essay any projects. In that sense, I think this new paradigm of music distribution and production completely adheres to the high-end ethos: Remove the conventional commercial considerations and what's left is the angels' share.

That may be really scary for big music, but it's great news for all of us music lovers.

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2003 Products of the Year
The votes are in... Stereophile writers and editors nominated and voted for their favorite products reviewed this year. John Atkinson tallied the votes. And the winners are...

Power Is As Power Does
Krell Industries' Founder and CEO Dan D'Agostino talks with David Lander.

Victim of Life's Circumstances
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Get on your Soapbox! Visit www.stereophile.com

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Bring everything home except the squeaky seats

Bring home the sound system and the big screen
You’ll laugh, you’ll cry, you’ll kiss the multiplex goodbye
Because you may never leave your house again
Now that you can afford to have everything at your fingertips
Things to know when you do it eBay

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Do it eBay Electronics
"... a serious high-end contender, and a formidable one ..."

- Robert Deutsch, Stereophile on the Studio/100
Push the affordable
Editor:
With the demise or transmutation of Audio, Stereo Review, and High Fidelity magazines, how will the next generation of audiophiles find their initial purchases? With those entry-level magazines gone and Stereophile now taking the pricey high ground, who can entry-level philes turn to?

Once Stereophile was all-encompassing, with the Audio Cheapskate/Anarchist and Corey Greenberg providing much-needed foils to the outrageous prices being asked for upper-end equipment. How can you justify not serving that segment of the audiophile market in the pages of your magazine?

Also, why haven't you endorsed used audio as a way of gaining entry to the hobby? I have recently purchased a Conrad-Johnson PV11 preamp for less than half the cost of new; it works flawlessly and provides many hours of listening enjoyment.

As a working journalist in the field, I cannot understand why Stereophile has abandoned the education and enlightenment of so many would-be audiophiles by refusing to publish reviews of affordable equipment, especially with the economy currently in the tank.

Ron Vorland
success_456@prodigy.net

Thank you
Editor:
For the first time, I have listened to a CD that John Atkinson engineered and produced, the clarinet quintets of Mozart and of Brahms [Mosaic, Stereophile STPH015-2]. Thank you for capturing this beautiful music so vividly. I am grateful for the experience that you have given to me. Your work reminds me of the contributions of Seymour Solomon's Vanguard recordings. Now I see that the quality of Mr. Solomon's work did not pass away with him.

Rand Anderson
randanderson@earthlink.net

Looking in vain
Editor:
You advertised your Editor's Choice Sampler & Test CD in the October issue (p.183). However, I've looked on your website in vain to buy this CD.

Erik Herbermann
Kirewman@aol.com

Words fail me, Mr. Anderson. I very much appreciate your comments. To learn that the end result of what was literally hundreds of hours of work fell on receptive ears is reward enough. Thank you.

Sorry for the obfuscation, Mr. Herbermann.
Editor's Choice, Mosaic, and all the other Stereophile recordings can be purchased by clicking on the "Recordings" button at the top of the www.stereophile.com home page.

—John Atkinson

J. Gordon who?
Editor:
What's up with J. Gordon Liddy...er, Holt, ripping Art Dudley a new [body opening]? ("Letters," September 2003, p.9)? It's a hobby, guys; people have opinions. I tend to concur with Arty on this one. I'm a farm boy from the Great White North — lots of time for listening in the winter — but I never hear "the sympho- ny," "the jazz trio," or "the band" in my listening room. It always sounds like hi-fi — great, joyous, and awesome at times, but always hi-fi. I do hear my four kids on sax, trumpet, baritone, violin, and piano, with the neighbors on drums, and they don't sound like hi-fi.

Arty, keep up the good work.

Lee Labby
leelabby@accesscom.ca

JGH & fidelity
Editor:
I originally was not going to write this e-mail, because I thought I didn't really care and also because I thought that Art Dudley could more than stand up for himself. But, after much cogitation, I couldn't get J. Gordon Holt's September letter aimed at Art (p.9) out of my head.

In his June "Listening" (p.45) Art claims that "hi-fi" has nothing to do with live music. J. Gordon disagrees. But why? Is it because a hi-fi might not ever be able to achieve perfect fidelity "to the original" in his listening room? No, J. Gordon will not refuse "to even try" to make that happen. Is it because J. Gordon loves his hi-fi more than Art does? I don’t think so.

I think that J. Gordon (and a great many others like him) is attempting to validate his journey toward an external reference to musical fidelity that has consumed his hard-earned money and hard-spent time. I think a lot of people would agree with J. Gordon that live music and hi-fi have a lot to do with one another, with that point in mind. I am not one of them, and I am not alone.

A hi-fi, to me, is a tool of fidelity to myself. Why would I waste my time building a complex tool to satisfy any other idea of fidelity than my own? A hi-fi should be a tool capable of producing musical ecstasy—a tool that you construct with deeply personal choices that should lead to a greater intimacy (and, yes, fidelity) to oneself, not to some external goal of accuracy. Without a personally satisfying musical tool, built with fidelity to self in mind to explore our minds and our souls, our time and money are spent in vain. This is why some (I'd love to say "most," but will spare the innocent) people get caught in the tail-chasing upgrade scam, and others find musical satisfaction the first go-round.

J. Gordon Holt doesn't care that my (or, more obviously, Art's) idea of "fidelity" means something different to me than it does to him. In fact, I think he has missed that point altogether. I (and Arty too, I hope) want a musical tool in my listening room that will let me enjoy music in perfect fidelity to me, to my soul, and to my person as a whole. The idea of having an external reference to which we compare the music in our homes is inherently doomed to fail. That entire idea sounds, to me, like it was cooked up in the Dark Ages of our electronics forefathers by the Original Hi-Fi Salesman.

Let's start asking ourselves what we are really searching for in the musical quests happening in our homes. Let's start demanding that our hi-fi equipment be satisfying to our souls first, and forget all about any sort of external reference of accuracy. The only accuracy that counts is accuracy in a hi-fi's ability to satisfy our whole person.

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Letters
Stereophile, December 2003
So does Art Dudley really “know” that hi-fi and live music have nothing to do with one another? For him, I feel I can safely say, yes, that is the case, and I commend him for having the courage to speak out in the pages of Stereophile. No one else would probably have the fortitude to make such a statement for fear of alienating the readership. Thank you, Art.

And guess what? My system sounds nothing like real music, and I don’t give a shit, because I’m too busy enjoying the thrill ride it takes me on every time I fire it up.

Jay Moran
Lexington, IL
livstone@nto.com

Well, we have finally come full circle, haven’t we? We’ve created a kind of music listener who prefers his precious audio system to real music. Our next cultural breakthrough: Gainsborough’s Blue Boy reproduced in more subtle shades of orange, pre-matted and ready for framing. Mr. Moran and his optocentric ilk are that most revolting kind of Philistine: the snob kind. I say to hell with them!

J. Gordon Holt, Senior Writer
The Absolute Sound

A spankin’

Editor: I guess if J. Gordon Holt takes the time to give you a spankin’ in the September “Letters,” then you’ve been naughty! Kudos on printing your paddlin’!

B. Goyons
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Let’s get to work

Editor: There has been a bit of sense talked in Stereophile lately. As Jon Iverson says in his October “As We See It,” “Let’s get to work.”

I have cloth ears, so I ended up with a system largely comprising Stereophile “Class A” components: Sony SACD, single-ended-triode 300B tube amps, Avant-garde horn speakers. I love it, but sadly I have to work to afford this sort of gear.

At work, I listen to a small pair of speakers driven by a cheap integrated amplifier. The source is a computer onto which I’ve burned, with minimal compression (or none, if I love the tracks), all my favorite CDs. I run a short cable from the computer’s headphone-out jack to the amplifier. It gets me through the day.

I have really come to enjoy putting the Windows Media Player in random shuffle mode in the morning and hearing pleasant surprises all day. As the mood strikes me, some mornings I might just hit the Piano playlist, or the Blues playlist, or whatever.

I missed this convenience at home, so I bought a cheap 120GB external hard drive, about the size of a book, and copied my music files onto it through the USB port. I plugged this external drive into my home computer in the study and ran 12m of coaxial cable from my Sound Blaster Audigy Card’s S/PDIF digital output to a cheap DAC in my stereo room, which I plugged into the preamp.

It sounds scary good… This is where the fun is, guys. Do not underestimate what you can get off your computers’ hard drives. There is work to be done here, and I look forward to better sound on better software. But give it a try now—you’ll be surprised. At the price, it’s fantastic.

Keith Hoolihan
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Audiophile entry points?

Editor: I recently ripped over 250 CDs using iTunes (using the AIFF encoder, of course) into an older Mac that I had upgraded with a 200GB hard drive. Not only do I now have the best jukebox ever, but, combined with new B&W 601s and the 3090, I now have a far superior system. Soon I hope to add an M-Audio Sonic and use its digital out to maximize the potential of my system.

I have found the soundstaging and depth incredible, and I can’t help but wonder if the issue is reduced jitter due to the use of a hard disk instead of a CD player. Perhaps this reduced jitter might not be a factor when compared to multi-thousand-dollar players, but how about compared to a Yamaha, Denon, Sony, or Pioneer? Could this be the real entry for mass-market consumers into audiophile land? You have the tools and resources to tell…

David Moon-Wainwright
mufam@earthlink.net

iPods & serious listening

Editor: Almost two years ago, after reading a thread at rec.audio.high-end,1 I held a brief e-mail discussion with Kalman Rubinson, both about the iPod and the sound quality of MP3 files compared to 16-bit PCM. According to Mr. Rubinson, while MP3 was okay for very casual listening, it did not cut it for serious listening over a decent system.

Having connected my 15GB iPod to my Krell and B&W Nautilus rig using an inexpensive cable from Monster Cable, I got decent results with MP3s encoded at 192kpbs or higher bit rates. At 256kpbs with VBR, or simply playing uncompressed AIFF files, I would say that the iPod is appropriate for “serious” listening to rock, jazz, and pop music. Furthermore, I have also made some comparisons, and you know what? It was very difficult for me to distinguish any difference between MP3s played on the iPod and CD played on my Meridian 588 CD player.

For even better sound quality on the go, I strongly recommend using good cans, like the Sennheiser HD600s, and a headphone amplifier. Any easy-to-build DIY headphone amp can be found at www.tangentsoft.net/audio/meta42. I have assembled it using Analog Devices’ AD8620 dual op-amp and Elantec’s EL2001 buffers, and the sound is superb.2 It is far easier and cheaper, it has been a great pleasure to use to read Wes Phillips’ review and JA’s measurements in September.

Claudio Gonzalez Rodil, aka Rodelius
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iPods & the Light Side

Editor: First of all, I’d like to thank Wes Phillips for reviewing a device like the iPod in the first place (October 2003). It’s really neat to see Stereophile review a piece of equipment that has begun amusing the youngsters and is relatively affordable at that. Kudos.

The iPod’s operating system is actually a mixture of different operating-system components from different vendors. Yes, the core operating system and decoders are from Portal Players, but the software toolkit on which the GUI is based is from a company called Pico. The GUI itself was designed and implemented by Apple engineers.

I love my iPod. And as iTunes for Windows is finally here, you’ll be able to junk Music Match for good. Welcome to the Light Side.

Stephen Davis
stephendavis@mac.com

iPods & internal components

Editor: I’m a developer of accessories for the Apple iPod; my company also publishes the iPosing website (www.ipodang.com). Anyone familiar with the internal components of the iPod will instantly notice that Wes Phillips didn’t describe the inside of the new iPod in his October review. He has done a disservice to Stereophile and to its readers. I hope that, as a responsible journalist, you will inform your readers of this fabrication.

A.J. Fouladpour
aj@sk.com

Thank you for the clarification, Mr. Fouladpour. In describing the iPod’s innards, I relied on the expertise of a friend who regularly services portables. Apparently I did not understand that he was walking me through his older model, not the newest. I am sorry for the error—there was certainly no intent to misinform.

— Wes Phillips

iPods & alternatives

Editor: As a longtime fan of Wes Phillips’ audio re-

1 Go to www.groups.google.com and enter “what makes a CD player high-end?” in the search field.

2 A few pics of my headphone amp can be found at www.wav-ofl-fo.org/forums/showthread.php?threadid=374006&highlight=spanish+porn.
“Halcro’s dm58: The Best Amplifier Ever!”
Stereophile Magazine, October 2002

The undistorted truth.

You can now get all of the best features of our monoblock power amplifiers in a single stereo unit, the Halcro dm38. Designed by Bruce Candy, one of the world’s leading commercial physicists and a passionate audiophile. No other amplifier on the market delivers such low levels of distortion, with clarity throughout even the most harmonically complex pieces. Signal interference is virtually eliminated, unearthing ambient inner detail on your favourite recordings. A lower noise floor brings you more dynamic range and improved soundstaging. Top-end, mid-range and bass are life-like and uncolored. The result is pure music, completely natural and non-fatiguing. The dm38 produces stereo sound like you have never heard it before.

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views (and a still-happy owner of a Meridian 508.24 bought on his recommendation), I was intrigued to read his review of the iPod. There has been quite a lot of discussion in various Internet forums regarding the sonic differences between the iPod and the Creative Labs Nomad Zen NX, with, it seems to me, a substantial majority of folks who have tried both units favoring the Nomad Zen NX (and the sonically identical Nomad Zen).

It would be interesting to get Wes's comparative opinion of the two units.

Tom Digby
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iPods & roadblocks

Editor:
Thanks for publishing Wes Phillips' review of the Apple iPod in October. I wish Wes had commented on the issue of gapless playback on computer-media players, as this is probably the most significant roadblock preventing many classical-music listeners from using such players.

Much classical music is mastered as one continuous acoustic event, with track indices marking breaks in the music but not necessarily breaks in the acoustic event. Playback of such music on MP3 players can be jarring because the hall ambience, sound decay between tracks, or even notes in pieces whose movements follow continuously (e.g. the Mendelssohn violin concertos) are interrupted by clicks or arbitrarily long digital silences.

If computer-based music media are to replace traditional music media, especially because they promise greater ease of use and access, they should be able to perform all the user-interface functions of the media they replace.

Andre Yew
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iPods & AIFFs

Editor:
Wes Phillips states in his October 2003 review that the Apple iPod supports AIFF (Audio Interchange File Format) and WAV files — uncompressed audio, which is a must for any true audiophile. Apple states this too, on their iPod specifications site. However, did Mr. Phillips actually try this feature on any song longer than two and a half minutes?

The iPod has 32MB of RAM, 4MB of which are used for the operating system; the other 28MB are used for buffering data from the hard drive. This is what gives the iPod its incredible battery life and shock resistance: the hard drive runs only part of the time, pulling data off to feed the memory buffer. When the memory buffer is full, the hard drive stops spinning until the memory is empty again. However, where Apple failed was that the iPod does not have the ability to read from its RAM chip while writing to it — which means that when it has played out the full 28MB, playback has to stop for one to two seconds while it reloads the buffer.

Most users won't notice this because, with a 128kbps MP3 or AAC file, you can go through more than half an hour of audio before it has to reload, and the buffer can also reload between songs, during the silences there. However, with a long, uncompressed track — say, the first movement of a Mozart symphony — playback has to stop two and a half minutes in (at the 28MB point) while the RAM buffer loads another chunk of data. It will then stop again two and a half minutes later.

The AIFF and WAV support for iPod seems to really be just a marketing gimmick, a way to beef up the numbers sheet. The iPod was never really designed for it. Don't get me wrong — I love my iPod. But I returned two in a row for this exact problem before Apple's service department admitted that this is what's going on.

Dan Rose
drose@uburh.edu
Assistant Chief Engineer, WBUR-FM Executive Committee, Boston Audio Engineering Society

I am not sure if Wes Phillips did, Mr. Rose, but I have tried playing long AIFF files on my own 30GB iPod. Only last night, for example, I was listening to some uncompressed test mixes of some of my recordings, each between four and five minutes long. They played back without any glitches. Although, like Mr. Yew, I have been bothered by silences inserted between classical tracks, where the ambient noise should have been continuous, I assume this is due to the player's hard drive needing time to load the next track's data into RAM.

According to www.ipodhacks.com/article.php?id=90, songs that are large to fit into its RAM cache are played by the iPod straight from its drive, or at least in some mode that does not use the full cache, perhaps using it as a conventional FIFO buffer. I have noticed that you get shorter battery life playing back AIFF files, and that the player is much more sensitive to shocks when it does so, both of which suggest that the hard drive is being spun up more often.

—JA

Joseph re-rated

Editor:
In the latest "Recommended Components" listing, the Joseph RM7 Signature, one of Stereophile's "Joint Loudspeakers of 2002," was downgraded from "Class B: Restricted LF" to "Class C: Restricted LF." Apparently, there's no accounting for taste.

Chip Stern
New York, NY

This was an unfortunate error on my part, Chip. We keep all "Recommended Components" entries, past and present, in a vast Word database, with fields for contact info, rating, etc. I prepare the published text by exporting and sorting just the appropriate fields.

When I did so for the April 2003 listing, the entry for the Joseph RM7 Signature in the database had incorrectly been rated as "C." We fixed this on the page for the April listing, but while we then incorporate all the page corrections in the database before preparing the next listing, this one was missed. I then missed the error again when I was proofing the pages for the October issue.

Mistakes do happen, unfortunately. I will fix the Joseph rating and the Esoteric prices for the version of the October "Recommended Components" that is sold online as a pdf document, and correct the entries for the April 2004 issue's listing.

—JA

Wadia deletions

Editor:
I have been a Stereophile reader for more than a decade. I have always held the opinion that you and the staff at Stereophile were good reporters, and any personal bias would show. That is as it should be. John Atkinson's removal of Wadia Digital's products from October's "Recommended Components" because he questioned their availability, without so much as a call to the company regarding their situation, seems unworthy of Stereophile's position in the industry.

As you know all too well, a negative review in the pages of Stereophile carries tremendous weight. The deletion of Wadia from "Recommended Components" was nothing short of a negative review. I believe that Stereophile's readers deserve a well-researched view of the products that you represent to know something about. I have been a Wadia owner for more than a decade. The management at Wadia have assured those of us who care that they are doing fine, and that their products will be in the market now and well into the future.

If you cannot substantiate the comment made in the October issue, then publish a retraction of the comment.

Clyde Rhodes
carhodes@charternet.net

It appears that the Wadia brand is alive and well; see "Manufacturers' Comments" on p.171. —JA
More configurations than Mr. Potato Head.
THE INTERNET
John Atkinson
New this month, Stereophile brings to you the Internet's largest community of qualified audio and video buyers and sellers, powered by industry leader Audiogon. Visitors to www.stereophile.com will find a new “Marketplace” link that connects directly to the most robust venue for buying and selling used and new audio and video equipment on the Web. Services also include an online Bluebook for quick evaluation of used-equipment prices, online used-equipment forums, information on manufacturers, member product reviews, and a member feedback system.

Unlike eBay, Stereophile's Marketplace lists only equipment relevant to audio and video enthusiasts. All equipment is sorted into easy-to-use categories for quick browsing or searching for that specific piece of elusive gear. Dozens of A/V dealers, from Audio Advisor to Z-Squared Audio, also showcase their used, closeout, and special bargains.

Whether you plan to browse for a bargain or sell something to make room for more gear, the Stereophile Marketplace — www.Marketplace.stereophile.com — is the best place to start, in our modest opinion.

US: NEW YORK & SAN FRANCISCO
Stereophile Staff
After the resounding success of Home Entertainment 2003 in San Francisco this past May, Home Entertainment 2004 will take place in not one but two locations: New York City and San Francisco. Consumers on the East and West coasts will have an opportunity to see, first-hand, the latest in consumer electronics and home entertainment products, and to meet the companies and retailers who sell them.

The New York Hilton will host Home Entertainment 2004 East, on May 20–23, 2004. This location was the site of HE2002, where a record number of consumers heard a plethora of new products from exhibitors and attended many free educational seminars, free concerts, and more.

The Westin–St. Francis Hotel in San Francisco will be the location of Home Entertainment 2004 West, on November 4–7, 2004, 16 months after the much-publicized HE2003. Home Entertainment 2004 West will mark the fifth time this event has taken place in San Francisco.

Home Entertainment 2004 East and West will each be open to the public for three days, with the day before reserved for trade and press only.

A ticket to Home Entertainment 2004 East or West will offer the show attendee a wide variety of educational seminars on what's hot and new in consumer electronics technology, focusing on high-performance audio and home theater. HE2004 will also feature a pavilion devoted to digital photography and cutting-edge videography. In addition, each ticket will admit the show-goer to the many free, live music performances held daily — including a grand performance concert held one night at each show.

Irwin P. Kornfeld, vice president and group publisher of Primedia's Home Technology & Photography Group and executive director of the Home Entertainment Shows, said, “Our shows in both New York City and San Francisco have been very well-attended events. And, given that today's consumer wants to stay on top of the new technologies and components as they are introduced, we've got to reach the readers of our magazines, and our show attendees in these important markets, more frequently. These shows give manufacturers and local retailers the perfect opportunity to showcase their products in an informative setting and at an event that consumers have grown to trust. When it comes to getting the best advice, knowledge, and information, the Home Entertainment Shows keep qualified customers at the forefront and in the market.”

Co-sponsored by Stereophile, Stereophile Guide to Home Theater, Home Theater, and Audio Video Interiors magazines, the Home Entertainment Shows are the country's only events open to the public that offer an up-close and personal look at the latest available high-performance equipment.

C A L E N D A R

Those promoting audio-related seminars, shows, and meetings should fax (do not call) the when, where, and who to (212) 886-2809 at least eight weeks before the month of the event. The deadline for the February 2004 issue is December 1, 2003. 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.

Attention All Audio Societies: We don't have room every month to print all of the society listings we receive. If you'd like to have your audio-society information posted on the Stereophile website, e-mail Chris Vogel at List@antiphon.hypernart.net and request an info-pack.

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.

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

CALIFORNIA
- Wednesday–Thursday, November 19–20, 6–9pm: SF Stereo is proud to announce the North American premiere of Krell's Resolution Series loudspeakers. Dan D'Agostino and Bill McKeeven will appear at the San Francisco location on Wednesday night, and at the Mountain View location on Thursday night. San Francisco RSVP:

Stereophile, December 2003

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Introducing the next generation of Active Cables from Synergistic Research (X2)

evolution of the legendary Active X-Series cables with new levels of refinement, air, pin point imaging, detail, and holographic presence creation explained through a new 40-page Explorer’s Guide to (X2) Cables (pronounced “X two”) born of an obsession for beauty

www.SynergisticResearch.com
sound and image products, both current and soon to come.

**Home Entertainment 2004 East:**
New York Hilton, May 20–23, 2004 (Open to the trade only on May 20)

**Home Entertainment 2004 West:**
Westin–St. Francis, San Francisco, November 4–7, 2004 (Open to the trade only on November 4)

Tickets to both shows cost $35 for a weekend pass, $25 for a one-day pass.

**US: NEW JERSEY**

**Barry Willis**

In an effort to become more efficient, Sony Electronics will institute some big changes in the US.

Early in October, Sony announced that it would move most of its consumer-electronics marketing operations from Park Ridge, New Jersey, to offices in San Diego and San Jose, California. The move should begin in April 2004, and will come in the wake of last summer's consolidation of Sony's consumer divisions under new president and COO Hideki "Dick" Koninuma. The number of Park Ridge employees, now about 1600, will be reduced to about 1000. The goal of the reorganization is to "bring Sony's consumer businesses together in one place," said spokesman Rick Clancy.

Sony Corporation last year announced cutbacks in its workforce. On October 5, the company announced plans to do likewise with its massive parts inventory, currently 840,000 individual parts. By the end of 2005, Sony hopes to have reduced that number to approximately 100,000, with a core base of 20,000 items defined as "Sony standard parts." The parts inventory reduction is expected to cut the number of parts suppliers to about 1000 from the present 4700. In September, Toshiba Corporation announced a similar but less aggressive plan aimed at reducing their parts inventory by 20%.

For the first fiscal quarter of 2003, ended June 30, Sony Corporation's net profit dropped a staggering 98%, to ¥1.1 billion ($9.9 million), with sales down 6.9%, to ¥1.6 trillion ($14 billion). Streamlining its operations, including potential further cutbacks in personnel, could help the company regain profitability. So could a new generation of intelligent products, such as the PSX entertainment system, built on a PlayStation platform but incorporating Digital Video Recorder (DVR), DVD recorder/player, and satellite TV tuner, in addition to video game capabilities. Two versions of the PSX should appear later this year, one with a 160GB hard drive ($727), and one with a 250GB hard drive ($910). The PSX will lead Sony's drive into the market for "smart" interactive devices, emulating many of the functions now found on personal computers.

Despite what is probably a brief glitch in Sony's long-term profitability, the company is the most widely recognized brand name in both the UK and the US, according to Harris polls conducted earlier this year. On October 7, the Wall Street Journal reported that, in a survey of 4000 UK consumers over the age of 15, Sony was rated the "best brand." A similar poll of Americans published June 23 yielded an identical result. The responses were spontaneous rather than being selected from a list of brand names, the Harris pollsters noted. The second most-recognized brands in the UK and US were Heinz food products and Kraft, respectively. In both countries, Coca-Cola was the seventh most-recognized brand.

**US: SEATTLE**

**Jon Iverson**

Audio companies create products that are based on a variety of technologies; sometimes, when patents are involved, they provoke lawsuits. One such suit erupted earlier this year when Robert W. Carver, designer for and founder of Sunfire Corporation, filed a US patent suit against Canadian speaker manufacturer Audio Products International (API).

API has officially confirmed that a favorable verdict for the company rendered in April of this year, is now final. "On April 3, 2003, a jury of the Federal Court in Seattle invalidated all patent claims asserted against Audio Products by Mr. Carver," reported API in a statement last week.

During a two-and-a-half-week trial, a jury considered Carver's allegations that API had infringed certain claims of two of his US patents relating to small-box subwoofer technology. After concluding the jury verdict, the court entered judgment in API's favor on April 15. Carver also failed in an attempt to have the judge overturn the jury's findings and subsequently declined to appeal the decision. As a result, the court will be awarding some of the case's legal costs to API.

API says that the judgment represents

**Audiophile Society (BAAS)** schedules manufacturer and dealer demonstrations, fosters communication and camaraderie, operates a members e-mail network, and distributes High Note, an informative newsletter. For more information, please contact Dennis Davis at (415) 381-4228 or e-mail bluedecdr3@attbi.com.

**CONNECTICUT**

- For information about the Connecticut Audio Society, visit www.the-atom.com/cas or call Carl Richard at (860) 375-5937.

**FLORIDA**

- The Space Coast Audio Society meets monthly for audiophiles in the Melbourne-Orlando-Daytona (Ormond) Beach area. Call (386) 423-4650 or e-mail SCAS@antiphon.hypermart.net.

**LOUISIANA**

- "New Orleans' first and only high-end audio club holds monthly meetings to..."
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With the new KHT2005.2 system, you don't have to be in a 'sweet spot' to enjoy the full benefit of the latest 3D digital home cinema formats.

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a “complete vindication” of its position that its small-volume subwoofer and driver designs were “a natural progression of established principles of subwoofer design, combined with the availability of new amplifier technologies such as [class-D] and Bash.

“Since the patents claimed rights in driver design and the operating conditions within the speaker box, if API’s designs infringed any of the claims in the Carver patents, those claims were considered invalid by the jury because they were either covered by designs that already existed or were a natural and straightforward progression of existing engineering design methods,” they added.

API’s Kevin Gabriel commented that the results of the verdict “have saved numerous speaker manufacturers millions in legal fees and proposed royalties in small subwoofer enclosures. [API’s] Mr. Heiber spent a large sum of his own money to stand on principle for what turned out to be invalid patents that Mr. Carver tried to receive royalty payments on.

API is located in Toronto, Canada, and manufactures and markets Athena, Energy, and Mirage speakers. The verdict sets a precedent for cases involving other subwoofer manufacturers that Mr. Carver has claimed have infringed on his patented designs.

DENMARK
Barry Willis
High-end audio manufacturer GamuT Audio—Stereophile's Brian Damkroger was very impressed with their CD 1 CD player last May—has been acquired by Danish investment firm Rossing Nielsen Electronics A/S, according to an announcement released September 22. (Rossing Nielsen is a majority shareholder in loudspeaker manufacturer Avance International A/S) Under the new ownership, the number of GamuT products will be reduced to “provide shorter lead times and to make the brand more competitive,” according to company principal Poul Rossing.

Lombardi Sales will continue to represent GamuT in the US and at the upcoming Consumer Electronics Show (CES) in January 2004. US dealers should contact Ray Lombardi for more information.

UNITED KINGDOM
Paul Messenger
B&W’s new 700 series is the English speaker company’s most important loudspeaker launch in some time. It replaces the CDM NT line and bridges the gap between the beer-budget 600 series and the high-end Nautilus 800 speakers. The seven 700 models include three stereo pairs, dedicated center-front and surround speakers (the latter with a dipole/monopole option), and two powered subwoofers.

The three two-channel models maintain B&W’s tradition of numbering inconsistency by using the lowest figure for the largest speaker. The DM703 ($3500/pair) is a full three-way floorstander, the DM704 ($2200/pair) is a two-and-a-half-way floorstander, and the DM705 ($1500/pair) is a two-way stand-mount design. All three models use techniques and technologies trickled down from the 800-series Nautilus and Signature models. Most immediately obvious are the elegant and discreet cabinets, whose front and top surfaces are now formed from a single piece of laminated MDF, creating a curved edge immediately below the external, time-aligned tweeter. Each speaker is slightly narrower at the back than at the front, which helps to “de-focus” internal standing waves; only the front and rear panels are parallel.

Aided by the relatively new Klippel distortion-measuring apparatus, which enables the contributions of individual nonlinearity mechanisms to be isolated, much work has gone into developing new drive-units and motors. In the 700 series B&W introduces what they call “balanced drive,” which involves adding an aluminum disc and a copper cap to the driver polepiece to minimize variations in inductance. Magnetic field symmetry has also been improved.

The DM703, the only true three-way, features the “surroundless” mid-range-only driver pioneered in the larger Nautilus models. B&W doesn’t believe in extra “supertweeters,” but has improved the high-frequency extension of its existing tube-loaded tweeters by using a copper cover on the center pole and a single-layer ribbon coil to reduce the voice-coil inductance. Copper-coated aluminum wire reduces the moving mass, and a superior coil/dome join raises the first breakup frequency.

Similar incremental refinements have been applied throughout the 700 speakers, including the terminals and crossover network. B&W claims that all of this results in a significant increase in sound quality over the CDM NT line. The DS75 surround speaker also merits a mention. It’s not exactly the prettiest or most discreet surround around, but in addressing one of the more intractable problems of multichannel music, it goes further than most.

It’s generally accepted that movies sound best with a relatively diffuse and delocalized surround sound, such as that produced by dipole speakers. Multi-channel music, however, is normally mixed for replay by conventional monopole designs. B&W is not the first to make a surround speaker that can be switched between dipole and monopole

discuss topics of interest and listen to music. Join the fun by e-mailing zephirin@cox.net.

MASSACHUSETTS
• Tuesday, November 18, 7pm: Spearit Sound (Boston) will host an evening of multichannel audio featuring representatives from McCormack Audio, Philips, Siltech, and special guest Jim Thiel of Thiel Audio. RSVP: (617) 734-8800.
• For details of upcoming monthly meetings of the Boston Audio Society, samples from their publication, The Speaker, or membership information, visit http://bostonaudiosociety.org, e-mail dbys@atgglobal.net, or call (603) 899-5121.

MISSISSIPPI
• If you are an audiophile living on the Mississippi Gulf Coast who would like to participate in a high-end audio club, please e-mail stokjoc@hotmail.com.

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

Stereophile, December 2003
WorldRadioHistory
modes, but it might well be the first to enable the changeover to be made (at least theoretically) remotely or automatically — and it's definitely the first British firm to do so.

Some surround processors can be programmed to supply a 12V "trigger" signal, according to the source being played. The neat thing about the DS7 is that this signal (or a switch on the front baffle) can be used to toggle the speaker's crossover and driver connections between monopole and dipole operation. It remains to be seen how easy this arrangement is to implement, but it might be a clever way to get around one of the difficulties of conveniently integrating multichannel movie and music replay.

John Atkinson is working on a review of the new 705, scheduled to appear in a Spring 2004 issue of Stereophile.

**US: YOUR LOCAL MALL**
**Barry Willis**

Is retailing headed up or down? North America's two largest electronics retailers have reported vastly different results for the second quarter of 2003.

Best Buy, the region's largest electronics retailer, is riding an updraft. The electronics giant doubled its net earnings in the second fiscal quarter, reaching a total of $139 million — a huge leap from the $62 million reported for the same period in 2002. Earnings from continuing operations grew more than 75%, to $140 million, up from $79 million in the second quarter last year.

The Eden Prairie, Minnesota–based retail chain enjoyed 17% revenue growth in the second quarter, to $5.4 billion, a nice rise from last year's $4.6 billion, with comparable store sales up 7.5%. US Best Buy stores posted 15% sales growth in the second quarter, for a total of $4.9 billion, up from $4.3 billion in the same period a year ago. Best Buy's international operations (Canadian Future Shop stores) grew 44%, to $486 million, up from $338 million in the same period a year ago, with comparable store sales up 4.1%. Gross profits increased slightly, from 25.3% of revenue last year to 25.4% for the second quarter of 2003, with Best

North America's two largest electronics retailers have reported vastly different results for the second quarter of 2003

Buy–branded stores attaining 25.6% gross profit. Part of the gain in efficiency was attributed to an 8% reduction in the company's workforce.

Best Buy reported operating income of $230 million for the second quarter, compared with $130 million in the same period a year ago, the increase largely attributable to the addition of 13 Best Buy stores and six Future Shop stores in the past year. Revenue for the first half of 2003 was up 14%, reaching $10.1 billion, a jump from last year's $8.8 billion. For the first half, Best Buy reported net earnings of $114 million. During the same period in 2002, the company suffered a net loss of $271 million.

The picture isn't as bright for Richmond, Virginia–based Circuit City. The nation's second largest electronics retailer has been hampered by slow store traffic, declines in margins, and continuing losses from its bankcard operations. For the second quarter of 2003, ended August 31, the company reported a $124.2 million loss from continuing operations — more than 10 times the $11.2 million loss posted in the same period last year. The net loss reflects pretax charges of $148 million, the cost of Circuit City's continuing interest in its bankcard portfolio, store remodeling expenses of $18.2 million, and store relocation costs of $4 million. For the quarter, comparable store sales were down 5%, with sales totals down 3%, to $2.16 billion. In the second quarter of 2002, Circuit City posted total sales of $2.22 billion.

Circuit City chairman and CEO Alan McCollough predicted an upswing in business as the winter holiday season approaches. Typically the best time of year for electronics stores, the winter months should see growth in sales of all home-theater–related products, especially flat-panel televisions, which continue to get better and cheaper as manufacturers ramp up production. Circuit City could end the year on a more positive note, after completing the sale of its bankcard operations. Announced in August, the sale could lift a continuing burden from the company's bottom line.

**UNITED KINGDOM: LONDON**
**Paul Messenger**

Last summer I traveled deep into the East End of London, to the Whitechapel Art Gallery. B&W's Danny Haikin had invited me there because the company was involved in sponsoring one of the exhibitions. Indeed, to enable the largest installation to take place, B&W had supplied 40 small DM303 loudspeakers.

The artists concerned are Canadians Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller. Their work, *Forty Part Motet (2001)*, might be seen as the ultimate in multichannel surround-sound systems. It's based on a performance of 16th-century
The Best Loudspeakers Ever?

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composer Thomas Tallis’ *Spem in Alium*, a choral work for 40 unaccompanied voices. In this installation, the 40 loudspeakers were arranged in a large circle in a much larger room, each voice reproduced through its own channel.

Of course, one could set up a live performance, each speaker replaced by an individual singer. But that would create a very different situation for the listeners, and rather miss the point. The concert situation is a formal one, with the audience seated in specific places. During the 14 minutes of this recorded performance, some people remained seated in the middle, but the majority tended to wander, moving around the ring of speakers and getting up close to individual “voices.”

I enjoyed watching the reactions of those who came into the gallery, often parry through *Spem in Alium*. Their expressions showed a mixture of emotions, mostly delight, but mixed with puzzlement and a good measure of amusement. It was clear that visitors were intrigued and entertained by this unorthodox approach to sound reproduction.

The recording itself was made by the Salisbury Festival and Salisbury Cathedral Choirs, using two Tascam MX2424 hard-disk multitrack recorders. *Forty Part Motet (2001)*—the installation itself—can also be purchased. I understand that three replicas have been bought, for around $30,000 each. I don’t know where the work was scheduled to go after the Whitechapel show closed at the end of August, but B&W’s Danny Haikin hinted at putting it on at Home Entertainment 2004 East, in New York City, if it can be arranged.

**US: AUSTIN**  
**Barry Willis**  
On September 29, Austin, Texas–based D2Audio Corporation announced a new line of compact 1000W digital amplifiers. Measuring only 4" by 6", the self-contained, fully functional amp modules need only power-supply and input/output connections, and are said to be perfectly suited for use in a new generation of compact receivers, powered loudspeakers, flat-panel video monitors, and other consumer gear for which size, heat, and weight are limiting design factors. D2Audio’s modules are said to be 90% efficient, a dramatic improvement over the less-than-50% efficiency of most traditional designs.

D2Audio’s new devices were developed under an umbrella of 18 different patents, and are claimed to be “the world’s only intelligent amplifiers... capable of recognizing complex speaker systems to which they are attached and optimizing the sound accordingly.” D2 states that the devices permit DSP-based adjustments using such parameters as room dimensions, acoustical characteristics, and the location of the audience in the room. The company...

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**WASHINGTON**  
- The *Pacific Northwest Audio Society* meets the second Thursday of each month. Usual start time is 7:30 pm at 4545 Island Crest Way, on Mercer Island. For more information, call Jerry at (253) 939-9678 or Ted at (425) 861-4568.

**WISCONSIN**  
- If you’re interested in joining an audiophile club in the Wisconsin area, please e-mail Robert Hughes, thughes @appletonaudio.com.

**CANADA**  
- Thursday, November 20, 5-8pm: *Audienville* (972 Boulevard St.-Laurent, Montreal) will host a music seminar with Jay Reif of *Bluebird Music*. The new Series II range of loudspeakers from *Living Voice*, and *Chord Electronics*’ new Choral range, will be demonstrated. RSVP: Steve Nicola at (514) 861-8050. Visit www.bluebirdmusic.ca for more info.

**GERMANY**  
- Thursday–Sunday, December 4–7: The *Fourth European Triode Festival*, a gathering of tube audio hobbyists and professionals, will take place in Langenargen. Hosting participants from all over the world, ETF03 will feature lectures, workshops, a flea market, live music, and much more. For info, visit www.triodefestival.net. For reservations, e-mail Wolfgang Braun at wb@braunbaustoffe.de.
believe that such digital amplifiers will drive the trends of "compact" and "intelligent audio equipment" in new products, offering more features and higher performance in ever-shrinking packages.

D2Audio is currently shipping modules for consumer applications: the GR120 for audio receivers, the GM100 for multi-room distributed audio. In 2000, the company will begin offering amp modules for the professional and commercial audio markets, and will then tackle the automotive market. The global market for audio amplifiers is approximately $2 billion annually, according to Will Strauss, principal analyst at Forward Concepts Research.

Dell, Inc. has joined Gateway and Hewlett-Packard on the consumer convergence bandwagon. On September 25, the Texas-based computer company, headquartered in Austin suburb Round Rock, announced that it would debut digital entertainment products, including "digital music players, an online music service, and a multifunction LCD television and computer monitor."

The new products are part of a growing trend to integrate computers and home entertainment electronics, and should be available in the US by the winter holiday season. "We are revolutionizing technology...by delivering what is most important to consumers — content and experience — at a better value than they're currently getting," said chairman and CEO Michael Dell. "We want our customers to enjoy music, movies, home films, and personal communications when, where, and how they want."

**THE INTERNET**

**Jon Iverson**

Only a few years ago, Napster quickly took root to show the world how Internet-based audio file-trading was where music distribution's future growth might run wild. But the record labels would have none of it and just as swiftly took a legal chainsaw to Napster's trunk, laying it waste — and leaving plenty of room for Kazaa and other unsanctioned services to spread like kudzu.

Then Apple and the record labels mutated their own variety of downloading seed and, in an otherwise drying musical garden, iTunes sprang to life like the proverbial beanstalk. Overnight, the labels' attitudes about the Internet changed, and the race was on to fine-tune the newly blossoming commercial opportunities.

When iTunes was announced last spring, Apple's Steve Jobs promised that the music service would branch out into the Windows world before the end of the year. Since its launch in April, iTunes has reportedly sold more than 10 million AAC (Advanced Audio Codec) downloads to Apple Mac and iPod owners, and October saw the debut of the long-awaited Windows-compatible version of iTunes.

iTunes' success is remarkable considering that, until now, it was available only to the relatively small and devoted pool of Mac and iPod users. With the Windows world able to tap into the service, many observers predict that the true worth of iTunes and the popularity of the iPod are about to be tested.

Adding to the drama is news that Napster was to be officially relaunched on October 29, having been reconfigured around Microsoft's Windows Media Player 9 Series platform. Microsoft reports that 100 million copies of Windows Media Player 9 have been downloaded since its launch in January, "helping ensure broad reach for the Napster 20.0 service."

It's worth noting that the WM9-based Napster is not currently compatible with Apple's computers and the millions of iPods in use, thus setting the stage for what may be audio's most significant format war in years. According to Napster, the new service will initially offer PC users a library of 500,000 songs at 99¢ each, or $9.95 per album. The company says that users also have the option — for $9.95/month — to upgrade to Napster's premium service, which offers "unlimited listening and downloading, 40 commercial-free interactive radio stations, and a collection of community features, including the ability to email tracks to friends and share play lists with other Napster users."

Napster says it has also forged a series of partnerships with consumer-electronics and computer manufacturers to bundle the service with new products. The first such product, from a partnership with Samsung Electronics intended to develop a family of portable audio devices preloaded with Napster 2.0, was revealed in October. In addition to traditional portability, Samsung says, the new devices include an FM transmitter to wirelessly play music through car and home stereos.

Napster has also partnered with Microsoft and computer manufacturer Gateway to "allow music fans to experience Napster from the comfort of their couch using a TV and a remote control." Napster will be the featured music service on Microsoft's Windows XP Media Center Edition 2004, and Gateway promises to emulate Apple's approach with iTunes and Mac computers, shipping Napster pre-installed on every consumer desktop PC it sells, with 150 songs pre-loaded on the hard drives of the new systems.

The battle lines are thus drawn: between Apple's iTunes, and Napster and its WM9-encoded files. Each format offers a variety of audio compression options, along with comprehensive Digital Rights Management (DRM) tools to keep the record labels happy. But while Napster is not currently compatible with the widely used iPod, Apple will quickly invade Windows territory with its AAC-based iTunes service. The next few years should be interesting, and may set the course for the future delivery of music to consumers everywhere.

**US: YOUR LOCAL FLEA MARKET**

**David Lander**

Collecting vintage audio gear doesn't necessarily mean paying four-figure prices for early Marantz or McIntosh components. You could, instead, scour tag sales and thrift shops for items badged with names as commanding as Air Chief, Captain, and Commodore, as aristocratic as Viscount, Windsor, and York. These brands, along with many others, appeared on transistor radios.

The transistor radio turns 50 in 2004. Like the revolutionary device it was named for, it's as American as Bell Labs, where the transistor itself was developed. The first sets were more expensive than you might imagine. Most cost between $50 and $90 at a time when the AR-2, the second speaker from Acoustic Research, sold for $86.

No matter. These little sets offered true portability, even if they weren't always quite so small as some marketing executives wanted people to think. When Sony's TR-63 arrived in the US in 1957, it was billed as a "shirt-pocket"
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The introduction of the N°433, triple-mono amplifier later this year adds multi-channel system capability to this impressive series. All three models carry the refined, sculptural look that sets Mark Levinson apart from all others.

Visit your Mark Levinson dealer soon to experience the difference a balanced approach to design can make.
radio, but because it was actually a tad bigger than that, Sony had shirts with oversized pockets tailored for salesmen.

The transistor radios that collectors most covet were manufactured in the decade immediately following the gadget's introduction, and many are identifiable by two tiny triangles on their dials, at 640kHz and 1240kHz. These were based on the Civil Defense logo and marked the two CONELRAD stations. (That awkward acronym stood for Control of Electromagnetic Radiation.)

As part of a scenario scheduled to unfold in the event of nuclear attack by the Soviet Union, television would go dark and radio would be virtually silent. Only the CONELRAD stations would operate, and they would transmit emergency instructions at low power, a tactic meant to keep enemy aircraft crews from homing in on the signals of known, higher-powered stations and using them to navigate. CONELRAD lasted from 1951 to 1963, when the Emergency Broadcast System replaced it.

Transistor radio enclosures often sported winglike V shapes or atoms. These motifs, common in mid-20th-century design, celebrated the very innovations that the CONELRAD symbols implicitly warned were double-edged swords.

These days, you can get a terrific vintage transistor radio for $100 or less. Bear in mind that collectors tend to look for enclosures with interesting shapes, appealing colors, and little or no damage. Whether or not a set is in working order is likely to be less important, especially to audiophile collectors, who are uniquely equipped to hear the irony echoing from such brand names as Amisonic and Dynamic, Fidelity-Tone and Ful-Tone, Realtone and Truetone — and from the "Hi-Fi" designation manufacturers sometimes added for good measure.

To learn more about transistor radios, visit www.etedeschi.ndirect.co.uk/how to2.htm, a website created by an enthusiast named Enrico Tedeschi. He offers essential collector information there, as well as top-10 lists of the most collectible models, organized by country of origin. Collector Sarah Lowrey showcases her extensive assortment of sets at www.transistor.org/collection/collection.html, and illustrated books by experts such as Marty and Sue Bunis are available through the usual sources.

UNITED KINGDOM
Paul Messenger

To state that the hi-fi industry has become obsessed with the cleanliness of the electrical power supply coming from wall sockets is perhaps an overstatement. But this apparently peripheral part of the hi-fi chain is currently receiving considerable attention from a number of players.

Different approaches have been tried, from anti-RF AC leads via simple filtering and hefty isolation transformers, to elaborate mains regeneration. A number of these have enjoyed significant commercial success, though it's also probably true to say that their effectiveness seems to vary from system to system and location to location, and none has received universal approval.

There are probably two reasons for the increased interest in wall AC supply purity. One is that, as our systems become more refined, they steadily become more sensitive to AC-borne noise. More significant, the proliferation of all manner of new electronic devices in home and neighborhood has gradually turned what, 20 years ago, was a relatively clean 50/60Hz sine wave into a much dirtier, more polluted waveform, with many nasty, spiky, higher-frequency components.

This is important — the mains electricity supply is the sole and absolute source of power for every element in the hi-fi system (including, ultimately, the loudspeakers). Turning a nice, clean sine wave into a complex, subtle music signal of wide bandwidth and dynamic range is one thing; creating the same from an unpredictably dirty power supply poses many more problems.

A power amplifier, located between its power supply and the speakers, behaves a little like a faucet, rapidly adjusting the voltage to mimic the audio signal. (The corresponding current is entirely determined by the demand created by the speakers' impedance.) To do this effectively, the power supply must have bandwidth at least as wide as the amplification circuitry. Keeping the amp's supply free from spiky mains pollution without hampering its performance is therefore a far from trivial task.

To my knowledge, all the solutions so far proposed and available are inserted between the AC outlet and the equipment. This is commercially very convenient, as it means they remain independent of the equipment with which they are used and can be sold as accessories. However, British inventor Richard George has come up with a very different way to combat power-supply pollution — one that operates on the rectified DC side of the supply to completely isolate a piece of equipment from the wall supply while still maintaining its electrical supply.

This is known as the Never-Connected technique (www.never-connected.com), and its basic principle is very clever indeed — rumors suggest that it's unusually effective. However, it has the obvious disadvantage of having to be built into each individual component, preferably during manufacture or through skilled after-sales modification. Consequently, patents are currently being finalized around the world, and parent company Fenson & Co. Ltd. is looking to license the technology.

The Never-Connected approach takes advantage of the sometimes overlooked fact that a power supply actually takes up power from the mains over only a few degrees of the complete sine wave — the brief period in the cycle when the voltage on the transformer secondary is higher than that on the supply rail, which is a necessary precondition for current to flow. NC's innovation is to isolate the equipment itself entirely from the wall during this part of the cycle by diverting the incoming current into a storage capacitor, then releasing it to the supply side once the AC current stops flowing.

The first Never-Connected licensee to sign up is UK electronics specialist Trichord Research. Besides making its own amplifiers and the electronics for Michell turntables, Trichord has been supplying and fitting precision "re-clocking" kits for all brands of CD players for a decade; offering mods for power-supply conversion is a natural progression.

I've had no personal experience of the new supplies, but Martin Collloms, who originally drew my attention to Never-Connected, has tried a Marantz CD player, and Trichord had modified as a demonstrator equipped for switched comparison between the NC and standard versions of both analog and digital power supplies. Martin reported substantial improvement for analog, rather more equivocal results for digital. Another UK reviewer, Dave Davis, has compared original and NC-modified versions of Trichord's Delphini phono stage, also with positive results.

I understand that the NC technique can be used with switch-mode supplies, but don't yet know whether it can be applied to power amplifiers. It's too early to say just how significant Never-Connected will become, but it looks likely to become an important new weapon in the battle against power-supply pollution.
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SLP-98 as shown includes the phono section along with chassis in Jaguar® Anthracite black clear coat and silver anodized front and knobs.
The Harbeth Audio Compact 7ES-2 is one of the best-sounding speakers I have had the pleasure of reviewing over the past 20 years. It is also a speaker with a past. No, not a dark past. I mean a history that goes back half a century and more.

Originally introduced in 1988, the 7ES-2 is something of a classic. Unfortunately, for most of the time since, Harbeth has been unavailable in the US. That's now changed, and I can finally review the product.

The re-appearance of Harbeth in the US—and of the Compact 7ES-2 in particular—is very good news, especially to those who like classical music and jazz, and who are keen on what came to be known as "the BBC sound." When you buy a Harbeth, you buy a piece of history.

But before we go back 50 years, I should take you back a mere 26, to 1977, when Harbeth was founded. The name stands for Dudley Harwood and his wife, Elizabeth: Har+Beth. Undoubtedly, Mr. and Mrs. Harwood were inspired by Spent+Dor, aka Spencer and Dorothy Hughes, who established Spendor in 1969.

The 1970s were good times for British hi-fi. Loudspeakers, anyway. The Spendor BC1 epitomized the BBC sound—accurate, pure, clear, and free of colorations. Few other speakers could touch the BC1, except, perhaps, the original Quad ESL electrostatic and the BBC-designed LS3/5A minimonitor. In the late 70s, Bowers & Wilkins (B&W), not directly connected with the BBC, introduced their famous DM7 loudspeaker, which has a similar civilized sound. British loudspeakers ruled.

There was a reason for this.

Beginning in the late 1940s, the BBC's Loudspeaker Research Department conducted serious studies of what was wrong with most commercial loudspeakers. As it turned out, there was plenty. "Hi-fi" did not yet exist as a concept. Speakers were not "high-fidelity"—many people played records through their radios. Those few who had more serious sound systems typically made their own—good sound was a do-it-yourself affair. Loudspeaker drivers were drilled into baffles larger than the drive-units themselves, and mounted in open cabinets. Some sound enthusiasts built drive-units into their walls.

I remember a family friend—Mr. Dutton of Seekonk, Massachusetts (you can't make this up)—who, in the early 1950s, had a home theater. Mr. Dutton acquired an Army-surplus 16mm movie projector, and not the silent sort. (Most home-movie enthusiasts owned silent 8mm projectors.) He owned an assortment of discarded newsreels, Three Stooges shorts, and a few Woody Woodpecker cartoons from Castle Films. Unfortunately, Mr. Dutton was starved for software, and 16mm feature films were expensive to rent. His speakers—horns, I believe—were built into the walls.

In a way, I'm surprised there wasn't home theater in the 1950s. This was, perhaps, a failure of imagination among those in the entertainment industry. If 16mm feature films had rented for $10-$20 instead of $50-$100, more people might have bought projectors. Yes, it would have been pricey—but still possible to sell. The economy and home construction were booming, after all.

Sorry for the digression.

High Fidelity—the concept more than the products—came along at about the same time Elvis did, in the early to mid-1950s, spurred in part by the popularity of the long-playing record, introduced in 1948. And so did the idea of putting speaker drivers in enclosed cabinets.

The BBC was interested in loudspeaker sound quality for a simple reason: quality control. How do you know your broadcasts—especially your live concert broadcasts—sound good if you don't have proper loudspeakers? And maybe minimonitors at that—something you can actually take on location.

Under D.E.L. Shorter (the British did love initials back then), the Beeb's Loudspeaker Research Department identified what was right and what was wrong with loudspeakers. Quite unintentionally, perhaps, Shorter and his colleagues helped create the British loudspeaker industry. Shorter was head of the Beeb's LRD from the late 40s until 1971. His successor was Dudley Harwood, who ran the department from 1971 until he co-founded Harbeth, in 1977. Harwood is one of three people given credit for the final design of the LS3/5A minimonitor. (The other two are M.A. Whaton and R.W. Mills.)

About 20 years ago, the Harwoods sold Harbeth to Alan Shaw, who has kept the firm small, British, and very much in the BBC loudspeaker tradition. If you really want the BBC sound, your choices are two: Spendor and Harbeth. Recently, Derek Hughes, son of Spencer and Dorothy and designer of many superb speakers in his own right, joined Harbeth. He is said not to be twiddling his thumbs.

When Dudley Harwood left the Beeb in 1977, he carried with him a patent for the use of polypropylene in loudspeaker cones. This led to what Harbeth says was the world's first polypropylene-cone loudspeaker, the original Harbeth HL monitor. To this day, "polyprop" cones are a defining characteristic of Harbeth speakers. (It's fair to note that Spendor was using plastic-cone drivers, featuring
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the proprietary Bextrene material, before Harbeth was founded.)

Not everyone sings the praises of polypropylene cones. It’s not accidental, perhaps, that polyprop cones came into being at about the time the hi-fi industry was switching from tubes to transistors. (Well, most of the industry, anyway.) There was a loss of sensitivity compared to doped paper cones. The Harbeth Compact 7ES-2 is rated at 87dB/W/m. Its nominal impedance is given as 8 ohms.

But, according to proponents of polyprop—none more passionate than the red-headed Alan Shaw—there is nothing quite like this material for bass/midrange cones. (Apparently, polyprop is not suitable for tweeters.)

There are other materials. Feverish minds, in France and elsewhere, keep coming up with this or that, always with the aim of making a cone lighter and stiffer. Popular in some quarters is Kevlar, the material used in bulletproof vests and biarproof outdoor trousers from Eddi Bauer and L.L. Bean. Kevlar pants. Haven't tried them.

As for Kevlar speakers, listen to Mr. Shaw. You can hear different cone materials, he wrote for his website: “I can't stress this point enough: Kevlar sounds like Kevlar; polypropylene sounds like polyprop; aluminium/magnesium sounds like ringy metal, which it is.

“You have a guide to how a competitor’s speaker will sound just by consideration of the cone material from which the bass/mid driver is formed,” said Shaw. “You really don’t need to hear the speaker once your ears have developed a ‘taste’ for the different cone materials.

“We are about engineering, not marketing,” sniffs Alan Shaw on the Harbeth website. Well, that’s for sure.

Enter the original Harbeth Compact 7, in 1988. (The Compact 7ES-2 was not born yesterday.) The Compact 7 was the first model to use Harbeth’s proprietary Radial cone driver. The cone consists of an injection-molded polymer with a glass microspher fill, terminated by a nitrile rubber surround. The entire 8” driver is built on a reinforced injection-molded chassis and produced in-house by Harbeth.

“Two-way speakers are a good way to stay out of trouble.”

—Henry Kloss

The Compact 7ES-2 also uses a 1” ferrofluid-cooled, magnesium-alloy dome tweeter custom-made by SEAS, of Denmark. The tweeter is protected by a wire mesh. Just two drivers, crossed over at 3.3kHz.

“Two-way speakers are a good way to stay out of trouble,” the late Henry Kloss once told me. Most of his designs for Acoustic Research, KLH, and Advent used just two drivers and a single crossover. “You can get better integration, dealing with just two drivers,” said Henry.

Another word is “coherence.” Many of my favorite speakers have been two-ways. The Spendor BC1 (though it did use a supertweeter). The Sonus Faber Minima FM2. The B&W DM7 (passive radiator instead of a port.) Having the Compact 7ES-2 in my listening room reminded me, once again, that a lot of “progress” probably isn’t. I am especially skeptical of moving-coil speakers with lots of drivers. What could their designers possibly have been thinking? And who are those designers, anyway? Sorry to be a snob, but I like loudspeakers with a pedigree. With a past, if you will.

The “Compact” part of the 7ES-2’s name is a misnomer. “Compact” compared to what? Not to the standard mounted minimonitor, that’s for sure. The 7ES-2 is 203” high by 10.6” wide by 12.3” deep and weighs 30 lbs, but it is small in comparison to larger Harbeth monitors and to the classic Spendor BC1 and SP1. It goes on stands from 16” to 20” high, which add about another $200 to the cost per pair. Lightweight, open-frame stands are fine, and possibly preferable to heavy, lead-filled stands.

And it’s biwirable, if spending more money on wire is your thing.

Why not build a floorstander?

Why, reflections from the floor—a muddying or muffling of the sound. Fashion be hanged! Get those speakers up on proper stands. Floorstanders might look nicer and be easier to sell, but do they sound nicer?

The Compact 7ES-2 is unfashionable in another way. Harbeth hasn’t gone in for a thin cabinet, where the driver baskets are sliced off to achieve a narrow profile and, supposedly, superior imaging. I laugh my head off about this. Few speakers can touch the Compact 7ES-2 when it comes to creating and maintaining a believable soundstage.

Be unfashionable yourself and leave the 7ES-2’s “edgeless” grilles in place. These slide into a groove that goes all along the edges of the front of the cabinet. The speakers look better with the grilles, in my opinion, and sound a little better too. Especially with the grilles in place, I did not suffer from metal-dome tweeteritis.

For that matter, be unfashionable in paying only $2200 for a pair of loudspeakers (plus $200 for stands, of course). But you might already own suitable stands. Hell, you could be really unfashionable, in audiophile terms, and put these up on some kind of architectural pedestal. Just spike the bottom of the pedestals.

“You paid only $2200 for your loudspeakers? You can’t be a serious audiophile.”

But who wants to be? Being a serious audiophile creates angst. The life of my late friend Lars might have been shortened, in part, because he took hi-fi so seriously and never lightened up.

Rock fans and others looking for excitement can go elsewhere, and no doubt will. Those looking for musical involvement with more serious—or, let us say, traditional—musical genres might be thoroughly enchanted by the Compact 7ES-2. I was. This was one of the few speakers with which I did not get the constant itch to substitute my reference Quad ESL-988 electrostats.

No, I'm not going to make the mistake of giving up Quads again. I still love electrostats' speed, their stunning clarity, the total absence of cabinet colorations, having no crossover, etc. But a pair of basic Quad ESL-988s now costs $6500—a very good value, to be sure, at a time when many speakers sell for wacko prices. Those who love Quads but who have less money to spend, or for whom electrostats might pose place-

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ment problems...well, those folks can look to the Harbeth Compact 7ES-2.

In fact, even if you have only $1000 or so to spend, give the Harbeths a listen. They're that good. And this is not the UK or Europe, but America—if you don't have the money, borrow it. Some things are worth going in hock for.

The 7ES-2's standard finishes are eucalyptus and cherry; both are fashionably light. Other finishes are available for extra money and a longer wait. And speaking of cabinets, that's another defining characteristic of Harbeth speakers. Sorry to turn historical again, but...

Part of the joint tradition of D.E.L. Shorter, Dudley Harwood, and the BBC was some hard thinking about the role of speaker cabinets. Remember, in the late 1940s and early '50s, most drivers were mounted on baffles fronting open cabinets. The idea of trapping air to enhance bass was a new one.

The cabinet works for you or it works against you.

D.E.L. Shorter and Dudley Harwood didn't say that, so far as I know, but Franco Serblin, of Sonus Faber, told me something like it. You tune the speaker cabinet like a musical instrument. Speaker designer Renaud de Vergnette, of Triangle, believes much the same thing, although he's a little less in love with cabinets as furniture. His aim is to let the energy escape.

As it turns out, this is the classic BBC approach. No so-called "acoustical suspension" speakers here, where the entire speaker is sealed—sometimes with something like Mortite—and bass response is constipated inside. The problems with acoustical-suspension speakers, to my ears, are not only less sensitivity but also a muffling, muddying, and slowing of the sound. When did you ever hear an acoustical-suspension speaker described as "electrostatic-like"?

Good sound has to do with the way you release sound from the cabinet. Quickly is good. But the cabinet should live and breathe, according to the BBC tradition. To that end, it should flex. And be ported.

In the mid-1960s, BBC engineers developed a technique for a model called the LS3/4. The idea was to screw the front baffle and rear panel into a wooden sub-frame by means of "loppy joints." This created the least resonant cabinet. The speaker could "breathe"—sound could escape. This is why the walls of the Harbeth Compact 7ES-2 are so thin.

The lossy cabinet became a feature of many British loudspeakers, including the LS3/5A and various models from Spendor, Harbeth, Epos, and others. Undoubtedly, the cabinet design is part of why the Compact 7ES-2 sounds as it does.

And the sound?

As I've hinted, glorious. If I were a music reviewer instead of an audio reviewer, and if I could neither afford nor accommodate a pair of Quad ESL-988 electrostatics, the Compact 7ES-2 is a speaker I might choose. It's for sure a speaker I shall recommend. And who knows? This pair might go in my living room. The problem is, I don't exactly need another pair of speakers. But you might.

If I were a music reviewer
Harbeth's Compact 7ES-2
is a speaker
I might choose.

Granted, the frequency response is given as 48Hz-20kHz, ±3dB in free space, with the grille on and listening off-axis. (By the way, I found the speakers sounded best when toed-in ever so slightly, maybe 5°.) Bass freaks can go elsewhere and get the sound they deserve, perhaps. Or they can add a subwoofer with all the attendant matching problems.

"They need a subwoofer," opined my friend Marc, who is very much the subwoofering sort.

"The hell they do," I exclaimed.

Deep bass is almost always more trouble than it's worth. You shake the floor. You excite room resonances. You muddy the sound. You slow the presentation. I won't put a subwoofer under my Quads, either.

Not that you'll get much approval from any audiophile-nerd friends for having a pair of Compact 7ES-2s. So (relatively) inexpensive. So old-fashioned. So déjà vu.

I laugh my evil laugh.

If you like classical music and jazz—or any music that isn't electronic—you really should audition the Harbeth Compact 7ES-2, even if $2200 is a stretch. This is one of the finest-sounding loudspeakers I have encountered in 20 years of scribbling.

For most of my listening, I used my full Mac system. Well, almost full: the McIntosh MCD 205 CD changer, C2200 tube preamp, and MC 2102 power amp. Even though McIntosh has recently changed hands—they're now owned by the Denon and Marantz group—you don't see them closing the factory in Binghamton, New York, and shifting production to who knows where. Mac should be around for at least as long as I am, and for very good reasons: Engineering. Good sound. Value. Service. Actually, the new ownership bodes very well for McIntosh, which is a national treasure...like Harley-Davidson. (Sorry, I had to get in the plug. And the dig.)

Have I told you how good the full Mac system sounds? It sounds sensationally great with great loudspeakers, and the Harbeth Compact 7ES-2s qualify.

What did I hear? Well, in the traditional BBC sense, nothing. Nothing irritating or off-putting, that is. There is that relatively low sensitivity—perhaps unavoidable. There is that missing deep bass—again, unavoidable. Otherwise, the 7ES-2s sang and imaged like crazy.

What I noticed most of all was a total freedom from listening fatigue—even on my beloved 1920s and '30s popular music recordings and historic classical CDs. (Now more than ever, I listen for content, not for sound. But good sound is nice.) This is not to say the treble was rolled-off or closed-in. It wasn't, especially not after the speakers had run in—a process that took about 200 hours, give or take.

I was enchanted. Instruments were so full, so ripe, so lush I could almost pinch each musician's ass. I'm thinking female musicians. (My wife, Marina, tells me to behave myself and be politically correct.) When the recording was good, there was a voluptuous quality to the sound. Yet I detected no artificial sweetening. There was no cloaking quality.

Quite the contrary. Where Bruchner's brass blared—as in the late Georg Tintner's cycle of the 11 symphonies, in a Naxos "The White Box" 11-CD set (Naxos 8.50110)—the horns positively brayed. As they should.

The Harbeth Compact 7ES-2 is one of the 10 or so finest speakers I have encountered in more than two decades of reviewing—put there with such classics as the original Quad and the ESL-63, the Spendor BC1, and the LS3/5A. The fact that the speaker is relatively affordable is a bonus. The only downside, outside of bass extension, is that sensitivity rating. Harbeth recommends 25-150W of power. I don't know about 25W in most North American listening rooms, but 80-100W should serve you just fine.

I did he the speakers into our living room, where I drove them with the
They say that knowledge is power. So when it comes to reacting to the constantly fluctuating power needs of today's loudspeakers, an A/V receiver has to be very smart indeed. Big dynamic swings from exploding planets and earthquaking bass drums give your system a lot to think about.

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Heh-heh-heh. That’ll teach them polypropylene cones!

While not taking back what I said above about my (mainly) tube Mac system, the Parasound amplifiers were superb—grabbing the bottom-end ass (oops! ‘scuse me) while retaining a level of sweetness and delicacy I can only dream of achieving in real life.

All kidding aside, these are wonderful speakers. And now Harbeth Audio has a dedicated, determined US importer. Hats off to Walter Swanbon, proprietor of Fidelis Audio/Video, in Salem, New Hampshire. Walter wanted to sell Harbeth in his shop, so he became the importer himself.

Sam’s Product of the Year
Actually, it might have been the Harbeth Audio Compact 7ES-2. Not eligible this year, alas, having been reviewed later than October. So my pick for 2003 is the Parasound Halo JC 1 amplifier, a pair of which I own.

I know— the magic of tubes. But for a reviewer, especially, it’s nice to have a pair of unimpeachably powerful (I’ve been reading too many music reviews) solid-state amps. These are rated at 400W into 8 ohms, twice that into 4 ohms. Apparently, according to John Atkinson’s measurements in the February 2003 issue, the Halos are capable of more than 1000W into 4 ohms. Amps of this power do suggest the need for a dedicated line, which I now have.

“These amps take a long time to break in,” Richard Schram, president of Parasound, warned me.

Boy, was he ever right.

It wasn’t that the Halos failed to please after 100 or so hours of use. They did, with a surprisingly sweet, seductive sound that I don’t usually associate with solid-state. But it took many more weeks—months, even—and hundreds more hours before the JC 1s came into their full glory, which is...glorious. Until the amps were broken in, they lacked some immediacy and transparency. They needed to develop.

For a brief time, I had a very expensive pair of amplifiers in house. Even though the Parasound JC 1s were not yet fully broken in, I preferred their sound, in some respects—for about a fifth the price. There was, right from the start, a certain ingratiating quality. Truth of timbre. Smoothness. You get the picture.

The remarkable things are the build quality, the looks, the price. Before you blow $10-$20k or more on some amps that were recommended by a reviewer who didn’t buy them, give a listen to the Parasounds, which this reviewer did purchase. I am not saying they’re the best amps ever. I don’t know. But I’m floored by what’s on offer for $6k. Kudos to John Curl (the “JC” does not stand for “Jesus Christ”), Bob Crump, and Carl Thompson, who collaborated on the design; and to Richard Schram for bringing it to market. Don’t buy an amp without hearing these, even if you can’t afford them.

Several things:
For all the power, the Halo JC 1 sounded delicate. Perhaps it’s better to think of it as a 25W class-A amplifier (which it is) than as a class-A/B powerhouse (which it also is).

It does run hot. But you can turn down the bias, via a switch on the back, to the point where it runs about 10W in class-A, though it still runs warm. Interestingly, the sound changed very little. Yes, it was perceptibly better, especially over time, with the juice goosed. But not dramatically so. Lower bias is useful for casual listening, or on hot nights in summer. In fall and winter, I like the extra heat.

Another thing: The Halo JC 1s were fine with solid-state preamps or with my passive Purest Sound Systems P500, but the Parasounds’ protection circuits did not take well to two tube line-stage preamps I used. I don’t want to get into naming names or trouble-shooting—tube preamps do sometimes lead to problems with solid-state amps. If there’s any vestige of DC at its inputs, the Halo JC I will, apparently, protect and protest, clicking and eventually shutting down. You may want to go passive yourself, or use a solid-state preamp.

Rethink my devotion to tubes? Well, once again—as with the Pathos Classic One last month—yes.

By the way, Parasound’s Halo T3 tuner is a winner, too. But I’ve run out of space.
They're nothing more than air molecules moving backwards and forwards. They can't be seen. They can't be touched. But they succeed in creating music, moods and feelings in you.

A tango in Buenos Aires, a brass band in Manchester, drums from Osaka. The journey's just beginning.
In 1982, while a graduate student in electrical engineering at Stanford University, Robert E. Stoddard proved the feasibility of using laser optics and high-speed servos to retrieve analog information scribed into the grooves of a phonograph record. Though once the stuff of science fiction, lasers had by then long been a reality—as had the other technologies needed to implement Stoddard’s idea. Still, none of his professors or colleagues thought the theoretical possibility could be turned into a reality, let alone a commercially viable one.

Stubborn Stoddard set out to prove them wrong, and founded Final Technology in 1983 to research, design, and build a laser turntable. In 1984 he was joined by Robert N. Stark, an expert in servo and analog circuit design. Stark designed the turntable’s high-speed servo and analog signal-processing circuits. The system’s high-performance scanner alone took 18 months to design. Seven years and $20 million later, Stoddard and his talented team of engineers had proven their point.1

But a funny thing happened on the way to designing the Final Technology laser turntable: at the same time that Final was founded, Sony and Philips had already applied similar technology to scanning pits and land surfaces on 5″ discs of aluminum-sputtered polycarbonate. By the time Stoddard’s product was ready for production in 1990, the compact disc had all but consigned the vinyl LP to the trash heap of technological history.

Or so everyone thought. Like the LP itself, the dream of a turntable that could read grooves with a laser beam would not die. The Final Technology laser turntable has been resurrected as the ELP Laser Turntable by the ELP Corporation of Japan. ELP is headed by Sanju Chiba, an analog true believer; he and Stoddard spent another seven years to improve the quality and reliability of the invention, and to establish a manufacturing facility and the processes necessary to hand-build each ‘table. Attempts at lower-cost, mass-produced models proved unfeasible.

ELP, which has been building and selling the Laser Turntable since 1997, recently announced three LT models with improved sonic performance and user interfaces, including CD-like programmability and remote control. More than 1000 turntables have been sold so far, and recently, Smart Devices began handling American distribution. Because the ‘tables are assembled by hand, and because demand exceeds supply, you’ll need to plunk down a $400 deposit and wait eight to ten weeks before a unit arrives at your door, shipped directly from Japan. The three new models are the LT-ILRC ($10,500, 33 1/3 and 45rpm), the LT-1XRC ($13,300, 33 1/3, 45, and 78rpm), and the LT-2XRC ($14,300, plays 7″, 8″, 9″, 10″, 11″, and 12″ records at all three speeds). Shipping to anywhere in the US costs approximately $400; the buyer pays any additional import duties.

I was invited to a preview demonstration of one of the new ELP turntables, given by Chiba in June 2001 in a hotel adjacent to the World Trade Center in New York. While aspects of the presentation were impressive, it was impossible to form any kind of opinion about the ‘table’s sound because of the unfamiliar associated equipment and the usual problems of show-demo conditions. In any case, memories of the demo itself were soon to be overshadowed by my decision to spend the rest of that spectacular sunny afternoon in the WTC’s crowded, noisy central plaza, soaking up the sights and sounds. Images of families at play, and of young couples walking arm in arm amid the clowns, storytellers, clusters of high-flying balloons, and food vendors, linger almost cruelly, but I’m grateful to have had that one last visit.

**ELP LT-2XRC Laser Turntable**

Judging by the many e-mails I’ve gotten asking for information about ELP’s Laser Turntables, most audiophiles automatically associate lasers with digital sound. While the ELP’s information-retrieval system of servo and scanning laser is digital, the information itself remains in the analog domain throughout. There is no digitization of the audio signal. Whew! Bet you feel better now.

A five-laser pickup retrieves and transmits the groove information via a series of mirrors and lenses. Two lasers read the grooves, two locate the groove “shoulder,” and the fifth laser focuses on the record surface to allow the pickup to retrieve data from a wide range of disc thicknesses—and to properly track most warped records. The two groove-reading lasers are constant-output. Each channel, or side of the groove, is read separately. The modulated light’s reflection travels through a series of mirrors and lenses until it reaches a photo-sensitive device (PSD) analogous to the optical pickups used for film soundtracks. The five PSDs—one for each laser—generate voltages similar to those produced by moving-magnet cartridges (12mV peak-to-peak at 1kHz, 5cm/s). Unless you request the equalized version of the ‘table, which can be run into a pre-amp’s regular line-level input, the signal

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1 The development of and technology behind the Final turntable was covered in depth in Stereophile. See the August 1986, October 1988, January, February, and November 1989, July 1990, and June 1991 issues.  —Ed.
Analog Corner

requires RIAA equalization. My review sample was the standard version of the top-of-the-line, $14,300 LT-2XRC.

The platter is belt-driven via a microprocessor-controlled industrial stepper motor that’s user-adjustable from 30 to 90rpm: in increments of 0.1rpm below 50rpm, and of 0.2rpm above. There’s no such thing as rumble or noise in such a design, and the system is claimed to be immune from any kind of external vibration, as well as from loudspeaker-induced acoustical feedback. (If you want more detail about how the optical pickup system works, along with informative diagrams, visit www.smartdev.com/LT/How_works.htm.)

Setup consisted of unscrewing two transit screws, placing the heavy unit on a suitable platform, then popping in the supplied laser pickup-alignment record, which does its thing after you follow a series of specific button commands. This is completed in less than a minute, and you’re ready to play LPs. Believe me, it sure beats setting up a phono cartridge—not that there’s anything wrong with that!

In Heavy Rotation

1) Peggy Lee, Bewitching-Lee: Her Greatest Hits, S&P 180gm LP
2) Otis Redding, The Dock of the Bay, Sundazed 180gm LP
3) Steely Dan, Everything Must Go, Reprise 180gm import LP
4) Frank Black and the Catholics, Show Me Your Tears, Diiverse 180gm import LP (test pressing)
5) Masked and Anonymous, various artists, original soundtrack, Classic 200gm Quiet SV-P LPs (2)
6) The Jimmy Giuffre 3, The Easy Way, Speakers Corner 180gm import LP
7) Nina Simone, Sings the Blues, Speakers Corner 180gm import LP
8) James White and the Blacks, "off-white", 4 Men With Beards 180gm LP
9) Peter Gabriel, So, Classic 200gm Quiet SV-P LP
10) Albert King with Stevie Ray Vaughan, In Session, Analogue Productions 180gm 45rpm 12" EP

Visit www.musicangle.com for full reviews.

If you know how to use a CD player, you know how to use the ELP. Push a button to open the drawer, and slip a record onto the felt platter. This requires a bit of dexterity — part of the disc must be fitted into the narrow drawer opening. After selecting speed and record diameter — the default settings are 33 1/3rpm and 12" — push Play. The drawer closes, the laser pickup scans the disc, marks the number of bands on the LCD screen, then scans back to the beginning of the disc and begins to play track 1. From the drawer closing to hearing the first notes took about 10 seconds.

During the month-plus I had the LT-2XRC, it never malfunctioned or gave me trouble of any kind. Which is not to say it was able to play every disc I threw at it. It wouldn’t play transparent or translucent discs, or picture discs, or sparkly or colored discs. The White Stripes’ Elephant consists of two LPs, one white, one red — both “no-plays” with the ELP. But original Mobile Fidelity Sound Lab JVC “supervinyl” discs, though somewhat translucent, played fine; so did Quiex LPs (the original, not Classic Records’ new version), which are also somewhat translucent. The LT played moderately warped discs, but not severely wavy ones. None of my records were too warped to play.

Issues of sound quality aside, the ELP LT would seem to be the perfect technical solution for vinyl playback, right? Sorry, but unless you’re an audio reviewer, there’s no free lunch: the LT-2XRC’s laser pickup was unable to distinguish groove modulations from dust. Worse, it gave them almost equal weight, though noise sounded softer, more muted, and less gratifying than via conventional playback. Noise also seemed to have more low-frequency and less high-frequency content; pops and clicks sounded thicker, more like blobs. Records that sound dead quiet on a conventional turntable could sound as if I was munching potato chips while listening to the ELP. Bummer. There’s a solution, of course: a record-cleaning machine. This can’t be considered an “accessory” with the LT: it’s mandatory. Even new records fresh out of the jacket can sound crunchy.

So before you play an LP on the ELP LT-2XRC, you must give the vinyl a wet vacuum cleaning. If you’ve previously cleaned a record and played it on your regular turntable, there’s no guarantee that that cleaning will suffice for ELP LT playback. If any dust accumulated on the record as it spun, or if the lip side picked up dust from the platter, you’ll hear every particle as loudly as the music itself.

But consider again the LT’s many pluses: no rumble or background noise of any kind; no cartridge-induced resonances or frequency-response anomalies; no compromise in channel separation (the ELP guarantees channel separation in excess of what the best cutters offer); zero tracking or tracing error; no inner-groove distortion; no skating; no adjustments of VTA or azimuth to worry about; no tangency error (like the cutter head itself, the laser pickup is a linear tracker); no record wear; a claimed frequency response of 10Hz–40kHz; and, because the laser beam is less than a quarter the contact area of the smallest elliptical stylus, it can negotiate sections of the engraved waveform that even the smallest stylus misses.

Records that are already worn or scratched also benefit from this design. Since the laser reads the groove walls, it often misses or minimizes surface scratches—even random ones that are reproduced as loud pops on conventional turntables. The laser beam normally focuses 10μm below the groove shoulder, but should that area be worn, you can, at the push of a button during playback, move the beam up and down among four settings. When you play mono LPs, you supposedly can select between groove walls, to find the one that’s less worn. (The demo CD supplied by Smart Devices says you can, but I found nothing in the instructions about it.) Speaking of the instructions, they need to be re-written by someone whose native language is English.

Once an LP has been scanned, you can choose to repeat the side from one to four times, or endlessly. You can program track order, pause play, and even “hover” over a single groove. You can audibly scan a track, or skip from track to track in either direction. There are even track time, elapsed time, and all of the other conveniences to which CD users have become accustomed. If the LP side has no bands, you can “insert” them manually and you can even skip tracks like “Mother” and “Miss Gradenko” on The Police’s Synchronicity. That’s worth $13,000 right there? Having a remote control in your hand that can skip tracks, scan them, and pause? Priceless!

How it sounds

David Chesky once remarked that there was something “magical” and inexplicable about the music generated by a stylus coursing through a record groove.
Here was an opportunity to test that theory. Is the magic we love about LPs inherent in the analog nature of record playback, or is it something added by that process that creates the sense of “reality” that draws us to the old technology? Or is it a combination of both?

The first record I played on the LT-2XRC was a UK Island pressing (pink label) of Jethro Tull’s Stand Up. I’ve owned since it was first issued. It was in a rice-paper sleeve, which means that at some point I’d vacuum-cleaned it—but for all I know, that could have been when I lived in Los Angeles, in the late 1970s. I began playing it, but it sounded so crunchy that I immediately cleaned it on the Lorícraft record cleaner.

I’ve had the Lorícraft for some time. It’s a wonderful machine that uses a nylon thread to clean the record instead of felt lips, so that every record surface is cleaned with a new length of thread. I like that. The Lorícraft is quieter than any of the standard cleaners, though it has some idiosyncrasies I’ll discuss in a future record-cleaner shoot-out. Like the ELP LTs, the Lorícraft is distributed by Smart Devices.

After I’d cleaned Stand Up, I heard what the fuss is about. Drop the noise floor and rumble to zero, and remove the inherent scraping sound of needle in groove (which, admittedly, the listener doesn’t hear as such), the inevitable resonances, and tracking error (minimal as it might be), and what’s left is something very different from what we’re used to from vinyl playback. The sound was both softer and sweeter than playback-by-sylus—sort of like when I listen for the first time to a relatively linear, non-peaky, resonance-free loudspeaker, and find it easy to confuse high resolution and detail with dullness. Couple that top-end sweetness with a robust bass response free of resonances and feedback, and it was easy to understand the complaints that have been made about the ELP’s overall softness.

It took time to get used to the LT-2XRC’s linear-response, distortion-free sound, but it didn’t take long to hear the incredibly clean high-frequency transients and effervescent decay of Clive Bunker’s drum kit, or the drive and body of Glen Cornick’s bass, and loom-\-meister Ian Anderson’s voice standing out front, his chest fully attached to his head. When the music got complex, as on the long break in “Back to the Family,” everything held together in an unusually coherent way. Musical complexity, deep bass, and wide dynamic swings did not affect the sound in any way. There was a consistency from first track to last that I noticed even on this, the very first LP I tried on the ELP. I like to think I’m used to the highest level of standard analog playback, but even I was struck by the differences between the optical and mechanical technologies—especially in the improvement in genuine, not “edge-enhanced,” detail and timbral nuance.

Still, there was that noise tradeoff. The LT-2XRC’s optical system definitely skewed the LP noise toward the audible zone. When I then played Stand Up on my Simon Yorke Designs S7 turntable, the results were much quieter, whatever “magic” is in the grooves made itself apparent via mechanical playback as image solidity and a slight bit of pleasant brightness.

New, vacuum-cleaned records sounded incredibly pure; old, worn ones got amazing new leases on life. It was the ones in the middle with which the results were unpredictable. For instance, for some reason my plain-vanilla Geffen pressing of Nirvana’s Unplugged in New York gave the LT-2XRC fits. No matter what adjustments I made, the ELP made a weird noise, as if it couldn’t find the groove. I suspect the LT was looking on to some kind of pressing defect that’s normally inaudible.

I bought what looked like a really clean original British Apple “top loader” pressing of The Beatles (“The White Album”) during a visit to the UK a few years ago for $75, but when I got it home I found a pretty serious scuff on “Back in the U.S.S.R.” Sure enough, there was an annoying ch-ch-ch with each revolution (no play on words intended). Played optically, with the beam focused below the scuff, there was no noise whatsoever. Still, I found the overall sound on side 1 unpleasant and somehow congested compared to mechanical playback, even if the LT revealed far more true detail. For instance, on “The Continuing Story of Bungalow Bill,” Yoko Ono’s background vocals are far clearer. (I used the ASR Basis dual phono preamp, which has two independent preamps on one chassis: comparisons were thus quick, and eliminated a possible variable.)

At a garage sale the other week, I lucked into a couple of Sam Cooke mono originals on Keene Records—I’ve never even seen them in used-record stores. Though not in the best shape, after they’d been cleaned the LT sailed below the surface scratches and the music came through unscathed, sounding far better than via mechanical playback. My copy of a Phil Spector compilation, Today’s Hits (Philles 4004), is a bit chewed-up but still playable—except for three tracks on side 1, which have a big, very audible gouge through them. This disc was resurrected by the LT! The gouge was inaudible, and Spector’s big Gold Star Studios sound came through undistorted, with the vibrancy and transparency of a brand-new record.

It was fun pulling out the most damaged records from my collection to hear what the LT could do. Years ago, although it was riddled with scratches, I picked up an RCA Living Stereo curiosum, The Fabulous Josephine Baker (LSC-2427), recorded in “Freedomland” and issued in 1960. Unlistenable via standard playback, it sounded amazingly vibrant, transparent, and clean through the LT, with just the occasional hint of surface noise. Amazing. Ditto some of my favorite Laurindo Almeida monos, such as Impressions De Brasil (Capitol P 8381), with Ray Turner on piano. The LT sailed through, below the surface noises and pops and clicks, delivering Almeida’s Spanish guitar more believably than I’ve ever heard it—by a wide margin—and placing the piano in an acoustic environment previously obscured, all without a hint of distortion.

The LT-2XRC’s circuits include an easily defeatable analog “noise-blanker,” to rid the signal of the most egregious noise. I tried it turned off, but found this made no audible improvement. Noise impulses became more distinct.

I also played a bunch of 78rpm and 45rpm discs, and found the results to be the same as with LPs: dirty records needed to be scrupulously clean, badly scratched records could be brought back from the dead, and the music extracted from the grooves could sound stunningly transparent, detailed, and timbrally superior to the best mechanical playback—but not every time, and not predictably so. A chewed-up original of Del Shannon’s “Runaway,” on a Big Top 45, was totally resurrected, and unplugged original Otis Redding 45s on Volt were astounding. A cracked mono Beatles EP (UK pressing) played as if it wasn’t cracked at all, and a split-in-two 78 put together on the LT’s platter played with just a slight pop with each half-revolution. Don’t try that at home!

**Verdict**

When using an ELP Laser Turntable, cleanliness is next to godliness. You’ll find out that records you think you’ve cleaned just aren’t—if you’ve cleaned it
and then played it a few times, it's now a dirty record. But even after thorough cleaning, your records will still have more pops, clicks, and problems than you'll ever hear via mechanical playback—especially for the first minute or so of play, for some reason. But other records you long ago gave up on will suddenly sound absolutely wonderful, the music so compellingly real that you'll easily hear "around" the noise. And if you own colored, transparent, or other unusual vinyl, you'll need an auxiliary turntable to play it back on.

As I write this, I'm listening to what I thought was a very clean original pressing of Richard Strauss's Also sprach Zarathustra (RCA LSC-1806). There are noises and tearing sounds I've never heard before. Still, the music itself has never sounded so magnificent: the always-stunning strings have never sounded so transparent and rich, the horns never so realistically brassy, the pipe organ at the beginning never so deeply solid or easy to hear, or with a noise floor of zero (despite the noise suspended in space above the floor!). Spatially, the rendering of this disc has never been so accomplished, and the banishing of inner-groove distortions on classical LPs is a true breakthrough.

I don't mean to overemphasize the noise problems, and I don't mean to say that most of the everyday records I played didn't sound better than I've ever heard them. But you should know that the musical pleasure wrought by the ELP LT-2XRC might be accompanied by the pain of more noise than you'd like.

For archivists, and owners of big collections of 45s and 78s, the ELP LT-2XRC is a godsend, though again, noise will be an issue with many shellac recordings.

Some of you will hear this thing and think I'm crazy: You'll hate what you think is softness, but what I think is actually a lack of peaky resonances. I played plenty of hard rock on the LT-2XRC, and let me tell you, "Rocks Off," from the Rolling Stones' Exile on Main Street, has never sounded better to my ears.

The demo CD only hints at what this system does correctly, timbrally and spatially. Ironically, if you listen to the music itself, you won't know you're listening to an LP. It's almost like a reel-to-reel tape. Unfortunately, when there is noise, it will always make you aware that you're listening to an LP. That's the confounding thing about this fabulous contraption.
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I didn't care how the stuff measured, and I wasn't terribly worried about the sound. When the single-ended triode movement crossed my attention eight or nine years ago, I simply thought: That's for me.

For the first time in a long time, audiophiles were putting together music systems differently, spending money on audio equipment differently, and listening differently. Shopworn watchwords like soundstage and bloom and inner detail were replaced with vibe and drama—words that real people might actually use to describe real music. And, as with the flat-earthers of the 1970s, it was nice to think that a part of the audio community was once again more concerned with notes than with noise.

There was even some potential for camaraderie: The SET movement attracted disparate types in much the way that people who were disillusioned with the pasteurized arena-rock of the 1970s came together around those first albums by the Ramones and Television. I suppose the same mechanism was at work: When things got stale, a bored minority looked for something different and better—and their lives took on new meaning when they realized there were other people out there just like them. (I'm told this was also the motivation, later on, for a significant portion of the Smiths' fan base, but not for respect for my editor, I won't go there.)

One thing was clear: Whatever else was going on, the people who began experimenting with low-power amps and sensitive loudspeakers in the early 1990s were having fun—thus guaranteeing that they'd be misunderstood and, ultimately, loathed by certain others among the industry, press, and fellow enthusiasts.

Iron chefs

To uncover the real roots of the SET movement, you have to look a bit further back, to the mid-70s audio scene in Japan—a place where no technological artifact ever goes entirely out of style, and where the vacuum tubes and horn drivers abandoned by the West found a loving adoptive home.

In the US and elsewhere, single-ended amplification left the stage soon after it bowed in the early 1930s, primarily because the push-pull circuits that arrived shortly thereafter seemed to offer lower measured distortion and higher output power. The single-ended products that remained—mostly table radios and small guitar amps, such as Leo Fender's original Champ—did so for purely economic reasons: Then as now, one 6V6 tube was cheaper than two. In any event, one could say that early SET technology never achieved its

The most advanced Japanese audiophiles view their systems as works of art, and rightly so.

full sonic or musical potential here, arguably because no one was willing or able to manufacture the huge output transformers necessary for wide-bandwidth performance in those types of circuits. But Japanese enthusiasts were uniquely undaunted by this, and Japanese companies such as Hirata, Tamura, Kanno, and the beguilingly named Nature Sound were ready to oblige SET experimenters with whatever high-quality trannies they needed, and then some.

It's more than just having good iron: The Japanese have always been blessed with a healthy disdain for, as Robert Frost put it, "playing tennis without a net." They understand and appreciate the challenge of creating something within a strict set of guidelines—in which case the drive to re-create music with just two or three watts of amplifier power stands alongside bonsai, haiku, and Japanese architecture. And the Japanese have a finely tuned appreciation for beauty and a drive to acquire it—not in a gross or greedy way, but as a means of expressing oneself, however subtly. Thus do the most advanced Japanese audiophiles view their systems as works of art, and rightly so.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch, the modern SET movement didn't go wholly unnoticed. Smart companies such as Cary Audio and Pass Labs began making low-power amps using tubes and transistors, respectively, and Danish-born Englishman Peter Vrortrup, through his Japanese-based Audio Note company, established a SET presence in the US and Europe, the initial success of which seemed to catch some folks off guard. SET-friendly shops sprang up, such as Deja Vu in Virginia. And the press took notice in their own way, with a few established titles being a bit more adventurous than others, and with new print mags springing up in the SET pasture seemingly overnight. Some of the latter, such as Joe Roberts' superb Sound Practices, were a breath of fresh air: adventurous, informative, and fun. Others tried to parrot SP's hip tone but were either poorly edited or not edited at all, and ultimately fell flat.

The response from the audience was mixed. Some hobbyists took the plunge and stayed there, happily. Others enjoyed reading about the trip but decided to stay home for the time being. (When I was editor of the decidedly SET-friendly Listener magazine, the letters I treasured most were those from intelligent readers who didn't happen to care for tubes or horns, yet who felt their enjoyment and understanding of the hobby was enhanced by reading about them.)

And, of course, there were a few sad cases who weren't able to just shrug and say "That's cool" when confronted with the news that other audiophiles do things differently—and quite possibly have more fun in the process. That's just human nature, I suppose, although it often seems that audiophiles are second only to aquarium-plant enthusiasts in their tendency to malign other hobbyists—but whether that's merely for amusement or to establish themselves as the hobby's alpha males, I'm not certain. (Then again, I do remember reading in National Geographic that female audiophiles will allow themselves to be mounted only by potbellied males who can scream the loudest insults at loudspeaker technologies, digital encoding schemes, or magazines of which they disapprove.)
Listening

Before setting the subject of personality disorders to one side, I should not let SET enthusiasts themselves completely off the hook. Remember what I said earlier about a potential for camaraderie? Well, forget it: These people all hate each other now. First, the 300B tube triode and 2A3 tube triode started looking down their noses at each other. Then a subclan of the 2A3 tribe discovered the 45 tube, a discovery that apparently rendered the 2A3 unacceptable overnight—and for its part, of course, the 300B is now way too mainstream and thus uncool. Cary Audio is disliked by other amp makers for being successful, and Avantgarde, which also does well in the marketplace, seems to be in the barrel among loudspeaker "students of the art." By the time I attended my first SET-oriented hi-fi show, it seemed that much of the playing field had been taken over by trash-culture devotees (you know the type: anemic-looking East Village males who pretend they think the first Josie and the Pussycats album was the greatest record ever made) who see their goal in life as the disavowal of everything that's enjoyed by at least one other person. So much for weenie roasts and "Kumbaya."

Which brings us, inelegantly, to our hobby's hoary old clash between objectivity and subjectivity. In this Prometheus conflict, audiophiles who are technically oriented insist that measurements, because they are objective, are the best if not the only reliable way to describe audio gear. Their counterparts ridicule that notion, suggesting that the only way to appraise something is to apply it to the job for which it was designed. Thus, cars can be judged only when driven, wine can be judged only when it's drunk, and $10,000 minimonitors can be judged only when used to hold small boats in place.

I think it's fair to say that the loudest critics of the SET movement in this country have, for the past 10 years, been the same self-appointed experts who want to save us all from the horrors of having fun with our hi-fis. "Go ahead and listen to whatever junk you want," they will say, "but don't you dare call it hi-fi, because fi means fidelity, and single-ended triode amps and horn loudspeakers are so colored that they do not and cannot exhibit true fidelity to the original signal — without which, you are wasting your time. PS. Please leave the planet now."

Which is bullshit, of course. When people go on and on like that about "fidelity," what they're generally talking about is flat frequency response. It's a tone thing, in other words. But the science and art of music reproduction encompass a great many different things: Dynamics. Pitch. Timing. Speed. Texture. Scale and spatial effects. Freedom from noise. And, yes, tone — as in "correct" tone. My question — and it's a good one — is this: Why do some people not only take it upon themselves to put tone at the top of the list, but go so far as to pretend that it's the only thing that matters?

That's where claims of objectivity fall flat. I can't think of anything more subjective than trying to force other people to accept someone else's priorities.

Why have we become tyrannized by the cult of flat frequency response?

For the record: Does flat response equal truth? No. That's like saying a truthful tax return is one on which the taxpayer's name and address have been entered correctly: Honey, that's just the beginning.

Let's look at the example of a Lowther full-range driver. Are Lowthers flat? For the most part, and depending on how they're used, the answer is another big, juicy "Hell, no." For one thing, they've got that peaky thing going on in the upper midrange, which alone is enough to chase some — some — audiophiles into the next county. For another, Lowthers neither extend far enough into the highs to be called airy, nor far enough into the lows to be called truly full-range. I think it's perfectly reasonable to think of the overall spectral lightness that can result from poor bass extension as a coloration. (Even if I don't. Really.)

But: There isn't another dynamic, cone-style driver on the planet — not a one — that can match the speed of the Lowther. In that sense, the Lowther's in-room performance is observably, inarguably more true to the signal it's fed. Thus, Lowthers are much higher-fidelity loudspeakers than average.

I can hear the howls from here.

The above is, of course, an example of subjectivity — in this case, my subjectivity. Even if I publish bookloads of truthful numbers and clear, unambiguous graphics that prove the superior speed of the Lowther loudspeaker, my observations are subjective, not objective, and my opinion should not necessarily be given more weight than yours or anyone else's. Who am I to say that speed, as a parameter of audio performance, is or should be the most important?

Why have we become tyrannized by the cult of flat frequency response? I think it's because frequency response is easy to measure. I mean, if I can do it... Are you likely to pick up the phone any time soon and order a squarewave generator, an oscilloscope, and a suite of Fast-Fourier Transform programs — then actually go to work using them? Of course not. That stuff requires training, understanding, and time: three things that are anathema to our American way of life. But a spectrum analyzer is different, and I speak from personal experience: It's easy. You can look at the front panel and, unless you're a habitual sniffer of paint fumes, you can get up and running within 20 minutes or so. Here's where the microphone plugs in. Here's where the pink noise comes out. And here's the control for determining how many dB are represented by each gradation. Simple as milk. The same typing chimps that came up with The Tempest and Richard III could do it, given enough time.

"...it's later than you think!"

How's that song go? "Enjoy yourself..."

Let me back up again: Although I was being truthful when I suggested that the differentness and funniness of the movement would have attracted me to SETs regardless of their sound, it was indeed their sound — their music-making ability, to be precise — that kept me there. Nothing does drama like a SET and a horn. Nothing does presence like that combo, either — not even a really good Quad on a really good day.

Above all, those systems love the human voice: They go looking for it and find it and pull it away from everything else like nobody's business. Having seen the band in concert at Saratoga this year, I've been on a big Crosby, Stills & Nash kick lately, and I've been listening a lot to their first album in particular, as reissued on LP by Classic Records a few years back. I remember hearing it on my Quads recently, and it was fine: transparent, uncolored, and nicely present — altogether fun and engaging and right. Then, just last evening, I set up my Lowthers and Fi preamp and Fi 2A3 stereo amp (a little less than 3Wpc). It may not have been "right," but it was arguably a little bit
truer to the spirit of the music. How did this system pull those voices forward, away from the guitars and everything else in David Crosby's incandescent "Guinevere"? And how could something like that be a distortion? I mean, maybe it is—but how?

I know that my really not caring whether or not it's a distortion constitutes a heresy. Sorry, but when I spend money on something, I'm stupid enough to want to enjoy it. Maybe that admission will draw more letters comparing me to yet another villain from the pages of USA Today (pedophile priests? murderers of pizza-delivery men?), but I have more important things than that going on in my life, and insufficient disposable income that I can afford to flush any of it down the toilet of audio correctness—anybody's audio correctness. To paraphrase a very different song, I buy what I like, and I like what I buy.

While I'm on the subject of heresies, here's one more: I think measurements remain worth doing, but not to make me or anyone else feel good about their choice of gear. Rather, I think that learning about technology, and looking for and occasionally finding correlations between science and sound, are also fun. (As John Atkinson will attest, I am forever bugging him to share with me his considerable experience on the subject.) In some parts of the audio world, of course, that observation is the fly on the sherbet: Some old people in hi-fi—younger ones, too, I'm sad to say—are like the biddies who don't think people should smile in church. I just wasn't put on this earth to make them happy. I smile in church all the time.

To wrap up, here are two things I know for sure:

First, if you worry about what other people think of your hi-fi to the extent that it affects your approach to the hobby, that's utterly sad, and you should stop doing it and start having fun right now. Life is brief.

The other thing is this: If your idea of fun is bullying people in the pages of an audio magazine or on an audio website in order to—what? impress girls? impress boys?—you are truly a sad sack of dung, and with the exception of a tiny handful of suckups, most people with a spine just wish you'd go away and stay there.

On that warm note, I wish the rest of you a merry Christmas. If you're observing some other holiday at this time of year, I wish you a merry one of those, too, as long as it's not some stupid cult.
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- The Perfect Vision, March/April 2003

"Highs were as smooth as silk, midrange as clear as a bell and bass as solid as a rock...the S6's belong in that exceptional category of audio components that we know as the high end. ...These loudspeakers are under priced.”
- The Inner Ear Report, #15 Vol 1

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Well, that's what many people think when faced with assembling a multichannel music system.

SACD's original specification was for five identical full-range speakers for the five main channels and, if the program material called for it, another channel for subwoofer, LFE, height, and/or other effects. Bass management, whereby some of the bass from the main channels could be redirected to the subwoofer, was grudgingly permitted for those saddled with constraints of space, money, and/or spouse that prevented their having six large enclosures in the listening room. DVD-Audio, the prodigal son of the DVD-Video spec, was less dogmatic from the beginning, and assumed that most listeners would use smaller speakers, supplemented by a subwoofer or two to do the heavy lifting. As a result, fewer early SACD players had much in the way of bass management compared to early DVD-A players.

However, before one relegates to lower status systems with small monitors and sub, consider that speaker placement is an even more important variable in a multichannel setup than it is for two-channel stereo. If you want to maintain roughly equal speaker-to-listener distances and the recommended ITU angular arrangement — see "Music in the Round," June 2003, www.stereophile.com/showarchives.cgi?854:2 — you no longer have much freedom to place your speakers for optimum bass performance. In other words, unless you're very lucky in your room arrangements and in your choice of significant other, the extended bass of which your full-range behemoths may be capable — and for which you paid dearly — will not be realized. You'll be forced to use a sub after all.

I still advocate full-range speakers all around — or, at least, speakers with extension to below 50Hz — because you want to get the crossover to the sub as low as possible to prevent it from being audibly localizable, and for this, the main speakers must extend deep enough. You also want good power-handling right down to that rolloff to ensure full midbass and integration with the sub. In other words, those cute little pods and spheres that can't extend down into two-digit frequencies are beneath our consideration.

Until recently, however, all of this was theoretical to me. My Paradigm Reference Studio/60 and Studio/20 speakers have decent bass, and even the Studio CC center extends to just under 50Hz. Unfortunately, the Studio CC sits on a TV and the Studio 20s, with their rear-firing ports, nestled in my room's rear corners. So when I set up the Meridian Reference 800 DVD-A transport and 861 surround processor in this system, I was not surprised to find that crossing over the Studio CC and Studio/20s at about 65Hz unmuddled the bass to a substantial degree. The front L/R Studio/60s needed no such assistance, but I count myself lucky that their placement for best imaging also works pretty well for the low frequencies.

"But I like big speakers..."

That's what I pleaded when Magnepan's Wendell Diller tried to force a Home Theater Set (four wall-mount MGMC1 panels and a CC3) on me. What I really wanted was MG3.6/Rs all around, but my room can't accommodate them. And I anticipated problems with Magnepan's Home Theater Set because: 1) none of the speakers goes below 80Hz; 2) every multichannel player has different varieties of bass management, thus skewing any comparisons among them; 3) the resident analog preamps had no bass management; and 4) my wife would not be happy about the screw-holes in the walls when the Maggies were dismounted.

Salvation came in two ways. First, Diller offered to fly out to Connecticut (on July 4, no less) and rig up some floor and ceiling jacks to support the MGMC1s. While my wife is greatly pained by how ugly the jacks are, even she admitted that they were a canny solution that would leave no marks. Second, I got Outlaw Audio to send me their ICBM (for Integrated Controlled Bass Manager) so that all inputs and sources could share the same bass-management circuitry and enjoy a level playing field.

The MGMC1 is a small (46" H by 10.25" W by 1" D), two-way planar-magnetic speaker with a quasi-ribbon tweeter running the full height along the outer edge. Inserts in the upper and lower ends of the MGMC1's inner edge mate with pins in the provided mounting brackets; the speaker can be pivoted on them, enabling the user to...
aim the speaker or, when it's not in use, to fold it out of the way. As a result, an MGMC1 always has one edge at the wall; Magnepan rates them down to 80Hz only with such boundary placement.

Magnepan also says to set "your processor or receiver to 'small speaker'," confirming the need for bass management. However, since the MGMC1 is a dipole, radiating half its sound from its rear surface, its tonal balance will be greatly influenced by surrounding objects and materials. On the other hand, readjusting the speaker's angle with respect to the wall also allows the user to tune the tonal character imposed by the surroundings. This turned out to be quite useful.

I used the Outlaw ICBM to redirect sub-80Hz bass from the Maggies to a Paradigm Servo-15 subwoofer, the Bel Canto PR6 multichannel preamplifier (see below) to tune the interchannel balance, and the Bel Canto eV6 power amplifier to provide the muscle. Later, I swapped out the eV6 for the Adcom GFA-7805, as part of the preparation for a forthcoming review. Wendell Diller placed the front left and right MGMC1s symmetrically on the front wall but, like most rooms in most real homes, the features in mine make it asymmetrical. The left speaker had an equipment rack about 1.5' to its left, but the right speaker had a doorway the same distance to its right. The only way to balance them was to make sure the door was kept closed for serious listening. I boosted the right channel by +2dB to compensate for the speaker's greater distance from the corner, and angle the right speaker a bit off-axis to the listening seat to compensate for the reflections off the back of the door. This may sound complex and tedious, but it indicates that the Magnepan's design was smart enough to permit such tuning.

The rear MGMC1s needed similar attention: my room's windows and drapes prevented their symmetrical placement as well. The right rear speaker was mounted to the side wall about 2.5' from the rear corner, but the left one was mounted to the rear wall only a bit more than 1' from the corner. In effect, the left rear MGMC1 aimed its rear radiation directly into a well-draped corner, thus enjoying considerable gain in the lower midrange and bass, while the right rear MGMC1 could take advantage of only a bit of corner loading. Here, again, judicious re-angling compensated well for the tonal imbalance, and the corner loading was equalized with respect to the front speakers: -3dB for the right rear, $-9\text{dB}$ (f) for the left rear.

The bass-managed Magnepans conveyed a magically full and transparent illusion with good multichannel source material.

The Magnepan CC3 is a similar, small, two-way planar magnetic, but measures 36" W by 10.5" H by 5.5" D. Cautious examination through the grillecloth with a high-power flashlight revealed that the CC3 is very much like an MGMC1 laid on its side and curved in the horizontal plane: The quasi-ribbon tweeter extends along the entire length of the speaker's upper edge. The curve is flattened in the very central portion of the diaphragm, but the curvature somewhat lessens the horizontal beaming one would expect from a flat MGMC1 in that orientation. The CC3 was placed, of necessity, atop the "soon to be dispossessed" TV in the center of the wall and subjected to 2dB of attenuation to balance with the front L/R speakers. With that attenuation, the CC3 did not call attention to itself and blended very well with the MGMC1s.

Big things in small packages I suspect that the gurus at Magnepan who came up with 80Hz as the MGMC1's rolloff and recommended crossover frequency took into consideration just how common 8' ceilings are. That height implies a room mode at around 70Hz, and these small speakers could take some advantage of it to support their waning bass response. Well, my room is 16' by 16' by 8', and its 70Hz mode is quite strong — there was no evidence of a suckout or any compromise in power in the crossover range between the Magnepans and the Paradigm Servo-15.

The result: At their mid-wall height, the bass-managed Magnepans conveyed a magically full and transparent illusion with good multichannel source material. In my CES report in September's column, I described my experience of hearing the master tapes of Stanislaw Skrowaczewski's recordings of orchestral works by Ravel that Mobile Fidelity was preparing for SACD release. Well, the results (Mobile Fidelity UD SACD 4002) are all that I anticipated. Via the MGMC1-CC3-Servo-15 system, the sound was a remarkably grain-free and exquisitely detailed audio view of the orchestra. As with the master tapes, I did not hear a huge amount of hall ambience — just enough to sense the space.

What was outstanding was that I could hear each instrument and know its precise placement in the orchestra. First and second violins were distinguishable from each other, as was every woodwind and brass instrument. The bass and midbass were so good that I could easily distinguish the bass drum and timpani in sound character and placement, even though both were in the rear of the orchestra and neither was strongly lateralized. From the quiet stirrings at the beginning of Ravel's Rapsodie espagnole to its explosive conclusion, dynamics were stunning and, with either the eV6 or the 300Wpc Adcom GFA-7805, the Maggies never ran out of steam or ran into limits.

Bass power, of course, was the Servo-15's domain. That power was not lacking, but the system's overall performance was due to the good integration of the Maggies and the sub. Voices were the most demanding of careful setup with the Maggies, but they were also the most rewarding. At the original sessions, the chorus in the Daphnis et Chloë suite stood at the back of the hall and appeared primarily in the rear channels. It's positively hair-raising to hear them from there, sounding so lively and confirming a consistency of
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ambience only hinted at by the sound of the orchestra itself.

The midbass (60–100Hz) with the bass-managed Magnepans was still a bit leaner than with the Paradigms, but my preferences shifted with the music. With solo piano, such as on Mari Kodama’s Beethoven disc (Pentatone Classics 5186 024), the two speaker systems had equal midrange clarity, but the Maggie’s allowed me to hear more details of the piano strings and pedaling than I heard on the Paradigms. On the other hand, the important piano solos on Bob Belden’s wonderfully atmospheric Black Dahlia (Blue Note 5 41745 2) seemed just a bit thin compared with the rest of the ensemble. But I really dug that ear-popping opening chord, the bluesy trumpet, and the large, warm orchestral sound that submerged me in a deep noir mood with the Maggie’s.

I got some spectacular results using the Paradigm Studio/60s as front L/R speakers, the Magnepan CC3 in the center, and the MGMC1s in the rear. With 5-channel sources, such as the bonus, final track on MFSL’s Ravel/Skrowaczewski SACD, the CC3 had a remarkably illuminating effect on the Paradigms that still contributed a deep soundstage and midbass weight. With its horizontal ribbon, the CC3 has excellent vertical dispersion to compensate for its placement above the plane of the floorstanders, and offered so much more information in the middle — where, after all, most of the music is. The MGMC1s in the rear worked well also.

What distinguished the Maggie’s from the Paradigms was the amount of internal detail I could hear from almost any disc, as long as the volume was not set too low. If I did that, the Maggie’s soundstage shrank and they sounded a bit anemic. Switching back and forth, I traded depth of image and warmth with the Paradigms for clarity and precision with the Magnepans.

The fundamental properties of the Magnepan speakers are of a quality well beyond their modest prices: $750/pair for the MGMC1, $990 for the CC3. To those prices must be added the cost of a decent subwoofer and bass management, which may already be built into your player, receiver, or preamp/processor. These are necessities; in multichannel or stereo, the Maggie’s have no bass below 80Hz, and sound very lean on their own.

But provide those ancillaries and operate the Maggie’s as intended, and they’ll almost completely disappear, acoustically speaking. Considering their flexibility in placement and adjustment along with their performance, they’re a multichannel bargain, especially if you have to get your speakers off the floor.

Someone’s got to do the dirty work
Each of the SACD and DVD-Audio players I have offers some bass management — but the options vary, are obscure, or, stupidly, apply to only some disc formats, not all. But why try to have each and every player do this when every one of them will have to be channeled through a preamp and amplifier? It was apparent that I needed an analog-domain multichannel bass manager. Fortunately, the Outlaw Audio ICBM ($249) is just such a dandy device. My success with Magnepan’s Home Theater Set would not have been possible without it.

The ICBM is a seven-channel crossover with a mixing facility for the bass. The crossover is independently selectable for the L/R, Center, L/R Surround, and Center/Surround channels. (The latter is provided for compatibility with 6.1- and 7.1-channel home-theater systems and for the six-channel setups championed by Chesky, Telarc, and MDG.) The crossover settings are bypass, 120Hz, 100Hz, 80Hz, 60Hz, and 40Hz. Options for mono/stereo subwoofer drive and bass redirection into full-range main speakers are included. The Mix control allows adjustment of LFE signals relative to the other channels, a necessary when switching among music and movie sources. A subwoofer level control adjusts that output, including LFE and all signals redirected to the subwoofer. Finally, the subwoofer’s low-pass slope is switchable between 12dB/octave (normal) and 36dB/octave (THX). All the right tools for the task.

The ICBM can be used between any two line-level devices; if you need to manage only one multichannel source, the Outlaw can go between source and pre-pro. I tend to mix and match several multichannel players, so I put the ICBM between the preamp and power amp so that it could do its job on any and all sources, including two-channel ones.

While the ICBM runs off a chintzy-looking wall wart, its construction and performance were serious and solid. Remaining powered up at all times, the ICBM added no perceptible hum or noise. In fact, once I’d set it up to my satisfaction, it required no further attention until I changed another component in the system.

There’s little more that need be said about the ICBM. It did the job it was intended to do, and I could hear no sonic compromise while using it. It was difficult to A/B it, as I’m not sure there’s any way to completely bypass all its circuits, pots, and switches. Swapping it in and out of the system in two channels with the Paradigm ‘60s, I was satisfied that any very slight veiling I might have heard with the Outlaw was more than outweighed by the advantages gained from its use. Also, I was impressed with the ultra-detailed (but not bright) sound of the Magnepans as heard through the ICBM. Surely, if there was any significant corruption, the Maggie’s would have revealed it.

As far as I know, the ICBM is the only game in town when it
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comes to add-on analog bass management for the home user. Until the day there's a quality pre-pro that will accept industry-standard digital multichannel inputs from all formats, and manage bass and other functions in the digital domain, the Outlaw Audio ICBM will have an honored place in my system.

**Multichannel Preamp No.3**

My first experience with an analog multichannel preamplifier was with the Sony TA-P9000ES, a remarkably self-effacing device. It did its limited job with its two multichannel inputs extremely well. It was supplanted by the more capable McCormack MAP-1, a line-level analog preamp that I found both good-sounding and simple to learn and use. In this era of complexity, the latter is no small accomplishment. The latest contender in the multichannel preamp games is the Bel Canto PRE6.

The Bel Canto PRE6 aims higher than these two in its elegant appearance and programmability, and that's reflected in its price: $3800. The PRE6 is capable of eight-channel operation, or six-channel operation in one zone simultaneously with two-channel stereo operation in another. Its degree of flexibility can be downright intimidating, but it comes with a reasonable default setup for two six-channel inputs, three two-channel inputs (one of them balanced), stereo tape input/output, two six-channel outputs (one balanced), and two two-channel outputs (one balanced). Those with special needs can arrange for up to 12 stereo inputs. (Whew!) Bel Canto has thoughtfully put a red/green LED next to each input jack; these are of great value in making connections.

As on all current Bel Canto designs, the PRE6's control panel is a large black oval surrounded by a brushed-aluminum faceplate. Across the front, from left to right, are the company name, Mute and Enter buttons, a large bright display, a four-button array for Volume Up/Down, Input Selection, and Tape Monitor, and, finally, a Standby button. I never used any of these, instead preferring the remote control. For example, the front-panel Input button lets you step through the inputs in order, while the remote gives you direct access, and adds left/right balance controls and a display shut-off option. But the display readout is so readable and the remote control so convenient, why get up from your seat?

Inside the PRE6 is one large printed circuit board bearing the active componentry, with precision resistors and film capacitors, in a small corner. It is otherwise dominated by high-quality mechanical relays. A daughterboard attaches to the rear panel for input/output, and another attaches to the front panel for controlling the logic and display. That front PCB also holds a SIP connector, which permits reprogramming of the microprocessor controller that actually runs the operations.

**The PRE6 sounded absolutely wonderful and, as configured, operated perfectly.**

With the immediate necessity to set channel balance for the Magnepan system (and needing to show the visiting Wendell Diller my competence), I grabbed the remote. I clicked Enter eight times and, like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* after she's clicked her heels, entered a wondrous realm: Input Configuration.

It wasn't so bad! Within five minutes, we had all the channel offsets for the Magneps (see above) programmed for the two multichannel inputs. Trial and error worked better for me than trying to understand the manual. However, a strange thing happened after inputting the offsets: The PRE6 would often make very loud pops when being reprogrammed, or more important, when being switched among inputs. A distress call to Bel Canto resulted in their sending an interface board for the front PCB SIP connector, a serial cable for my laptop, and a disc of software. After upgrading the software from Rev. 3.16 (5/3/03) to Rev. 3.2h (7/8/03), all was well, with sure and silent switching thereafter. I don't know if such problems are endemic to earlier software versions, but I do know that they're easily cured.

But all that's under the bridge. The PRE6 sounded absolutely wonderful and, as configured, operated perfectly. I sat comfortably on the couch, PRE6 remote in hand, enjoying Alan Civil playing Mozart's Horn Concertos (Pentatone SCD1105), a classic 1971 performance remastered in stereo and four-channel from the original quadraphonic masters. The stereo track is like the original LP but with a quieter background. In multichannel, the sound of the horn is less confined and seems to be much larger, just as it would in a concert hall. After all, a French horn's bell is usually aimed away from the audience; most of the sound reaches our ears indirectly, after having bounced off the walls of the hall. I suspect that the stereo mix minimizes this in order not to obscure the other instruments, but multichannel lets the horn sound like a real French horn in a real hall. So felicitous were the balance and resolution of recording and system—including, in no small part, the PRE6—that the orchestral details were not masked while the horn filled the hall.

What I liked best about the Bel Canto PRE6 was the difficulty I had defining its sound. Most of the adjectives used to describe components imply a sonic character of some kind, and the PRE6 had little. Even the use of
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such terms as “open,” “full,” and “spacious” assumes that the signal and music had these features but that the component is neutral in permitting us to hear that. The Pre6 sounded lively, tight, and punchy. 

But that’s part and parcel of this bluesy, swingy music and its recording, as was a bit more splash in the rear channels than I found ideal.

On the other hand, the Pre6 sounded strong, sweet, and powerful with Mahler’s Symphony 5, performed by Hartmut Haench and the Netherlands Philharmonic (Pentatone 5186 004) and recorded during a concert in Amsterdam’s Concertgebouw. While this is not a performance for the ages, the richness of the acoustic gives considerable size to the sound; I feel I know what it was to be part of that audience. Benjamin Zander’s recording of this work with the Philharmonia Orchestra (SACD, Telarc CD-80569) is, overall, a more balanced performance; on the same system, it sounded more direct and detailed, but with less weight or sense of occasion. I listened to a dozen or so other familiar recordings, and each seemed different enough that I could detect no bias imposed on them by the Pre6.

Compared to the McCormack MAP-1, the Bel Canto Pre6 has less zing in the highs and definitely worked better with the Magnepans. With the Paradigms, it was a toss-up. The McCormack was less tolerant of bright or splashy recordings, but could be thrilling with the better ones. With the Pre6, such distinctions were apparent but less disturbing. The simpler MAP-1 was easier to set up and use and, at its lower price, might be preferred if matched up with a little care.

All in all, though, I found the Bel Canto Pre6 easier and more enjoyable to use with a wider range of components and discs. Perhaps it goes back to my continuing inability to put my finger on the character of its sound—like any really first-rate preamp, it doesn’t have much character. One of these days, when I can spare it from the multichannel system, it deserves an audition in the main stereo system. It’s that good.

Coming Attractions
On tap are two more multichannel analog preamps, one about four times the price of the other; a universal disc player; and some concerned thoughts about center-channel speakers. See you in March.
COMPONENTS

Amplifiers, of 2003 also has a of those categories votes; lic by more "WWW" egory, in product The The the product best—and transports, issues, the winners and/or listed current prices etc.), "Editor's Accessories (everything else), These are components will have been auditioned for which a writer had put his opinion in print for public scrutiny. The prices listed were current as of the end of August 2003. To order back issues mentioned in this article, call (888) 237-0955, or visit www.stereophile.com (MasterCard and Visa only). "WWW" indicates that the review is available online free of charge in our free on-line Archives. Each of the magazine's editors and reviewers gave three votes for his first choice in each category, two votes for his second choice, and one vote for his third choice (if any). JA tallied the votes; address complaints and compliments to him.

And the winners are...
2003 LOUDSPEAKER

Quad ESL-989
($8500-$9350/pair; reviewed by Larry Greenhill, Art Dudley, & John Atkinson, Vol.25 No.11 & Vol.26 No.5, November 2002 & May 2003 WWW)

Runners-Up (in alphabetical order).
Audio Physic Virgo III ($6995/pair; reviewed by Brian Damkroger, Vol.26 No.9, September 2003 WWW)
Dynaudio Confidence C4 ($16,000/pair; reviewed by John Atkinson, Vol.26 No.3, March 2003 WWW)
Focal-JMlab Grande Utopia Be ($80,000/pair; reviewed by Paul Messenger, Vol.26 No.9, September 2003 WWW)
InnerSound Eros Mk.III ($7995/pair; reviewed by Larry Greenhill & John Atkinson, Vol.26 No.4 & 5, April & May 2003 WWW)
Mission Pilastro ($40,000/pair, reviewed by John Atkinson, Vol.25 No.12, December 2002 WWW)
Sonus Faber Cremona ($7495/pair; reviewed by Sam Tellig, Vol.26 No.1, January 2003 WWW)
Triangle Magellan ($32,900/pair; reviewed by Sam Tellig, Vol.26 No.6, June 2003)
Wilson Audio Specialties WATT/Puppy 7 ($22,400/pair; reviewed by Michael Fremer, Vol.26 No.9, September 2003 WWW)
Wilson Benesch Arc ($3825/pair; reviewed by John Marks, Vol.25 No.11, November 2002 WWW)

Longevity but also for its improvement with age, the ESL-989 is the third version of Quad's groundbreaking ESL-63, and features two extra bass panels for improved low-frequency performance (−6dB at 30Hz vs the '88's 35Hz rating) compared with the otherwise identical ESL-63, which has now morphed into the ESL-988.

Despite the contenders being universally superb examples of the modern speaker designer's art, the ballot wasn't even close—the ESL-989 got more first-place votes than any other contender.

In his November 2002 (Vol.25 No.11) review, Larry Greenhill reflected, "Kicking back and listening to the Quad ESL-989's warmth, transparency, transient response, and power...I couldn't think of another loudspeaker I'd rather own." Art Dudley looked back on the '989's predecessors fondly but was unputtable by nostalgia: "The relatively Spartan cachet of the original is a thing of the past, and the company that made it has changed forever—but the new model is better in almost every way, not to mention one of the best you can buy, period." Likewise, John Atkinson found the ESL-989s to be the best loudspeakers he had ever experienced in terms of midrange magic and imaging.

Though it's still unable to reach down to the 20Hz extreme required for a full-range Class A rating in "Recommended Components," and it gives up ultimate dynamic range in favor of midrange perfection, we proudly make room for the ESL-989 to sit in our "Restricted Extreme LF" subcategory, happily sacrificing those last few hertz and decibels.

W
Harmonic Technology has exclusive distribution rights for “Single Crystal” Furutech products in Canada and the United States.

"...I prefered listening through the Harmonic Technology cable."

-Michael Fremer, Stereophile, April 2003
This page from Stereophile, December 2003, features the section titled "2003 Joint Amplification Components". The text includes reviews of amplifiers such as the Linn Klimax Twin, Parasound Halo JC 1, and VTL TL-7.5 Reference, among others. The reviews are written by various reviewers and cover the years 2003 and 2004, with dates ranging from June to October. The article highlights the performance and characteristics of these amplifiers, noting their strengths and qualifications for consideration as "Runners-Up" in their respective categories. The text also includes a brief introduction about the selection process for the "Runs-Up."
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Anthony Cordesman, The Absolute Sound

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2003 DIGITAL SOURCE COMPONENT

**dCS Verdi–Purcell–Elgar Plus SACD/CD playback system**
($33,985; reviewed by Michael Fremer, Vol.26 No.4, April 2003 WWW)

**Runners-Up (in alphabetical order):**
- **Apple iPod** ($490 as reviewed; reviewed by Wes Phillips, Vol.26 No.10, October 2003 WWW)
- **Ayre Acoustics CX-7 CD player** ($2950; reviewed by John Atkinson, Vol.26 No.5, May 2003 WWW)
- **Classé Omega SACD player** ($12,000; reviewed by Jonathan Scull & Paul Bolin, Vol.24 No.11 & Vol.26 No.8, November 2001 & August 2003 WWW)
- **Esoteric DV-50 universal player** ($5500; reviewed by Paul Bolin, Vol.26 No.8, August 2003 WWW)
- **Meridian 800 DVD-A player** ($17,000–$19,000; reviewed by Kalman Rubinson, Vol.26 No.8, August 2003 WWW)
- **Musical Fidelity Tri-Vista SACD player** ($6495; reviewed by Michael Fremer & Sam Tellig, Vol.26 Nos.5 & 7, May & July 2003 WWW)
- **Weiss Medea D/A processor** ($13,500; reviewed by Kalman Rubinson, Vol.26 No.2, February 2003 WWW)

While each of these pieces occupies its own niche in the hallowed Class A+ of our "Recommended Components" pages, together, the dCS Verdi, Purcell, and Elgar Plus form a two-channel triumvirate of unrivaled audio power. With nearly twice as many votes as the runners-up in this category—not one of them technological or musical slop—the dCS components made the competition seem almost unfair.

Analog guru Michael Fremer was assigned the task of reviewing the trio as a trio, and though he held tight to his vinyl roots and constantly questioned the credibility of their $34,000 price tag, he finally admitted: "Whatever dCS has done here, their computational, electronic, and mechanical brilliance add up to what must be the state of the art of getting the most from digitally encoded music.... Spend some time with the dCS Verdi–Purcell–Edgar Plus. You'll understand how someone with $34,000 to drop might gladly do so for the pleasure of their company."

John Atkinson went on to note that their use of a FireWire datalink makes all three dCS products effectively future-proof: "It is hard to see how digital technology can get any better than this." Indeed, they may not be able to work miracles on DDD CDs as in 1984, but they bring us the future of digital playback today.

2003 ANALOG SOURCE COMPONENT

**SME 30/2 turntable**
($25,000; reviewed by Michael Fremer, Vol.26 No.3, March 2003 WWW)

**Runners-Up (in alphabetical order):**
- **Lyra Titan phono cartridge** ($4500; reviewed by Michael Fremer, Vol.26 No.6, June 2003)
- **Music Hall MMF-9 turntable** ($1695; reviewed by Michael Fremer, Vol.26 No.8, August 2003)
- **Rega P9 turntable** ($3500; reviewed by Michael Fremer, Vol.25 No.11, November 2002)
- **Rega RB1000 tonearm** ($1595; reviewed by Michael Fremer, Vol.25 No.11, November 2002)
- **van den Hul DDT-II Special phono cartridge** ($900; reviewed by Art Dudley, Vol.26 No.1, January 2003 WWW)

In an otherwise very close race, the SME 30/2 turntable freed itself—quietly, smoothly, quickly—from the rest of the pack. Its no-BS design features one high-quality motor and electronic drive, a crowned stainless-steel pulley, a compact, high-mass plinth, system, ultra-high-tolerance machining everywhere, zero use of acrylic, and a truly effective isolation system. This 94-lb hunk of black metal is "built to run O-rings around the competition," and that's exactly what it did.

Michael Fremer noted pitch-black backgrounds, spectacular transient speed and attack, glorious decay with no edgy peaks, and unparalleled performance in the areas of bass control, definition, extension, dynamics, and harmonics. All of this makes it, possibly, "the finest turntable in the world."

Though little more than a third the price of the Class A+ Rockport System III Sirius, the 30/2 had Michael singing a new tune: "I'd say the SME and the Rockport are at least on a level playing field.... Overall, the SME Model 30/2 might just be the best turntable I've heard."

SME 30/2 turntable
Arcam DVD Performance Reaches a New Low

New DV78 Delivers High-Performance at an Astonishingly Low $999

If you’re looking for a high-performance, specialist-designed-and-built DVD player that manages to keep the price tag in three-digit territory, here’s a list of all your options:

1. Arcam DV78 in Black
2. Arcam DV78 in Silver

Arcam actually has four DVD players: DV78 ($999), DV88 Plus ($1599), DV89 ($1999), and FMJ DV27A ($2999) – all designed and built by Arcam in the UK. At the risk of convincing you that all you really need to spend is $999, here’s our take on how to pick the right one for you:

As we all know, in any movie, it may be the picture that conveys the storyline, but it is the sound track that delivers what we all strive for – the full emotional impact of the original performance. One of the keys to superb audio performance is getting the digital clocking right. The vast majority of players simply derive an audio clock from the video clock using circuitry built into the MPEG decoder chip. This works, and is certainly inexpensive. But, it doesn’t provide performance that is up to Arcam standards. In the DV78 the audio clock is recovered via a separate Arcam-designed Phase Lock Loop using high-quality components intended just for that job. This costs quite a bit more but ensures a clean, low jitter audio clock.

Video performance is also superb, with the DV78 using the same motion-adaptive progressive scan and professional-grade video buffers as the more expensive DV88 Plus.

"The DV88 Plus, quite simply, captured details within the overall blackness of dark, moody films like no other DVD player I have auditioned."

Wes Phillips, OnHomeTheater.com

And DV89. And, thanks to top-of-the-line Wolfson DACs, CD performance through the analog outputs approaches that of Arcam’s highly-rated CD73T CD player. (A rare feat indeed, considering most DVD players are miserable CD players!)

In the DV88 Plus, Arcam cranks up the audio performance by using totally separate audio and video digital master clocks. And there’s a third master clock just for CD. Using two Wolfson DACs per channel, the DV88 Plus delivers CD performance similar to that of Arcam’s CD82T. There’s even an upgrade path for DVD-Audio.

The DV89 is essentially a DV88 Plus fitted with the same high-performance DVD-Audio board used in the FMJ DV27A. (Don’t be fooled by cheap players that seem to toss in DVD-Audio for free. Doing it right is expensive. The Arcam players use eight of Wolfson’s best DACs!)

The FMJ (Full Metal Jacket) DV27A pulls out all the stops. It provides totally independent audio and video power supplies (including a separate toroidal transformer for the audio supply), Silicon Image Progressive Scan, and Arcam’s AcouSteel vibration damped chassis system. CD performance is the best we’ve ever heard from a DVD player and, according to the reviewers, rivals that of dedicated CD players costing several times the price. In terms of both audio and video performance, the DV27A is demonstrably superior.

So, how do you pick the right one for you? Drop by your Arcam dealer and take ‘em for a spin. You’ll be surprised at the performance of the DV78 and amazed at how good Arcam DVD can be.

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Solid State
Echo Busters Decorative Room Treatments
($165-$235 each; reviewed by Brian Damkroger, Vol.26 No.9, September 2003)

Rives PARC parametric equalizer
($2800; reviewed by Kalman Rubinsohn, Vol.26 No.7, July 2003, WWW)

Runners-Up (in alphabetical order):
Acoustic Zen Silver Reference II interconnects, Gargantua II AC cord, & Satori Shotgun speaker cables ($948-$998/m, $1488, & $1188/8' pair, respectively, reviewed by Paul Bolin, Vol.25 No.1, January 2003 WWW)

AudioQuest Anaconda interconnect & Gibraltar speaker cable ($1250/m pair & $850/10' pair, respectively, reviewed by Brian Damkroger, Vol.26 No.6, June 2003 WWW)

Grand Prix Audio Monaco equipment stands ($2495-$4495, reviewed by Paul Bolin, Vol.25 No.12, December 2002 WWW)

Monster AVS 2000 Automatic Voltage Stabilizer ($1500, reviewed by Chip Stern, Vol.26 No.6, June 2003 WWW)

Symposium Ultra Isolation Platform ($599, reviewed by John Marks, Vol.26 No.3, March 2003 WWW)

This photo finish captures two winners as each attempts to tame the untamable — room acoustics — from very different directions.

When plants and rugs just couldn't cut it anymore, Brian Damkroger found Echo Busters' trio of absorbers, diffusers, and bass traps to be invaluable resources in setting up a new listening room and getting the space to work well with his audio gear. With some Bass Busters, Echo Busters, and Double Busters in place, his room went from being "essentially unlistenable" to having excellent bottom-end balance and articulation with improved image focus, a wider soundstage, and greater density of images. Brian wouldn't live without them.

But what if impractically large acoustic absorbers become...impractical? When adding more panels and traps is no longer an option, the Rives PARC line-level three-band parametric equalizer provides an alternative by attenuating resonant frequencies in a more selective — and fashionable — fashion. Similar to the Echo Busters, the results of the PARC were subtle but undeniably worth the effort. High frequencies seemed a bit brighter, deep bass was unmuddied, and the pulse and meter of complicated passages of music were enhanced, while the midrange and treble range remained untouched.
2003 Editor's Choice

Apple iPod

Not much needs to be said about my choice for 2003. The admission may not earn me any points in politically correct audiophile circles, but Apple's cute little iPod was the product I most enjoyed using this past year. Its large-capacity hard drive and ability to play back uncompressed AIF and WAV files pushes it ahead of run-of-the-mill portable players, while its intuitive, playlist-based interface is a harbinger of how all of us will be surfing our recorded music libraries in the near future.

Barry Willis said it best in a private e-mail: "The iPod is a groundbreaking device, a paradigm shift of the first magnitude. A designer can do anything with a big enough development budget and unlimited number of chips. While the result may be impressive, it is not really a great leap forward, given the prohibitive retail cost and cumbersome implementation. Packing the iPod's level of performance, accessibility, and ease of use into such a small, sleek package ranks right up there with some of the great inventions of all time."

I'll give Chip Stern the final word: "As the stalking dawg for a new class of audio products, the iPod represents part of a long-term survival scheme for two-channel audio."

Amen to that. Hook up an iPod to a pair of in-the-ear headphones like the Etymonic ER-4s or the new Shure E5cs, and you have true high-end sound to go. Now if only it had an S/PDIF digital output!

2003 Budget Product of the Year

Apple iPod

Runners-Up (in alphabetical order):

Atoll Electronique IN 100 integrated amplifier ($1075; reviewed by Sam Tellig, Vol.26 No.4, April 2003)

Benchmark Media Systems DAC1 D/A processor ($850; reviewed by John Marks, Vol.26 No.7, July 2003 WWW)

Meadowlark Swift loudspeaker ($995/pair; reviewed by John Marks, Vol.25 No.11, November 2002 WWW)

Monitor Audio Silver S2 loudspeaker ($749/pair; reviewed by John Atkinson, Vol.26 No.8, August 2003 WWW)

Music Hall MMF-9 turntable (see "Analog")

Naim Nait 5 integrated amplifier ($1550; reviewed by Art Dudley, Vol.26 No.8, August 2003 WWW)

NHT SB-3 loudspeaker ($600/pair; reviewed by Robert J. Reina, Vol.25 No.11, November 2002 WWW)

Polk LS17 loudspeaker ($820/pair; reviewed by Robert J. Reina, Vol.26 No.3, March 2003 WWW)

Pro-Ject Perspective turntable ($999; reviewed by Michael Fremer, Vol.26 No.1, January 2003 WWW)

Rega P3 turntable (see "Analog")

Everyone was surprised by this one. Holding tight to their audiophile morals, Wes Phillips and John Atkinson did the unthinkable dirty deed: They went on a run with the fashionistas and rubbed shoulders with the beautiful people to get to know Apple's sexy white box a bit better. Someone had to do it. Could true audiophiles take this cute little gadget seriously?

JA found that the iPod's measured performance was better than that of many CD players, while WP was most impressed by its ease of use and lack of a single playback standard, allowing it to support even hi-rez digital files.

JA: "Excellent, cost-effective audio engineering from an unexpected source."

WP, channeling a different Apple: "Babe, you're a rich man!" Stephen Mejias: "I still can't afford it."
Room Improvement

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Slow and steady wins the race again. The Quad ESL-989 barely edged out two of our Amplification winners—the earth-quaking Parasound Halo JC 1 and the world-beating VTL TL-7.5—to take home the top prize. Quad’s original ESL speaker made its debut in 1957 as “a genuine breakthrough, not just a refinement of something else,” and the ESL-989 is the latest descendant of what became known as “Walker’s Wonder.” The ’989’s immediate predecessor, the ESL-63, placed second among John Atkinson’s list of the 100 most important audio products since 1962—see www.stereophile.com/showarchives.cgi?709—and was his very first “Editor’s Choice,” back in 1992. While the ’989 still may not be perfect—who wants perfection, anyway?—its improvements are undeniable: more bass, more inner detailing, more depth and sense of spatial location, and a more extended top end, while preserving the original’s alluring midrange and holographic imaging.

Can it continue to improve? Sadly, given Peter Walker’s poor health these days, it’s likely that the ESL-989 represents the end of the road for his vision. Which makes it a fitting recipient of Stereophile’s recognition.

1 In September 2003, Quad published a lavish coffee-table book housing Peter Walker, Quad: The Closest Approach (ISBN 0-9545742-0-6) has been compiled and edited by veteran audio commentator Ken Kessler, and includes interviews with PJW, his son Ross, and long-time Quad designer Mike Albinson, as well as reminiscences by many audio industry notables (including myself). More details can be found at www.iagamerica.com/quad.—John Atkinson

Stereophile, December 2003
Maybe Dan D’Agostino was destined to develop and build a line of products distinguished by their sheer might. After all, he grew up just blocks from a natural phenomenon synonymous with power: Niagara Falls. Even today, when the 56-year-old D’Agostino returns to his boyhood home to visit his parents, he enjoys pulling on a pair of shorts and going for a long run in the adjacent park, which resounds with the Falls’ unrelenting thunder.

D’Agostino’s father, Frank, a machinist by training, owned and operated an appliance store, where Dan worked as a boy, repairing the electric timers in washing
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"The final selection of cabling and system synergy was perhaps the most difficult task but the TQ2 I/Cs were an easy call. I now have TQ2 between all my important components". Tom Jenkins


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Well, you've come about as far as possible from transistor radios. How do you feel about the fact that the Krell name has come to stand for high power?

I have to go back to what Muhammad Ali said: "Float like a butterfly. Sting like a bee." He was a powerful boxer, but he had finesse. Anyone can build a very powerful amplifier. The point is building one that sounds good, and one that sounds good at low volume levels.

Your first amp, the KSA-100, produced 100 watts at a time when the benchmark unit in the field, the Mark Levinson ML2, was rated at 25W. Why did you quadruple the power?

I started looking into why I needed it. I'm always reminded of an article [Stereophile] Julian Hirsch wrote many, many years ago about how much power it took to reproduce a piano on a pair of AR loudspeakers. It was some extraordinary amount of power. That's what got me started, because it occurred to me that the tips of musical material, the peaks, got clipped off. We may not consciously hear it, but some part of us does, and it's the difference between what's real and what's not.

Why did you employ a class-A design?

The amplifier wasn't originally intended to be class-A, but a lot of people were interested in it and talked about it in glowing terms, so I changed a part of my design. I did that, and I listened, and lo and behold, it did sound better. It absolutely sounded better, and it sounded better in the areas that audiophiles listen to: the center image, the fact that the image didn't drift. There was more air around the music, and it seemed to have a wider, much deeper stage. All those things were more apparent when that amplifier was operating in class-A mode. After doing a lot of research, I decided it was feasible to build a 100-watt, pure class-A amplifier. I didn't think anything smaller was big enough power-wise, and anything bigger became more of an engineering monster. It did use fans—they were quiet—and I spent a lot of time figuring out how to make it usable for the average guy, because the heatsinks operated at about 75–80°C, which is just a bit cooler than a clothes iron when it's heated up. So I put really tall feet on the amplifier, and the heatsinks were exposed on the bottom. A little fan was sucking air in and blowing it out, and that enabled me to run it in class-A mode in a relatively small box.

How do you respond to people who listen through your amplifiers and claim to hear a distinctive Krell sound?

We strive to get the maximum amount of bandwidth and use the minimum amount of filtering. I guess that's created a sound, but we haven't done any modeling to satisfy our own particular preferences. I've never wanted to make an amplifier like that, because I've always thought it would color a good recording.

Tell us about Sustained Plateau Biasing, which was a 1990s Krell innovation.

It came from a desire to make larger class-A amplifiers. With [conventional] sliding bias, you're turning the transistor on really hard, then turning it off in conjunction with the incoming musical signal, which creates very unusual and nonlinear distortions in the output stage. What's wrong with it is that it's changing with the music. What's right is that, at idle, it's not drawing a lot of current. I thought about a lot of...
things, and one was the sustain pedal on a piano. When you push it down, the note hangs on. I asked myself why I just couldn't ramp up the bias to the level of class-A that I needed and just hold it there for a period of time. And if another signal comes in that's higher, go up another level and hold it there. And if the level goes back down, after a period of time, which is usually 60 to 90 seconds, go back down as needed. So you get the amount of class-A you need, never more or less. And you're not changing the output stage with the musical signal. Sustained Plateau Bias allowed me to get huge amounts of class-A power for short periods of time.

**DL:** You've also become known for current-mode designs.

**DD:** All of our products for the last 10 years have been really serious current-mode designs. Other companies have it, but we specialize in it. It allows us to get wider bandwidth through the signal path, even though the circuits themselves are a little more complicated and require more parts. Current mode is a domain of current gain as opposed to voltage gain. Obviously, you have to go to voltage gain at some point, but we have as much current gain as we possibly can before we get into voltage-gain stages, which reduces noise.

**DL:** You put even more emphasis on current gain when you developed your Master Reference Amplifier about six years ago.

**DD:** Right. We reid our preamps to better match the MRA. The KCT is a complete current-gain preamp. We eliminated voltage-gain stages that we used in the past and replaced them with current-gain stages.

**DL:** Back in the mid-1990s, you created a separate company called Krell Digital. How was it structured? And what was your rationale?

**DD:** I owned 50%, and investors owned 50%. Digital was in its infancy, and we were unable to finance what we wanted to do, which was to create a 64x-oversampling processor in software. We looked at what was being called 64x-oversampling and realized it wasn't being done in the signal path, but afterward. We actually did it in software. We made a whole processing engine, and it cost a little over a million dollars to do that.

**DD:** And then, between Krell and Krell Digital, you suddenly found yourself with nearly two dozen products — so many they added up to a problem.

**DD:** We couldn't go to the dealer and tell him he had to take all of them, and we didn't want to go to separate dealers, so we wound up buying Krell Digital back and folding it into Krell.

**DD:** Some of your newest products are loudspeakers. You designed speakers when you worked for Dayton Wright, but that was back in the 1970s. What drew you back into the field?

**DD:** What really got me going is that Apogee hired us to do the woofer amp and the tweeter amplifier for their Grand loudspeaker. The speed of the woofer cone was too slow for my taste, so I took my pair of Apogees and pulled them apart, put an accelerometer on the woofer, and created an input/output comparator that could control the woofer without the noise and instability of a feedback loop. But I got it finished too far into the product's life for them to implement it. Then I started playing with it on our Master Reference Subwoofer. We applied it and refined it.

**DL:** The MRS led to the LAT-I. Why did you decide to develop a full-range speaker?

**DD:** One of the main things was dealer politics. We've had a dealer who was selling our stuff really well but who didn't have a main speaker line, so we'd try to get him one we liked. In a lot of areas, we couldn't.

**DL:** Apart from that, what does the LAT-I have that competing speakers don't?

**DD:** We're an electronics company; so we used an electronic model. A lot of loudspeaker companies are very capable, but their electronic abilities are not as great as ours because, obviously, they're not in that business. I haven't been in the speaker business, but I have had speaker experience, and a couple of other people who work here have had speaker experience.

We've designed crossovers for MartinLogan and Apogee and JBL. With its aluminum cabinet and our crossover design, we've made the LAT-I a unique speaker.

**DL:** So the work you've done for other companies over the years should now give your own company a boost. Have you enjoyed those projects?

**DD:** I always like to do things that I don't normally do, because it gives me experience and a broader base of knowledge.

**DL:** Are you currently involved in any consulting projects?

**DD:** No. We've kind of put the lid on it because it's too hard. We don't have enough engineering time as it is to get all the products out that we want to.

**DL:** Has Krell's reputation among audiophiles helped your dealers sell your home-theater line to nonaudiophile customers?

**DD:** In some areas, yes, because we've been able to garner a reasonably well-recognized name. And I think that home-theater customers are very likely to buy one brand right through the product line.

**DD:** That explains the prototype speakers being auditioned as we speak, in your company listening room just down the hall. You're currently planning five new models, and you've promised that they'll be considerably less expensive than the $37,000/pair LAT-I. How much will they sell for?

**DL:** From about $3000 up to $10,000 per pair.

**DL:** Can we expect to see a Krell system for cars?

**DD:** I doubt it. It would be very difficult for us to mount such an effort. We'd have to have financing from the automobile company that wanted us to do it.

**DD:** You're not in the turntable business, and you do offer CD players, but you've said that you prefer vinyl to the CD.

**DD:** I still think vinyl is better, but with the two formats we're dealing with now, DVD-Audio and SACD, I think there's a possibility of equaling vinyl — as soon as we decide not to stick with our old methods of recording. I think we have to go back to the drawing board as far as how we record SACDs, because I don't think their potential has been realized.

**DD:** You began delivering an SACD player not long ago. Do you intend to make a commitment to DVD-A?

**DD:** We're working on a universal digital engine that will translate SACD, DVD-A, 16-bit/44.1kHz. It will translate any kind of thing you put in it, so you can do everything, including video, on it. That begins with a raw datastream, a giant brain. We program it. We write codes and algorithms to make it run.

**DD:** And you can program-in anything that comes down the program-information superhighway.

**DD:** Pretty much, but the penalties are steep. It costs huge amounts in royalties and upfront money to have these technologies at your fingertips so you can manipulate them the way you want. Unlike most other companies, you will not...
see us going out, buying some company's transport, stripping the faceplate off, taking the engine and putting our output stage or our videocard in it. If you're doing that, you don't have to pay these royalties, but there's embedded software and you don't have the versatility we do.

**DL:** Rather than continue using one particular transistor that everyone else was employing, you had Motorola create a solid-state device exclusively for Krell. What, specifically, is it?

**DD:** A power device. An output transistor. The transistor everybody in high-end audio used was really made for switching power supplies in motor drivers, not for audio. Everybody used it because it was robust enough to allow us to have a lot of current and voltage output, but it was relatively slow and had erratic gain. They made a device of their own accord — this was probably 17 or 18 years ago — but it didn't work. I talked to the engineers till I was blue in the face but never could get anywhere. Then, five or six years later, we started petitioning them, asking, "Did you ever fix that device?" They wound up building a version that worked. It had the same current and voltage as the other device, 25 amps at 250 volts, but its bandwidth was 30MHz as opposed to 5MHz. That's what we wanted, because processing in our amplifiers is so minimal. We don't slow the amplifier down unless we absolutely have to. Our goal was to buy a million devices; that's why they built it.

**DL:** And have you bought a million?

**DD:** Oh yeah.

**DL:** How many engineers do you have now?

**DD:** Eleven.

**DL:** And how much time do you personally spend on engineering?

**DD:** Four or five hours every day. I oversee all the work. I assign it, I tell the other engineers how we're going to do it, and I critique what they're doing. So I'm very hands-on.

**DL:** Has being in Connecticut, which has long been a center for defense manufacturing, helped you find skilled technical help?

**DD:** One of the major things that has helped us here is the fact that there are so many contractors. One of our major metal vendors is a big Sikorsky supplier. The machine shops do work for all the military companies around here. They work to a specification that matches what we need.

**DL:** You used to start your day with three double expressos, but we've been sitting here in your office sipping your new drink of choice — tea. Could this signal a change in the no-nonsense Dan D'Agostino, who's known for never pulling his punches? How is your proverbial punch these days?

**DD:** [Laughs] It's a smoother delivery, but the metal's the same.
If you care about performance, ADCOM has the complete solution for your multichannel home theater system. Our power amps are without equal, our advanced resolution 7.1 tuner/preamps push the envelope of performance, and our new line of DVD players will set the standard for high resolution components. When you add it all up, ADCOM is stacked!

Go to www.adcom.com/fatampman to see the premier edition of the FatAmpMan ADCOMics and enter to win a free ADCOM stack.
Delbert McClinton

But whoever's giving him this adoration, McClinton is happy to have it. Judging by his smiles, sweat, and onstage patter—an extended riff on New York women he's known gets big laughs—he's feeling it.

The music business has rarely been kind to Delbert McClinton. For many more years than he now cares to remember, the Texas-born R&B singer, best known for the 1978 hit “Givin' It Up for Your Love” (and for his rough and rowdy ways), was struggling. Unfashionable thanks to his commitment to straight-ahead, blues-based R&B, McClinton soldiered on through a succession of musical fads: disco, punk rock, alt rock, grunge rock, hip-hop, etc. For a long time, it looked as if he'd persevered in vain. He didn't begin to have money in the bank until 10 years ago.

Lately, the stars have aligned for the singer, now 63 years old (who still resembles his younger self, as shown on p.81). For a guy who has a memorable tune called “Why Me?,” everything is suddenly coming up Delbert. Radio host Don Imus has become a big supporter, and McClinton now plays for higher fees to fuller houses. His new record, Live, documents a night in Norway when he and the band were on in a big way. Even his annual Sandy Beaches musical cruise of the Caribbean is making money. Best of all, people are respecting his music.

“Things have gotten a lot better for me in the last several years,” he says, not unaware that we're having this conversation in his room at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel. “I think the business of I-can't-like-it-if-I-don't-know-what-you-call-it has fallen by the wayside a great deal. Used to be people didn't even want to listen. 'Well, that's not the kind of music I listen to.' ‘How do you know it's not? You haven't heard it.' 'Well, is it this or that?' ‘Well, it's a little bit of that and a little bit of this.' That's just a nut. And that's gotten a lot better.

“I guess the thing that I've gotten out of the last three years is some vindication, if for nobody other than myself. I knew it was good, but I was having a hard time getting it in front of an audience. And that's gotten better. And with the success of these past two records, I'm sitting on top of the world.”

What changes will McClinton make now that he's no longer living, as he once put it, “on popcorn and mayonnaise”? A change of costumes between numbers?

“Not that so much,” he says with a grin. “But when you've got 12 guys on a bus...it's like being in a German submarine. No, [laugh] I don't need any extravagance whatsoever. In fact, I enjoy being with the band, I don't even know that I would change that.”

McClinton's climb began in the late 1950s in Fort Worth, TX, when he and The Stratajackets backed such bluesmen as Howlin' Wolf and Big Joe Turner, and McClinton was bitten by the upbeat, electric blues bug. In 1960, his cover of Sonny Boy Williamson's “Wake Up Baby” was one of the first records by a white artist to be played on local blues station KNOK.

The mention of many still consider his biggest claim to fame makes him smile and roll his eyes, but McClinton dutifully recounts for the millionth time how, while in England in 1962 with singer Bruce Channel, his younger self taught an even younger John Lennon a few tricks on the harmonica, one of which ended up as the famous lick on “Love Me Do.”

McClinton, always a songwriter, began plying that craft with the Ron-Dels (aka the Rondells), and later as half of Delbert and Glen (with Glen Clark). The 1972 Delbert and Glen album featured one of his most enduring tunes, “B Movie Boxcar Blues,” later covered by John Belushi and Dan Aykroyd on the first Blues Brothers album. It also featured a classic Delbertism, “Ain't What You Eat but the Way You Chew It.”

“They're dated. Nobody ever heard those records. I'm slowly in the process of redoing that stuff. I wrote 'em and I'd like to sell 'em, especially with a new treatment. I've tried and tried and tried to make some kind of deal with Atlantic Records to let me put them out. I don't even think they know where they are, 'cause they won't even talk to me now.”

When Delbert and Glen's second album, Subject to Change (1973), failed to sell, McClinton signed a deal with ABC Records and released his solo debut, Victim of Life's Circumstances. A long string of critically successful but slow-selling albums followed: Genuine Cowhide (1976), with its memorable cover image depicting a worn wallet with the outline of a prophylactic, and Love Rustler (1977) (both on ABC). They were followed by Second Wind (1978) and Keeper of the Flame (1979), both on Capricorn; and The Jezus Kind (1980) and Plain from the Heart (1981), both on Muscle Shoals Sound.

McClinton's ascent began in earnest when he met Wendy Goldstein, a producer at NBC in New York. She began organizing previously neglected areas of his career, such as music publishing and back taxes. His first live album, Live in Austin (1989, Alligator), showcased what has always, along with his ability to write songs, been one of the two pillars of McClinton's talent: his killer live show.

It was also around this time that he met Don Imus. McClinton leans back in his chair and shakes his head when I mention the impact his improbable friendship with Imus has had on his life.

“I know it, man. Can you imagine trying to buy that? Started when he came to a show I did, years ago, I think it was at the old Lone Star [in New York]. I didn't know him from Adam. He was already a personality around here. All I knew was, I was fucking up and crazy and so was he. We fell in together. The very first night we met, we both got to talking about, you know, we really got to quit doing this. And we did. He cleaned up about the same time as I did. The odd part about it is that we both have one single habit that we can't seem to break. And it's Nicorette gum.

“I'll take that one, though. We laugh about how fucking crazy we were and how we were wasting our lives. That's how we met, being all screwed up, and talking about how we knew we were and we needed to fix it.”

When he's in New York, McClinton is a regular guest on Imus's popular morning radio show, although he admits that getting up at 5am isn't really his thing. (The day we talked, I was the last interviewer before he pulled the blinds, unplugged the phone, and took a long nap.) But even McClinton marvels at the Imus factor. Are they pals, or is it a marriage of convenience?

“I can call him any time I want to. I give him a lot of room and he gives me a lot of room. He's a busy guy and I'm a busy guy. I don't need to hang out with Don all the time. It's not that kind of friendship. But he'd do anything for me, as I
would for him. Our friendship began at an odd juncture and became strong because we both got well from it.

The early 1990s was the first peak in McClinton's career. His songwriting began paying dividends; he moved to Nashville, and his songs were covered by the likes of Wynonna Judd, Martina McBride, and Vince Gill. In 1991 he won a Grammy for Best Rock Vocal, Duo or Group, for his duet with Bonnie Raitt on “Good Man, Good Woman.” That track was released on Raitt's Lick of the Dice and on McClinton's 1990 album, Never Been Rocked Enough, his strongest effort in years. It includes “Why Me?,” “Miss You Fever,” and “Every Time I Roll the Dice," his biggest hit single since “Givin' It Up For Your Love” more than a decade before.

McClinton has often joked that he's a cur on record labels: once they sign him, they're doomed to go out of business—fast. The curse struck three times between 1971 and 1981, and again in 1997, when Rising Tide, a Nashville-based indie backed by major label Universal Records that had been launched with grand aspirations, closed its doors mere months after the release of One of the Fortunate Few. Loaded with guest shots—Lyle Lovett, B.B. King, John Prine, and others—the album sold 250,000 copies before the label and its catalog disappeared.

Undaunted—“used to setbacks” is more likely—McClinton signed with yet another independent label, this time Austin, Texas–based New West Records, and released Nothing Personal, which won a 2001 Grammy for Best Contemporary Blues album. The album's title is one of the axioms he's had to learn to live by, and may also serve as the guiding principle behind his new pact with New West.

“It's been real good so far. I was able to make the deal I wanted instead of someone making me a deal. The fact that I own these records—I just lease them to New West—that in itself is inspirational.”

Now, in one of the bizarre, to use the word, “junctures” that seem to pop up in his career when least expected, McClinton has released Live, a live album that was never meant to be. Originally a radio broadcast from the annual Bergen Blues Festival in Teagertogen, Norway, the two-disc, 19-track set is a near-thrill dose of McClinton's current live show, which is as sharp, focused, and funky as he and it have ever been. If anything an overly critical judge of his own records, the singer says he had a good feeling about this set as soon as the radio producers burned him a test CD.

“The ambient sound on this record, to me, is in itself thrilling. It feels like you're sitting right there in the room with it all going on. You can hear every breath in the room. If you're hearing something live and somebody fucks up a little bit—a little clam, you know—and then makes a great recovery from it... I love that, man. It's like gettin' an inside track. I can't stand perfect music. I want to hear it go up on two wheels and almost turn over. And I think we got that on this record.”

Much of the punch on Live and the live show comes from McClinton's current seven-piece band, easily the best he's ever had. While the tenures of its members vary—from just a year for hot, hot, hot guitarist Rob McNelley, to 21 years for saxophonist Don Wise—this band routinely lays out fast, tight versions of McClinton standards like “Going Back to Louisiana” as easily as it nails newer tunes it's played in studio versions, such as “Squeeze Me In.”

“I've had a lot of fools in my band and I've been a fool in the band. But there comes a point in time where you gotta say, 'Well, do you want to be a fool or do you want to keep doing this—making music and having a good time? So I surrounded myself with non-fools. It's a very stable atmosphere. I pay my guys good, as they should be. I'm not trying to be greedy, I just want everybody to be happy.”

Being happy is a place where, thankfully, McClinton himself now dwells. Now sporting the mustache he's sprouted occasionally during his career, he looks and sounds better than ever, despite 40 years of personal demons, record labels gone sour, and an incredible number of road miles. Those miles, combined with his recent modest success, have given him a more balanced perspective on the musical world that now surrounds him—a world radically different from when he started.

“It's a silly bunch of crap now. It's all, get the marketing people in the room and say, 'Well, what can we sell? What can we sell this.' Can you put something together like this and get a pretty face?”

“That's not to say there's not some talented people out there. There are. I think Avril Lavigne is absolutely phenomenal. She is just such a good singer and songwriter. There are people out there who are over-the-top great, but the bottom line is it's corporate-driven, visual image, tits and ass, and girls kissin' onstage. It gets back to the old, old saying: trash sells. It's funny how, when somebody ceases to shock ya, how quick they cease to interest you.

“But I don't want to badmouth what anybody's doing. I just came from a different place.”

Stereophile, December 2003

Stefano Flood
With the exception of dCS and Accuphase, you don't see anyone jumping on the bandwagon of $15,000-plus SACD players — and for good reason. Despite enthusiasm for the format within the relatively small audiophile community, high-resolution audio isn't exactly making waves on the front pages — or even the back pages — of the mainstream news media. And while ABKCO Records has sold millions of Rolling Stones hybrid SACD/CDs, and Sony is looking to repeat that phenomenon with the recent Dylan hybrids, what's being sold in both cases are CDs, not SACDs. The higher-resolution layer is simply going along for the ride.

The good news is that, despite the mania for digital MP3 downloads and the media's focus on it, to get good sound, millions of discerning consumers are clearly still willing to pay for what they could easily steal online. (I don't care how greedy or evil the record biz might be — I think unauthorized file sharing is stealing.)

But the long-term survival of the SACD format remains uncertain. Now that DVD-Audio is finally awakening from its corporate-induced slumber, many consumers are taking a wait-and-see stance toward both. The video-based DVD-A medium, in particular, is problematic for many audiophiles, who like to keep kosher when it comes to audio and video. But some great DVD-A titles are now being released, such as the recent reissue of the Beach Boys' *Pet Sounds*, featuring engineer Mark Linnert's superb 5.1-channel remix, along with the stereo and original mono mixes, in 24-bit/96kHz sound. Who wants to miss such a treat — and hundreds more like it — by buying an expensive player that decodes only SACD?

That's the issue dCS is facing, having issued the two-channel, $33,000 SACD assemblage of Verdi transport, Purcell D/D converter, and Elgar Plus DSD DAC, and which I reviewed in the April 2003 issue. No doubt there are some well-heeled audiophiles who have huge collections of CDs, are buying SACDs, and will invest in such a product because it maximizes CD sound and can decode SACD as well, but how many? Meanwhile, aside from Linn's Unidisk 1.1 universal player ($10,995), audiophiles wanting a high-quality universal player are still on hold. And the question remains: How many audiophiles want video anything in their audio systems?

Perhaps that's why Krell — known for its price-no-object assaults on the state of the art — has entered the SACD wars by taking aim, with the $4000 SACD Standard, at a more modest segment of the market. Perhaps Krell figures that it's better to let the market shake itself out than to empty the corporate piggy-bank by laying odds on a risky bet.

**Standard Krell**

Despite its relatively modest price of $4000, Krell's SACD Standard has absorbed technology and build quality that Krell pioneered in its far more expensive products. The chassis-within-a-chassis design gives a fortress-like solidity designed to provide an ultra-stable, vibration-resistant platform for the Philips SACD transport. Once past

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**Description:** Multichannel SACD/CD player using 24-bit Burr-Brown, dual-differential DACs and Philips disc transport. Digital outputs: 1 optical (TosLink), 1 S/PDIF (RCA), both CD only. Analog outputs: 1 pair balanced (XLR), 5.1-channel single-ended (RCA). Frequency response: 20Hz–20kHz, +0/-0.5dB. S/N Ratio: 105dB SACD, 108dB CD, both A-weighted. Channel separation: not specified.

**Dimensions:** 17.9" W by 5.7" H by 16.5" D. Weight: 25 lbs.

**Finishes:** black, silver.

**Serial number of unit reviewed:** 57303060025.

**Price:** $4000. Approximate number of dealers: 150. Warranty: 5 years parts & labor.

**Manufacturer:** Krell Industries, 45 Connair Road, Orange, CT 06477-3650. Tel: (203) 799-9954. Fax: (201) 891-2028. Web: www.krellonline.com.
the OEM drive kit (transport, display and their power supply) and the differentially configured 24-bit Burr-Brown DACs, the circuitry is unique to Krell. This includes the discrete-topology, post-DAC filtering, with separate minimal phase-shift filters optimized for PCM and DSD signals. Power derives from a custom toroidal transformer wound with separate taps for the DACs and analog output stages. Several stages of discrete, Krell-designed linear output regulators are said to produce a quiet, stable, low-impedance voltage supply.
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The dual-differential, fully balanced output stage features Krell's current-mode design, based on the circuits used in their KPS-28c CD player ($7500) and KCT (for Krell Current Tunnel) preamplifier ($22,500), whose bandwidth is claimed to be -3dB at 15MHz. Krell claims that a current-based audio circuit is capable of far greater bandwidth and is less susceptible to circuit-induced capacitances than the voltage-based variety. If left unchecked, such capacitances can have deleterious effects on the sound. Krell claims that its current-based design results in extended bandwidth and phase coherence for its output stage, even though the latter does act as a conventional voltage source.

The Standard, available in black or silver, is handsome but understated so—if you use the black version's front-panel controls instead of its remote control, you'd better have good lighting or you won't be able to identify the tiny, unlabeled buttons on either side of the central display and disc drawer. Fortunately, the layout of buttons is logical: to the left are the basic transport functions of Track Change, Search, Open/Close, Pause, Stop, and Play; to the right are Shuffle, Scan, Repeat, Repeat A/B, Display, and Dim. Also on the left is a Filter button that gives you a choice of two low-pass filters for PCM (CD), four for DSD (SACD). More about that later.

The remote control is likely to cause some controversy. Rather than using discrete, mechanical buttons, the SACD Standard's remote is a slim, "membrane"-type design more commonly used with such products as the Bose Wave radio—which, as we all know, can replace an entire rack's worth of bulky, old-fashioned components of the sort built by Krell. Krell's remote is far more substantial than what's commonly used with overachieving table radios, and is far less likely to scratch the furniture than the remotes often found accompanying.

**Measurements**

As reviewed, the Krell's maximum output from its unbalanced outputs conformed to the CD standard at 1.97V RMS. This doubled, as expected, from the balanced L/R outputs. Neither set of outputs inverted absolute polarity, and the source impedance was 119 ohms unbalanced and 238 ohms balanced, both figures usefully low. Error correction for CD playback was excellent, the player coping with gaps in the data spiral up to 1mm in length without audible glitches.

The SACD Standard's channel separation (not shown) was superb, at 110dB in the R-L direction, 120dB in the other. Its frequency response for CD playback was the same from both outputs and was superbly flat up to the upper octave, where it started to roll off a little early with Filter 1 (fig.1, top pair of traces), though not enough to be audible. Filter 2 gave a much steeper rolloff above 12kHz, reaching -3dB just above 20kHz (fig.1, middle traces). This tradeoff in the frequency domain is to give better time-domain resolution, though the audible difference may be subtle. (Note that there is no passband level difference between these two filters for CD playback.) Pre-emphasized data gave a very similar response (fig.1, bottom traces), confirming that the small number of pre-emphasized CDs will play back correctly.

With SACD data, all the Krell's filter choices were basically flat within the audio band, differing only in the ultimate rolloff and gain. Filter 1 is specified as having the greatest ultrasonic bandwidth, but it still reaches its -3dB point at 50kHz (fig.2, bottom traces), which I believe is mandated by SACD licensor Sony and Philips—see www.stereophile.com/showarchives.cgi?180:7. Filter 2 gave an overall gain of 0.5dB, but with a slightly faster ultrasonic rolloff (-3dB at 44kHz). Filters 3 and 4 featured gains of 5.15dB and 3.35dB, respectively (fig.2, top two pairs of traces), with, again, slightly different rolloff slopes (-3dB at 40kHz and 50kHz, respectively).

Fig.3 shows spectral analyses of the Krell player's output while it decoded dithered 16-bit (CD) data and DSD (SACD) data representing a 1kHz tone at -90dBFS, as well as DSD data representing a dithered 1kHz tone at -120dBFS. The Krell's noise floor is low—note the negligible level error on the -120dBFS tone—but the DSD encoding offers only about a bit's worth of resolution improvement over CD in the midrange and low treble while, as usual, the SACD actually has less resolution in the top audio octave (though by only a trivial amount). All the traces in the graph have a slight "bump" in the noise floor apparent at 200Hz, though this is probably irrelevant.

Linearity error for CD playback...
high-end gear, and which seem milled from a billet of kryptonite.

The SACD Standard’s rear panel has stereo XLR balanced output jacks, 5.1-channel single-ended RCA jacks, coaxial and TosLink digital outs (PCM only), 12V trigger jacks, an IEC AC jack, the On/Off switch, and an additional remote IR sensor and RS-232 communications port to permit the player to be integrated into one of those touchpad universal control systems that pops your corn, rolls up your shades, flushes your toilet, and makes you think you’re Master of the Universe.

If you want a comprehensive instruction manual for the SACD Standard, you’ll have to download it from Krell’s website as a PDF file and print it out. Both the quick setup guide that is packed with the Standard and the complete PDF version are crisply written and well-organized. In fact, they’re models of how instruction manuals should be written.

Sound

The SACD Standard was run in two-channel balanced mode into a VTL TL-7.5 preamplifier that I had on short-

Measurements

was very low down to below -110dBFS (fig.4), and is actually dominated by the recording’s inherent dither noise. As noted above, the Krell’s analog noise level is low, which, in conjunction with the excellent linearity, results in virtually perfect reproduction of an undithered 1kHz sinewave at -90.31dBFS, played back from CD (fig.5). The three discrete voltage levels can be clearly perceived, with excellent matching between the positive- and negative-going halves of the waveform.

The Krell SACD Standard offered superbly low distortion, even into low impedances. Peculiarly, the spectrum of the distortion did differ slightly for CD and SACD playback: in the former, the third harmonic was highest in level (fig.6); in the latter, the second harmonic (fig.7). But, as can be seen from these graphs, the levels were so low that it is hard to see that they will have any subjective consequences.

Intermodulation distortion was also extremely low (fig.8) — the 1kHz difference component resulting

Fig 4 Krell SACD Standard, balanced, right-channel departure from linearity, 16-bit CD data (20B/vertical div.).

Fig 5 Krell SACD Standard, waveform of undithered 1kHz sinewave at -90.31dBFS, 16-bit CD data.

Fig 6 Krell SACD Standard, unbalanced, spectrum of 1kHz sinewave, DC–1kHz, at 0dBFS into 8k ohms, CD data (linear frequency scale).

Fig 7 Krell SACD Standard, unbalanced, spectrum of 1kHz sinewave, DC–1kHz, at 0dBFS into 8k ohms, SACD data (linear frequency scale).
TERM LOAN. (The TL-7.5 is everything Paul Bolin said it was in the October issue, and if I can figure out a way to buy it, I just might.) I compared the Krell Standard to my reference Musical Fidelity Tri-Vista SACD player ($6500), which uses the same Philips transport.1

The SACD Standard is the first Krell model I've had in my system in 17 years of reviewing, so I was extremely curious to hear the company's take on SACD—or on anything, for that matter. I began with the SACD of the Police's Synchronicity (A&M Chronicles 069 493 606-2). Wow! Compared to the rich, warm-sounding Musical Fidelity Tri-Vista, the Krell delivered a full, Naim-like immediacy and rhythmic drive that was startling, exciting, and extremely involving. Bass control, focus, and solidity were noticeably more coherent. Stewart Copeland's kick drum on "Every Breath You Take"

from an equal mix of 19kHz and 20kHz tones lies at −106dB (0.0005%)—though Filter 2's precipitous but slower rolloff seen in fig.1 is associated with a higher-than-usual amount of 24.1kHz component. Of course, the noise floor around this fundamental is low, the noise modulation accompanying CD playback. Will this be audible? Certainly low-frequency noise modulation can be audible, but high-frequency effects might well be masked by the music program and by the ear's decreasing sensitivity in this region.

1 I feel obliged to make some disclosures: Musical Fidelity sponsors an advertisement on my website, www.musicangle.com; the company's owner, Antony Michaelson, has taken me to lunch and dinner many times, and we've become chummy. I've rarely said five words to Krell's Dan D'Agostino in my 17 years of audio reviewing, and he's never taken me to lunch or dinner or offered me so much as a candy bar.

Stereophile, December 2003

Fig.8 Krell SACD Standard, unbalanced, HF intermodulation spectrum, DC–25kHz, 19+20kHz at 0dBFS into 8k ohms (linear frequency scale).

Fig.9 Krell SACD Standard, unbalanced, high-resolution jitter spectrum of analog output signal (11.025kHz at −6dBFS sampled at 44.1kHz with LSB toggled at 229Hz). Center frequency of trace, 11.025kHz; frequency range, ±3.5kHz. (Grayed-out trace is SACD playback of 11.025kHz tone.)
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Stereophile, December 2003
was far better-defined, each contact of mallet on skin sending a tight shock wave of energy into the room. The same was true of Sting's bass line, each pluck of string had a far more distinct and dimensional, physical outline than through the Tri-Vista.

Yet the Standard's superior three-dimensional musical detail and rhythmic grip weren't accompanied by brittleness or a mechanical aftertaste, and though there appeared to be greater high-frequency extension and a slight upper-midrange emphasis, its presentation didn't sound bright or overly etched. In fact, the Standard seemed to have the same mid- and high-frequency ease and smoothness as the Musical Fidelity. Every SACD player I have heard, no matter the price, seems to have that, which is one reason the format is so attractive to audiophiles.

To better level the playing field, I then ran the SACD Standard single-ended, which equalized the outputs (the Krell's balanced output runs 6dB higher than its unbalanced) and made the direct comparisons more revealing. (The Standard does sound its best in balanced mode, but if you run single-ended only, don't let that stop you from comparing it.)

Police's "Tea in the Sahara" was a different experience with each player. Through the Tri-Vista, Sting's bass line had thick, almost lazy lift. There was a warm, wet midrange ambience in which Andy Summers' chorous guitar spread diffusely across the soundstage in the same plane as the drums. Through the Krell, each pop of Sting's syncopated bass line was far more organized rhythmically and harmonically. The harmonic components of Summers' chorous guitar were easier to delineate, and the mix of tonal colors was more distinctively portrayed compared to the Tri-Vista's more laid-back delivery.

Yet there was nothing etched, analytical, or bright about the Standard's overall presentation or tonal balance. The Tri-Vista's rendering was somewhat warmer, and passed along more context-defining midbass, as well as what seemed to be a wider-ranging harmonic palette, but it couldn't compare, overall, to the Standard's self-assurance, rhythmic swagger, and holographic soundstage presentation.

Because both players use the same Philips transport, either remote operated both units simultaneously. I was therefore easily able to get exact sync using duplicate SACDs I have, including Mobile Fidelity's recent reissue of Vox Turnabout's famous 1975 Ravel program, featuring Bolero, La Valse, and Pour un Infante Defunte, with Stanislaw Skrowaczewski conducting the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra (Mobile Fidelity UDSACD 4002). This quadraphonic recording, engineered by Joanna Nickrenz and Marc J. Aubort, has long been considered an audiophile classic, and this remastering, with new notes by Aubort, will quickly let you know why.

The two players presented entirely different takes on this transparent, expansive recording. The Krell Standard offered brassier brass, more snap to the snare, superior instrumental focus, more hall-reflection detail, and greater front-to-back precision—especially its forward placement of the string section. The MF Tri-Vista had a more laid-back, velvety-smooth overall sheen that emphasized the woody quality of the strings and the timpani's lower-bass content over the initial percussive thud, which the Standard delineated with far greater authority. Subjectively, either the Tri-Vista was somewhat laid-back in the mids or the Standard pushed the mids slightly forward. This and other simply miked acoustic recordings demonstrated that the Standard was all about detail, resolution, and three-dimensionality, while the Tri-Vista was more about overall spatial context and tonal richness.

Other rock SACDs I auditioned, including some of the Rolling Stones reissues and Bob Dylan's Highway 61 Revisited (Columbia CH 9034, produced by my old friend Steve Berkowitz), confirmed that the two players offered totally different, consistent, and easy-to-predict sonic perspectives. I enjoyed listening to both players, but the Standard's rhythmic grip, immediacy, detail, and three-dimensional presentation definitely worked better for rock and pop. What did the warmer, more laid-back Tri-Vista.

Two variables could affect the sonic outcome but not change the basics: cables and, in the case of the Standard, choice of filter. The Standard offers four filters for SACD playback. The first has the highest bandwidth, extending to 180kHz with a gradual rolloff. The second extends to 75kHz, with the steepest rolloff. It also offers 0.5dB gain across the entire passband. The third filter operates to 80kHz and has the second-steepest rolloff, while increasing gain by a very high 5.5dB over the passband. Filter No.4 operates to 90kHz and has the third-steepest rolloff, with a 3.5dB gain over the passband. Krell offers no guidance as to which to try when; after adjusting for the level changes, I found the effects subtle, my preference depending on the source.

Reviewers are supposed to regularly freshen their ears with live music, but while hearing live music is a good thing, I'm not sure it's much help in the reviewing process. Last week, from the 20th row of Avery Fisher Hall, I heard Loren Maazel conduct the New York Philharmonic in a stupendous performance of Mahler's Symphony 5. When the massed string sections began sawing away at their instruments, it got bright — Avery Fisher can be that way.

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**Associated Equipment**

**Analog sources:** ELP LT-2XRC Laser Turntable, Simon Yorke S7 turntable; Graham 2.2, Immedia RPM2 tonearms; Lyra Titan, Sumiko Bluebird cartridges.

**Digital source:** Musical Fidelity Tri-Vista SACD player.

**Preamplification:** Manley Steelhead, ASR Basis Exclusive phono sections; VTL TL-7.5 preamplifier.

**Power amplifiers:** Musical Fidelity kW monoblocks.

**Loudspeakers:** Audio Physic Avanti III, Wilson Audio Watt/Puppy 7.


**Accessories:** PS Audio Power Plant P300, Shunyata Research Hydra AC conditioners; Sounds of Silence Vibraphane active isolation platform, Symposium Rollerblocks (Tungsten, Grade 3 superbass), Finite Elemente Ceraball interface & equipment stands, Audiodynamics Cable Cooker 2.0, Walker motor drive, ASC Tube Traps, Shakti Stones & On-Lines, RPG BAD & Abffusor panels.

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The next day, I played parts of Benjamin Zander and the Philharmonia Orchestra's superb-sounding Mahler 5 (Telarc 25502-605690) on both SACD players, and aside from concluding that both sounded wonderful, and that the Standard's timbral balance was closer to what I heard at Avery Fisher Hall, I don't think it proved much. What if I'd been sitting way back, or in the balcony, or in one of the hall's notorious dead zones? What if I'd attended the Maazel performance in a warmer hall? You get my drift. The Tri-Vista's presentation was more like sitting at the back of the cavernous Avery Fisher, the Standard's more like my 20th-row seat.

The only definite conclusion I drew was that, when it comes to presenting the grandeur and flow of live music, SACD, like a good LP, does an adequate job, while even the best CDs (and CD layers) sound mechanical and closed-in. Using either player, compare the SACD and CD layers of the Telarc Mahler 5's opening measures: open and glorious vs. pressed between layers of glass. The trumpet's subtle ebb, flow, and decay on the SACD layer sounds the way it does live. On the CD layer, it just gets muffled and goes away.

Olga Kern's performance of Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto I, with Christopher Seaman conducting the Rochester Philharmonic (SACD, Harmonia Mundi HMU 807325), is a superbly transparent if somewhat warm recording. The Standard's more holographic presentation put the piano in greater relief, but did not overemphasize it or give it a cardboard-cutout quality. But with this recording I preferred the rich, sonorous warmth of the Tri-Vista's presentation because it seemed to better complement the intentions of the recording engineer. Because of that warmer presentation, the French horns had greater body, the double basses more weight, and the piano's pressurization of the hall — especially when Kern depressed a pedal — was more clearly defined and felt.

The CD Question

Through the Krell SACD Standard, good CDs sounded not as good as when upsampled to DSD through the $34,000 dCS stack — as I remember it. But they had greater image specificity, solidity, and clarity than when played through the Musical Fidelity Tri-Vista, which, though richer and warmer, gave up some detail and dimensionality, much as it did in the SACD-layer comparisons. But both players did a much better job with CDs than did earlier SACD players I've auditioned.

In my review of the Tri-Vista in the May 2003 Stereophile, I wrote that it sounded richer than the dCS stack but that the scale of the stage size dropped down a few notches in width, height, and especially depth. That was the case here too, as the Standard presented a wider, deeper, airier, taller picture, depth being the biggest difference.

If I had to choose one player to listen to Patricia Barber's Companion on, it would be the SACD Standard.

I also noted the dCS stack's greater image specificity, solidity, and crystalline transient clarity compared to the Tri-Vista's richer overall picture. That was the case here as well. The Standard was an excellent-sounding CD player, offering outstanding transparency and clarity and good edge definition without sounding artificial, and an appropriately big, airy picture. Its bass control and extension were as noted in the SACD comparison.

The Tri-Vista's CD performance, like its SACD playback, was warmer, tonally laid-back, and somewhat more softly focused than the Standard's. These differences were more apparent in direct A/B comparisons than when I simply listened for a while to each. Perhaps I'm over-emphasizing the differences for the purposes of the review, but one area where I'm not exaggerating is bass control and focus. The Standard beat the Tri-Vista by a wide margin in this area, and with that upper hand came superior rhythm and pacing and thus greater musical excitement.

I wrote the liner notes for Mobile Fidelity's new SACD release of Patricia Barber's Companion, recorded live at Chicago's The Green Mill. I didn't say much about the sound because at the time I had only the standard CD on hand. Now I have two copies of this excellent Jim Anderson "Red Book" recording, so I put a copy in each player and did the old A/B again. The Standard delivered more air, space, image focus, and specificity, while the Tri-Vista offered more of the spatial context and room size, with a slightly softer and warmer overall presentation. Barber's piano had greater percussive thrust via the Standard, and sported a bit more wood through the Tri-Vista. Both were very fine-performing CD players through which I thoroughly enjoyed the Barber album. I'm sure the SACD version of Companion will be even better, and suspect that if I had to choose one player to listen to it on, it would be the SACD Standard.

Conclusions

Krell claims that the SACD Standard offers "every bit of detail" available on an SACD. After spending some months with it, I tend to agree. Krell claims "extended bandwidth." Again, I agree. Krell claims that the Standard is an "exceptional value." I'm more than agree. For $4000, you get an outstanding CD player and a superb-sounding SACD player that has exceptional bass extension, control, and rhythmic surefootedness. The Standard's resolution of detail, dynamics, high-frequency extension, and soundstaging were also notable, and its overall presentation was musically and viscerally exciting without being bright, mechanical, or overly analytical. The Standard is an exciting-sounding, musically compelling player that rocks. Yet it also offers the delicacy, detail, and harmonic purity demanded by classical music.

What's more, you get fully balanced two-channel operation and surround-sound capabilities, though if you're not using full-range speakers all around, you'll have to provide your own bass management. You also get a choice of sonic contouring filters. Given that my reference Musical Fidelity Tri-Vista SACD player offers neither multi-channel operation nor balanced stereo outputs nor multiple filter options and costs $2500 more, the Krell SACD Standard is a highly desirable bargain.

The Tri-Vista's construction is far befeeter (it weighs twice as much, though that doesn't necessarily mean its rigidity is any more effective), and it offers 192kHz CD upsampling and access to the DAC for use with other sources. The Musical Fidelity is a wonderfully conceived and executed product, and I bought it with enthusiasm. Some might prefer its grace and warmth, but, given my musical predilections, if I had to choose one SACD player, regardless of price, I'd go for the Krell. It's swell. Now gimme a candy bar, Dan.

Stereophile, December 2003
Linn Unidisk 1.1 universal disc player

The manufacture and marketing of so-called "universal" digital disc players should have been a no-brainer right from the start. I recall the first demo of SACD I attended, when both SACD and DVD-Audio were little more than promises and contentions. That prototype Philips player consisted of several cubic feet of hardware controlled by a computer, even though mockups of more marketable SACD players were arrayed around the room. After the demo, I asked one of the Philips engineers if it was possible to make a player that could handle CD, SACD, and DVD-A. His reply: "Sure, if they let me do it."

Now, while the partisans of SACD and of DVD-Audio continue to rail about which is superior and which will triumph, most of us have not yet picked a side—if the musical contents appeal, we just want to play any available disc, regardless of format. It's today's version of the old issue of "Will it play in my VHS?" It's a question none of us should have to ask.

Fortunately, more and more universal players are appearing on the market and in the review pages of Stereophile, but one must always ask just how "universal" these actually are. To be truly universal, such a device must play not only all the obvious high-end formats—CD, SACD, DVD-Audio—but also DVD-Video (comes along with DVD-A) with Dolby Digital and DTS, VCD, SVCD, MP3, MPEG, CD-R, CD-RW, DVD-R, DVD-RW, and DVD+RW. And while we're at it, HDCD might be nice. As of September 2003, I have yet to see a player that does all of this, but things are moving fast. But even more important than comprehensive compatibility will be any truly universal player's ability to optimally play back all of these formats without robbing Peter to pay Paul.

The Linn Unidisk 1.1 ($10,995) comes tantalizingly close to being able to play every type of 5" silver disc—and, if Linn's contention that its Silverdisk Engine favors no format at the expense of another, of providing "a level playing field" for all discs.

The Silverdisk processor is not a chip but a board full of devices that recognizes the format of the digital signals on the inserted disc and: 1) activates the hardware appropriate for decoding that particular format; 2) deactivates all unnecessary modules, including their clocks and oscillators; 3) routes the signals through the active modules; and 4) formats the output into digital data-streams suitable for digital/analog conversion. The Silverdisk Engine is entirely digital, leaving the analog stages to devices on another board, isolated from the digital business end.

Linn sees the Silverdisk as a basic platform that can be adapted to various players by combinations of board reprogramming, device repopulation, disc transports, and/or analog boards. In the case of the Unidisk 1.1, the Silverdisk Engine and other boards are populated by the highest levels of component quality and isolation of components and functions. Linn has already designed a Unidisk 2.1, which offers a slightly less exalted level of performance but with an extended audio feature set. (See www.linn.co.uk/spec_sound/products.cfm?range=Universal%20Disc%20Player.)

After spending a morning with a Linn engineer, who gave me a guided tour of an eviscerated Unidisk, I was glad to get my hands on what looked to me to be the sleekest, most elegant player I was ever to have handled. We've already seen Linn's transmutation of high-wattage power amps, the Kinlax 500 Solo (see review in the October 1999 Stereophile, Vol.22 No.10). The Unidisk 1.1 is no less a revelation at 10.8 lbs and less than 0.4 of a cubic foot. Turning it about in my hands created no impression of gravitas, but in operation it never buzzed or vibrated, and sat quite solidly on every surface.

The front-panel controls are few and


**Dimensions:** 14.9" (381mm) W by 3.1" (80mm) H by 14.4" (368mm) D. Weight: 10.8 lbs (4.9kg).

**Serial number of unit reviewed:** 890898.

**Price:** $10,995. Approximate number of dealers: 140.

**Manufacturer:** Linn Products Ltd., Floors Road, Waterfoot, Glasgow G76 0EP, Scotland, UK. Tel: (44) (0)141-307-7777. Fax: (44) (0)141-644-4262.

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Stereophile, December 2003
intuitive. To the left of the central disc drawer and display are a large Open/Close button and two smaller ones, for Skip/Search forward and back. To the drawer's right are the large Play and the smaller Pause and Stop buttons. Most of these do double duty in menu navigation, but for that, the remote control is more convenient.

The rear panel is busier, providing the myriad audio and video connections. Most notable for audiophiles is the presence of both balanced and unbalanced L/R (stereo) outputs, in addition to unbalanced RCA jacks for multichannel line outputs. Digital audio outputs, both TosLink and coax (BNC, not RCA), are S/PDIF but are programmable for use in multichannel environments; they are also defeatable. Digital output is not provided for SACD, but can be up to 96kHz for DVD, or downsampled to 48kHz or 44.1kHz, depending on the disc type.

Setup via the Unidisk's onscreen display (OSD) system was simple and straightforward, and get this: The Linn Unidisk does not require a video monitor for setup or, for the most part, for use in a strictly audio system (but see below). The default settings are S/PDIF = Raw (all formats output), LPCM = 96kHz, and Channel Setup = 5.1-channel. Moreover, the last can be changed on the fly from the remote's Audio Adj button. Add to this a very readable and adjustable front-panel display, and one comes as close to obviating the need for a monitor as the DVD-Audio format permits. That said, the Unidisk's OSD is no slouch for setup or program display.

Has Linn slipped up anywhere in the ergonomics department? Well, my aging eyes would have appreciated bigger labels and a backlit remote. Nobody's perfect.

**Two channels in the big city system**

With one hand, I slipped the Unidisk into the equipment rack, plugged in a pair of AudioQuest balanced cables, an i2Digital X-60 BNC digital cable, and an IEC

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**Measurements**

The Linn Unidisk's maximum outputs for CD replay were 2.1V unbalanced and 4.1V balanced. The figures were the same for DVD playback, but increased to 2.26V/4.41V for SACD playback. The 0.2dB difference will be audible in direct comparisons of the player's CD and SACD playback, in favor of SACD. Neither set of outputs inverted absolute polarity, and the output impedance was a low 209 ohms from the single-ended RCA jacks. This more than doubled, to 597 ohms, from the balanced XLRs, though this is still low enough not to give matching problems, particularly as the source impedance remains the same across the audio band. Error correction for CD playback was some of the best I have experienced, there being just one dropout on the track with 1.5mm gaps in the data on the Pierre Verany test CD, and occasional audible glitches with 2mm gaps.

For CD playback, the Unidisk's response was flat over most of the audio band (fig.1, top pair of traces), with a very slight top-octave rolloff. It didn't change appreciably playing back pre-emphasized data (fig.1, bottom traces). For SACD playback, the output was down 3dB a little lower in frequency, at 40kHz (fig.2), than with other SACD players I have measured. I don't yet have a DVD-A with suitable test tones, but the Unidisk's faithful reproduction of a 96kHz-sampled 12kHz squarewave (not shown) from the Chesky test DVD-V confirmed the extended bandwidth. Channel separation (not shown) was superb in the bass and midrange, at better than 110dB. It worsened to a still-excellent 90dB at 20kHz, due to the usual capacitive coupling between channels.

The rather complicated-looking graph in fig.3 shows 1/2-octave spectral analyses of the Linn Unidisk's analog output while it decoded a dithered 1kHz tone at -90dBFS from CD (16-bit LPCM encoding), DVD-V (24-bit LPCM encoding), and SACD (DSD encoding), as well as a DSD-encoded, dithered 1kHz tone at -120dBFS. The top pair of traces are for CD playback and imply that the player's noise floor is above the level of the dither noise, which is not as good as I would have liked to have seen. However, the review sample of the Unidisk emitted sporadic low-level transient pulses at random intervals when playing back CDs and CD-Rs, which may have corrupted this result. (Reaching -70dBFS, it is unlikely that these soft ticks would be heard at the listening position with music program, which is why I assume KR was unaware of any problem.)

The 24-bit word length used by DVD lowers the L1's noise floor by as much as 12dB in the midrange, and less in the treble, which suggests good rather than great DAC resolution. But note the peaks at the power-supply frequency of 120Hz in the DVD traces. These are due to an unavoidable

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![Fig.1 Linn Unidisk 1.1, balanced outputs, CD frequency response at ~12dBFS into 100k ohms, with de-emphasis (bottom) and without (top). (Right channel dashed, 0.5dB/vertical div.)](image1)

![Fig.2 Linn Unidisk 1.1, balanced outputs, SACD frequency response at ~12dBFS into 100k ohms. (Right channel dashed, 1dB/vertical div.)](image2)

![Fig.3 Linn Unidisk 1.1, balanced, 1/2-octave spectrum of dithered 1kHz tone at ~90dBFS, with noise and spuriae, 16-bit (top at 5kHz), 24-bit (bottom at 10kHz), and DSD data (top above 10kHz). (Right channel dashed.)](image3)
power cable, and the Linn and I were off.

The learning curve was an absolute zero. Every audio disc I tried played correctly—even the very first MP3 CD-I'd ever made. Using the Audio Adj button, I could select an audio format on multiformat and hybrid discs, such as some SACDs, and the Unidisk remembered my choice when I later played discs of the same format. And the simultaneous S/PDIF output permits A/B comparisons with external DACs and processors, if that's your bent.

Easy and unchallenging ergonomically, the Unidisk was also a sonic overachiever. I don't know if my review sample had been burned in at the factory, but it impressed me with its clarity and dynamics right from the beginning, and those characteristics abided.

The first discs I played were of the live performance led by Péter Eötvös of Bartók's Bluebeard's Castle (CD, Hänssler 93.070), and the sampler CD from Manger Products. Between them, I heard everything from orchestra with voice—both in full cry and taking breaths—to solo piano, to reggae. Over the Unidisk, and in general comparison to other players, the sound was strikingly clear and dynamic. Bass had enough extension and energy to be felt as well as heard, but was notably detailed and unmuddied by resonance. The highs were not so much softened as massicre; this, coupled with a wide, deep soundstage, encouraged me to listen louder and louder—and it just got better. At low levels, little was lost except for dynamic range, now limited by the ambient noise levels in my city apartment.

Over the following weeks I listened to many, many discs—with this player, I didn't have to pay attention to format! One of my favorite stereo DVD-As from Hi-Res Music, Wayne Horvitz's Forever (Hi-Res HRM 2001), had more detail and presence than ever. Yet the Unidisk never seemed harsh, edgy, or too close for comfort, even when playing more aggressive mixes.

But only when I began to compare the stereo performance of the Unidisk with other components was I able to define

**Measurements**

ground loop that resulted when I hooked up a composite video connection to a TV monitor so I could navigate the menus on the Chesky test DVD. (For this and many other reasons, I hate televisions.) The DSD-encoded data on SACD offered as low a noise floor as 24-bit PCM in the midrange and bass, but, as usual, less than even CD in the top audio octave. (This is not the Linn's fault, but due to the aggressive noise-shaping used in DSD encoding.) The 1kHz tone at -120dBFS can be distinguished in this graph, but has a slight positive level error due to the presence of noise. (See fig.3 in this issue's review of the Krell SACD Standard player for slightly better performance on this test.)

The Linn's DAC linearity error for CD playback was negligible down to -110dBFS (fig.4), and dominated by the recording's dither noise, which is excellent. However, the player's reproduction of an undithered 16-bit, 1kHz sinewave at -90.31dBFS (fig.5) was obscured by high-frequency noise, which correlates with the spectral analysis of the dithered CD tone in fig.3. (See fig.5 in the Krell review for a much cleaner representation of this signal's waveform.)

The Linn Unidisk's analog output stages are not fazed by low impedances, their distortion signature not increasing even with the punishing 600 ohm load. And that signature was very low in level. Fig.6 shows a spectral analysis of the player's unbalanced output while it decoded DSD data representing a full-scale 1kHz tone. The third harmonic is the highest in level, though still negligible at -90dB (0.003%). Note, however, the appearance of the seventh harmonic. This may be at -100dB (0.001%) and way below the threshold of audibility, but it is still not something I like to see. (Check out the audibility comparisons of the second, third, and seventh
the Linn's sound. On two-channel CDs and the stereo tracks of SACDs, it was as
transparent as the Sony SCD-XA777ES SACD player, but soundfully trumped it in
high-frequency smoothness. The Sony can be slightly edgy at times; playing the
same discs, the Linn never was.

A more stringent trial consisted of pit-
ting the Unidisk on its own against the
Unidisk as a transport feeding an exter-
nal D/A converter. Against the Mark
Levinson No.360S DAC, the Linn's sound was lighter in weight—although
deep bass was not lacking—and the
No.360S was more firm and rich. At
high levels, the No.360S could seem ter-
rifyingly powerful, while the Linn, which retained its clarity, merely got
louder. Thus, with really big classical
stuff (Mahler, Wagner, etc.), I preferred
the Levinson; but with equally massive
nonclassical music, such as reggae and
rock, the Linn was a bit better at con-
veying the inner details, even when
played at very unneighborly levels.

I had three more pricey, fancy DACs
in house, from Nagra, Orpheus, and
Theta, but although the standalone Linn
was competitive, I preferred it as a trans-
port driving one or another of these
DACs, depending on the recording.
That said, I could hardly justify the
expense of any of these DACs as an add-
on for a Unidisk 1.1. I'd sooner invest in
multichannel partners for the Linn, or
an alternative transport for the DAC.

Still, the Linn's excellent "Red Book"
CD performance, coupled with its two-
channel performance with all other for-
atts, should make this issue irrelevant.

More channels in the country
The Linn Unidisk 1.1 could almost be called "portable." I put it in a canvas bag
and carried it, along with its remote
control and manual, as easily as a laptop
computer. In use, the manual seemed
bulkier and clumsier than the player,
but only because the Unidisk was such
a snap to set up and use, even in my
multichannel system. Sure, I could (and
eventually did) go to the OSD to
change some defaults in the setups, but
there really was no need.

harmonics on Stereophile's Test CD 2)
However, intermodulation distortion
was very low, even at the Unidisk's
maximum output level into 600
ohms (fig.7).

I measured the Unidisk's rejection of
word-clock jitter with the Miller
Audio Research Jitter Analyzer, which
performs a narrowband FFT
analysis of the player's analog output
while it decodes data representing a
high-level tone at exactly one quarter
the sample rate, over which has been
laid a low-frequency squarewave at
the LSB level. The measured jitter
level was just 179 picoseconds
peak-peak, which, while not quite as
low as the 136.6ps offered by Linn's
Sondek CD12 (see www.stereo-
phile.com/showarchives.cgi?86:8), is
still superbly low. Other than data-
related sidebands, indicated with red
numeric markers in fig.8, the only
two sideband pairs of note lie at
±15.6Hz (purple "1") and ±582Hz
(purple "8")

The grayed-out trace in fig.8 was
taken with the Linn Unidisk playing
back SACD data representing an
11.025kHz tone on Sony's "Pro-
visional" test SACD. Because there is
no low-frequency squarewave on this
track, there are no data-related side-
bands visible. However, there are
actually no sidebands visible at all—
just an elevated noise floor, which is
presumably due to the DSD encod-
ing's noiseshaping.

The occasional low-level clicks may
well be specific to our review sample,
but the Unidisk's somewhat disap-
pointing measured performance on
CD playback compared with SACD
and DVD caused my eyebrows to rise
a little. Nevertheless, Linn's Unidisk
1.1 offers idiot-proof playback of any
format of optical disc its owner cares
to place in its confidence-inspiring tray.
And while I have not yet auditioned
the DVD-A update of Meridian's 800,
Linn's Unidisk 1.1 stomped all the
other DVD-A players I have tried into
the ground when it came to realizing
the sonic potential of the medium.

—John Atkinson

Linn Unidisk 1.1

Stereophile, December 2003
Charged with creating a new high-powered amplifier that would continue our tradition of offering near state-of-the-art performance at a fraction of the cost, it seems that Steve McCormack has instead simply gone ahead and established a new benchmark of performance for solid state amplifiers. Read what Peter Moncrieff has to say in International Audio Review (IAR 80):

"For music lovers, this brand new power amp has now captured the top honor as the best solid-state amp on the planet. ... The sound of the DNA-500 combines relaxed authority, effortless transparency, grace and subtlety, and a musically natural liquidity. ... the new McCormack DNA-500 brings true musical naturalness to solid-state ... Its reach, and its grasp, are both broad and deep, extending far beyond the musical capabilities of other solid-state amps in many different ways, and in each and every way to a startling degree."

Visit a McCormack Audio dealer to hear for yourself just how power and grace combine in the DNA-500 to bring you closer to the music.
The Unidisk has no bass-management facilities—that's left to a preamplifier-processor or the 1.1's intended mate, Linn's Kisto System Controller. So I just plugged the six channels of analog output into my Bel Canto Pr6 and put in a SACD. When the front-panel display told me that the Linn was playing the two-channel stereo track, I pressed Audio Adj on the remote and the Unidisk switched to the multichannel track. As noted above, I never had to do that again—until told otherwise, the Unidisk assumed that that option was my preference for hybrid SACDs. With DVD-A, the OSD was often required for efficient use of menus and routing, despite the DVD-A group's contention that "Tray or Play" lets one avoid having to use a TV or monitor. For SACD, the OSD was not necessary but still useful: titles, tracks, and timings could be made available on my relatively big screen, in addition to the Unidisk's own very legible display.

In multichannel, the Linn Unidisk 1.1 sounded much as it had in stereo. Big surprise. It retained its spacious sound, which was advantageous for multichannel programs. Imaging seemed slightly wider with the Linn than with other multichannel players I've used, but I wasn't always sure that that's what I wanted. It was hard to be certain whether the Linn was revealing that these recordings had a bit too much bleed from the front channels around to the rear, or if it was somehow aiding and abetting that mastering habit. I'd set my channel balances with the Bel Canto Pr6, so all sources were subjected to the same amplification. Nonetheless, even the Bucky Pizzarelli discs on Chesky, both SACD and DVD-Audio versions, which I know so well, had more action and energy in the sides and rear than before.

Still, the liquidity of the Linn's mid- and high frequencies, coupled with its spatial generosity, made the most of really well-balanced recordings such as the Pizzarelli discs, Andrew Manze's Mozart disc, Night Music (SACD, Harmonia Mundi HMU 807280), and Brahms' String Sextet No.1 in B-flat, Op.18 (DVD-A, MDG 907 0969-5). Each benefited from the Linn's transparency, creating a wide, deep, convincing soundstage. In particular, the layering of the individual instruments of the AAM in Mozart's Serenade Notturna and A Musical Joke was nearly graphic! The six Brahms performers—a supplemented Leipzig String Quartet—were almost within reach. Bass and overall orchestral weight were ample as well with bigger stuff, such as Holst's The Planets with the SNO on DVD-A (Naxos S.110004).

In sum, the Unidisk 1.1's multichannel performance was excellent with music discs of every discrete format. I make that qualification because I found, to my surprise, that the 1.1 lacks multichannel decoders for Dolby Digital and DTS, and Linn's PR documents, website—even the 1.1's owner's manual—are less than explicit about this. While the Unidisk will provide a stereo mixdown from these data formats, I had to feed its digital output to the Meridian Reference 861 surround controller for movies, the few dozen DTS music CDs I own, and the video sides of AIX Records' DVD-Audio releases.

By now it should come as no surprise that the Linn was notably more spacious and open than the other players on hand. The Sony SCD-AX777ES seemed just a bit more constrained in soundstage dimensions and a little harder in the highs. The Marantz 8400, which I'll report on in a forthcoming installment of my quarterly "Music in the Round" column, came closer in smoothness and in its grain-free upper end, but produced a smaller soundstage than the Linn's.

A fairer face-off was against the big, black Meridian boxes. That contrast could be symbolized by their physical differences, but was nowhere near as extreme. The Meridian 800/861 is big, solid, and well-balanced. While the slim and silver Linn's low end was tight and full, the Meridian trumped it in the integration and power of its mid- to low bass. On the other hand, the Meridians' treble was clean and clear, if nowhere near as diaphanous as the Linn's. The Linn impressed me with what it did, presenting a convincing sound panorama. The Meridian impressed by being elusively unimpressive.

Choice? No way. The distinctions were so small in magnitude that I can still say that both are superb and capable of providing stupendous performance. Besides, the Meridian, in its current configuration, won't play SACDs, and requires a bigger, sturdier equipment rack and a bigger, sturdier budget.

**Conclusion**

Easy. The Linn Unidisk 1.1 does everything that a player can be asked to do, and does it all superbly. It's nearly as good a CD player as exists on this planet (Linn, maker of the CD12, would probably concur in my hedging), it's the smoothest-sounding SACD player I've yet used, and its DVD-Audio performance is as good as (if different from) the Meridian 800/861's. And don't forget—it plays almost everything else that comes on a 5" silver disc. And even though it's not quite as portable as an Apple iPod, I wouldn't be surprised if it was also the best MP3 player on Earth.

Is the Unidisk 1.1 the answer to everyone's dreams? Well, if you don't need Dolby Digital and DTS (or you have an external decoder), and if another of your components provides multichannel and/or bass management, it might be. If you just want a player that will play all stereo programs, regardless of format, with great sound, this is it.

---

**Associated Equipment**

**Two-Channel System**

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

**Digital sources:** Orpheus Zero CD player/transport, Sony SCD-AX777ES SACD player; Mark Levinson No.360S, Theta Gen.VIII, Orpheus One, Nagra DACs.

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

**Power amplifiers:** Sonic Frontiers Power-3, Classe CAM-350.

**Loudspeakers:** Revel Ultima Studio.

**Cables:** Digital: i2Digital X-60 BNC. Interconnect (all balanced): AudioQuest Anaconda & Python, JPS SuperConductor 2. Speaker: AudioQuest Granite. AC: JPS Aluminata.

**Multichannel System**

**Digital sources:** Sony SCD-AX777ES SACD player, Meridian Reference 800 DVD-A player, Marantz 8400 CD/SACD/DVD-A player.

**Preamplifiers:** Bel Canto Pr6, McCormack MAP-1.

**Power amplifiers:** Bel Canto eVo6, Adcom GFA-7805.

**Loudspeakers:** Magneplan Home Theater System; Paradigm Reference Studio/60, Studio/20, Studio CC, Servo-15.

**Cables:** Interconnect: Harmonic Technology & RS Cables multichannel, Alpha-Core Goertz Micro-Purl copper. Speaker: Goertz MI 2 Veracity.

—Kalman Rubinson
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Sony's first flagship Super Audio CD player was the two-channel SCD-1, reviewed by Jonathan Scull in November 1999. (The $5000 SCD-1 had balanced outputs; the cosmetically different but otherwise identical $3500 SCD-777ES had unbalanced outputs and was reviewed by Chip Stern in April 2001.) Sony's second-generation flagship player, the $3000 SCD-XA777ES, was reviewed by Kalman Rubinson in January 2002, and added multichannel capability with channel-level adjustment and bass management. Sony's third-generation flagship is the SCD-XA9000ES, also priced at $3000, which adds time-delay adjustment for its multichannel analog outputs and is presented in a smart new styling that Sony calls “Silver Cascade.” The disc drawer and the most frequently used controls are on the angled top half of the brushed-aluminum front panel; in the lower half are the display, the headphone jack and its volume control, and the multifunction control knob.

The most important new feature of the XA9000 is indicated by the rightmost of the four small buttons to the left of the drawer. Marked “i.Link,” this button, when pressed, turns off the player's analog outputs and sends six channels of multichannel DSD data down an IEEE1394 (FireWire) cable to outboard D/A processors and other components. An external digital output for SACD has been a much-longed-for feature, and according to Sony's White Paper on the XA9000's design, implementing a variable-bit-rate interface that can handle six channels of data sampled at 2.8224MHz with low jitter was far from trivial. So far, the only component available that can accept the i.Link data is Sony's new STR-D9000Es multi-channel receiver. But as the encrypted data format conforms to an industry standard — Digital Transmission Content Protection — I see no reason why, for example, the dCS Elgar's FireWire data input could not be adapted to work with it. Obviously, there is more to be reported on this subject.

Functionally, the SCD-XA9000ES is almost identical to the SCD-XA777ES; I refer readers to our Web reprint of Kalman Rubinson's review for a full description (www.stereophile.com/showarchives.cgi?491). The XA9000 appears to use the same multilevel DACs as the XA777, fed directly by digitally filtered DSD data for SACD playback, or by CD data first transformed to 24-bit words by an 8x-oversampling filter, then upsampled to 2.8824MHz/1-bit data. Two DACs are used per channel in multichannel playback; for two-channel operation, six DACs are summed to minimize noise.

About the only letdown I experienced with the XA9000 was with its remote, which is Sony's familiar plastic wand. Something chunkier would have been more in line with the player's techno styling.

**Sound**

From the first notes of the first Super Audio CD I put on — the Pentatone reissue of the Academy of St. Martin-in-the-Fields' 1974 recording of *Famous Overtures* by Rossini (PTC 5186 106) — it was obvious that Sony's new flagship is a player to be reckoned with. There was a wealth of detail apparent, yet without that detail being thrust forward at the listener. There was a big sweep of sound, which was quite enveloping despite my experiencing two—rather than multichannel sound. (This review concerns the Sony's performance as a conventional two-channel player; Kal Rubinson will comment on its surround capability in a “Follow-Up.”)

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**Description:** Multichannel-capable Super Audio CD/CD player with dual-laser pickup, remote control, channel-level and time-delay adjust, and bass management. Analog outputs: Two-channel, 1 pair L/R unbalanced, switchable between Direct (full-range) and Direct+Subwoofer; Multichannel, L/R/C/LS/RS/Sub unbalanced, switchable between Direct and DSP-controlled. Digital outputs: CD, S/PDIF (RCA and TosLink); SACD, DTCP-encrypted i.Link (IEEE1394, 4-pin variant). Maximum output level: 2V RMS at 1kHz into 50k ohms. Frequency response: SACD, 2Hz–50kHz, +0dB/-3dB; CD, 2Hz–20kHz, +0dB/-3dB. Dynamic range: SACD, >108dB; CD, >100dB. THD+N: <0.0012% at 1kHz. Power consumption: 32W.

**Dimensions:** 17" (433mm) W by 5" (127mm) H by 15.25" (387mm) D. Weight: 35.75 lbs (16.2kg).

**Finish:** Brushed aluminum.

**Serial number of unit reviewed:** 0800005.

**Price:** $2999. Approximate number of dealers: 200. Warranty: 3 years, limited.

**Manufacturer:** Sony Electronics, 1 Sony Drive, Park Ridge, NJ 07656. Tel: (800) 222-7669. Fax: (201) 930-1000. Web: www.sony.com.
The Rossini was mastered from analog tapes; next up was an SACD of orchestral tone poems from Debussy and Turina, with Jesús López-Cobos and the Cincinnati Symphony (Telarc SACD-60574), which had been recorded in DSD. Again, there was a big sweep of sound, but with delicate instrumental details—such as the castanets and the tambourine rolls in the first section of Debussy’s Iberia—clearly delineated against the orchestral backdrop.

These discs revealed something I have been musing about for a while: that the DSD encoding used on SACD gets instrumental tonal colors right in a way that, while not unknown with CD, seems fragile, with more of a chance of becoming diluted. The odd thing is that this benefit was apparent even with an SACD mastered from a recording that was originally PCM: Andrew Litton’s 1999 SACD of Mahler’s Symphony 2, with the Dallas Symphony Orchestra (Delos DE 3237). Though scored for vast orchestral forces, Mahler’s music depends much of the time on the tonal contrast and inter-
Sony SCD-XA9000ES

play between smaller-scale instrumental groupings. The Sony player managed to preserve the maximum differences between instrumental voices, and when it came to human voices... soprano Heidi Grant Murphy's emergence from the choir in the Langsam, misericord section of the work's final movement raised goose-bumps. The tonal contrast between Ms. Murphy's liquid treble and the darker quality of mezzo-soprano Petra Lang was delightfully apparent with the Sony.

As a CD player, the XA9000 was no slouch. After some experimentation, I ended up sticking with the Optional filter, which I found more palatable, to use an overworked adjective. (The filter setting is not available from the remote, un-fortunately, which makes comparisons difficult.) With the Optional filter, the natural, unforced quality of the Sony's vocal reproduction was evident on CD, though not to quite the same extent as with SACD. Even so, the delightful Pie Jesu from John Rutter's Requiem, from a 2002 CD produced by the composer (Naxos 8.557130), lacked for nothing.

low linearity error means that the XA9000's reproduction of an undithered tone at exactly -90.31dBFS is essentially perfect (fig.4). The three voltage levels comprising this signal can be clearly seen, and the waveform has excellent symmetry about the time axis.

Sony specifies the SCD-XA9000ES into test loads of at least 10k ohms. Even so, the spectrum of its output into a load as low as 600 ohms differed from that into the lab 100k load only in having a little more high-order harmonics (not shown), though these were all still 100dB down. Into 8k ohms, probably the lowest load the player will see in real systems, the only distortion harmonics that can be seen above the noise floor are the second, third, and fourth (fig.5), with the third the highest in level in the left channel at -97dB (0.0014%). This harmonic lay at -107dB in the right channel, the same as the second harmonic in both channels. This is superb performance. Note, by the way, that the 200Hz idle tone can be seen in this graph, but particularly, only in the right channel (red trace).

Regarding intermodulation distortion, the Sony player produced an extraordinarily low amount of the second-order difference component into loads down to 600 ohms. Into 8k ohms, for example (not shown), this lay at just -109dB (0.0004%). This graph was taken playing back CD data with the Standard filter. Switching to the Optional filter gave the spectrum shown in fig.6. This filter's early HF rolloff, seen in fig.1, drops the level of the tones, but because the ultimate rolloff rate is slower than the Standard filter, a strong reflection of the 20kHz tone appears at 24.1kHz: other aliased tones can be seen, albeit at very low levels, in the audible part of the spectrum. The tradeoff offered by this filter is better behavior in the time domain,

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Fig.4 Sony SCD-XA9000ES, waveform of undithered 1kHz sinewave at -90.31dBFS, 16-bit CD data.

Fig.5 Sony SCD-XA9000ES, spectrum of 1kHz sinewave, DC-1kHz, at 0dBFS into 8k ohms, SACD data (linear frequency scale).

Fig.6 Sony SCD-XA9000ES, HF intermodulation spectrum, DC-25kHz, 19+20kHz at 0dBFS into 8k ohms, CD data, Optional filter (linear frequency scale).
**Sony SCD-XA9000ES**

**Comparisons**

Fortuitously, the Sony arrived while I had both the Krell and Musical Fidelity Tri-Vista SACD players and Linn's Unidisk 1.1 universal player in-house. I compared the players using both SACDs and CDs, matching the levels to within 0.1dB at 1kHz using the Mark Levinson No.380S preamp's input offset function. (This was rendered more complex than it should have been, due to the fact that none of the players offered the same maximum level of SACD playback as they did for CD.) It is important to note that, much of the time, the differences between these players were very hard to hear. (Peculiarly, they were easier to detect with CD than SACD.)

Against the $14,000 Linn Unidisk (reviewed elsewhere in this issue by Kal Rubinson), the Sony had slightly greater low-frequency extension, the left-hand register on Robert Silverman's Beethoven piano sonata CDs (Orpheum/Masters KSP830) sounding slightly more robust. The players were virtually indistinguishable in the midrange and treble, but if I had to swear, I'd say the Linn was very slightly drier overall. The singers on Cantus' new Deep River CD (CTS 1203), for example, sounded a little further away from the mikes, the mix a little lusher, via the Sony.

The S6000 Musical Fidelity SACD player uses miniature tubes in its output stage and is a favorite of both Sam Tellig and Michael Fremer. Against the Sony, it sounded distinctly richer in the lower mids, with more palpable imaging. Although the Tri-Vista sounded a little more reverberant on the chorale arrangement of "Danny Boy" from my Editor's Choice CD (Sterophile STPH016-2), it was, paradoxically, the Sony that gave the impression of the window on the soundstage being that little bit cleaner. The Sony oh so carefully drew the leading edges of transients compared with the Tri-Vista, but this was at the expense of its high treble occasionally being a little emphasized, particularly on CD. The "世上" that begins the sound of each note of the flute in the Mozart Flute Quartet movement on *Editor's Choice*, for example, sounded a little detached on the XA9000, better integrated with the body of the instrument's tone on the British player.

The objects within the soundstage were thus more clearly delineated by the XA9000, but presented as being more of a whole by the Tri-Vista. Which is right? I engineered, mixed, and mastered all of the selections on *Editor's Choice*, so I should know, right? Actually, compared with the master computer file of the Flute Quartet, played back on the Mark Levinson No.30.6, the two players fall to either side of strict accuracy: the Sony a little too clean, the Musical Fidelity a little too muddy.

Where the more expensive player drew ahead of the XA9000 was in the bass. Yes, the Sony had better extension compared with the Linn, but the Tri-Vista had more upper-bass bloom. The ending of Mahler's Symphony 2, where organ pedals and tinfoil thunder out the falling-fifth/returning-E-flat-scale

**Measurements**

and there is some evidence that the ear is more tolerant of small amounts of aliasing than it is of the time dispersion typical of very steep filters.

I used the Miller Audio Research Jitter Analyzer to look for evidence of inadequate word-clock jitter rejection in the XA9000's analog output. The measured level of jitter was superbly low at just 176 picoseconds peak-peak, while the spectrum of that jitter (fig.7) confirmed the low level of data-related sidebands (red numeric markers). The sideway band pair highest in level were low in frequency, spaced 15.6Hz to the sides of the central 11.025kHz tone, and contributed 63% to the total. The noise floor in this graph is around 3dB higher than the lowest I have seen from CD playback. Though this is inconsequential, it does suggest that the Sony's dynamic range is a little less than is possible from CD. The grayed-out trace in fig.7 is a similar spectral analysis performed while the player decoded DSD data representing an 11.025kHz tone, without the low-frequency, low-level squarewave that the Miller Analyzer uses to diagnose word-clock jitter. The noise floor in this frequency region is around 4dB higher than with CD playback (presumably due to the noise-shaping used on SACD), and the sidebands at ±15.6Hz are again evident, at the same level. But even allowing for the absence of data-related jitter sidebands, the SACD spectrum is noticeably cleaner than that of CD.

Overall, Sony's SCD-XA9000ES offers superb measured performance, as I have come to expect from this manufacturer. But even though there were no audible consequences that resulted from the presence of that spurious 200Hz tone, I would still have preferred not to see it.

—John Atkinson
phrase that acts as the symphony's keystone, may have been awesome via the Sony, but it was cataclysmic via the Musical Fidelity.

The $4000 Krell Standard is closer still to the Sony's price. I auditioned CDs and SACDs using its Filter 2, which is closest in audioband response to the Sony's Optional Filter. The two players sounded extraordinarily close to one another; it took a lot of critical listening to determine that the American player had a slightly more robust presentation, that it sounded very slightly louder, despite having its level at 1kHz matched to that of the Sony within 2mV at 1V. Brian Arena’s solo tenor on the Debussy *Invocation* on my *Editor’s Choice* CD, for example, was presented more forward in the mix than it was by the Sony. Perhaps — and only perhaps — the Krell sounded softer in the top octaves, with a slightly less clear delineation of transient leading edges. Despite that, however, the flute on my Mozart recording had a little more sibilance through the Krell.

**Summing Up**

While it may not offer quite the sense of palpability of the twice-the-price Musical Fidelity Tri-Vista SACD player, or the overall knock-you-off-your-feet sound of the $26,000 dCS Verdi—Elgar Plus combo, Sony’s $3000 SCD-XA9000ES is still among the better SACD players I have heard. And this is considering it only as a two-channel player, remember — unlike the two other machines, the Sony is a full-featured multichannel player, complete with bass management and other channel adjustments. I shall be passing the XA9000 on to Stereophile’s “Music in the Round” columnist, Kalman Rubinson, for a “Follow-Up” report both on its capabilities in that area and for a direct comparison with its distinguished predecessor, the SCD-XA777ES. However, this will not be before I have enjoyed another couple of weeks of the XA9000’s excellent music-making.

As I write these final words, I have loaded the Sony’s drawer with what I believe is the first SACD to come from Linn Products: a new completion, by Robert Levin, of Mozart’s *Requiem* in a spirited performance from Sir Charles MacKerras and the Scottish Chamber Orchestra (CKD 211). I select track 8, and the lurching string figure brings in the choir for the *Lacrimosa* — sonic heaven that brings a tear to my eye!
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— Chip Stern, Stereophile, November 2003

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At what point does a high price become exorbitant? When do you start doing double takes, to make sure you haven't mentally moved a decimal point? When do you look at something and think, “No matter how good it may be, it's just not worth that much money”?

A few years ago, if I were contemplating CD players, I would have answered those questions confidently: “Anything over $1000.” Then the Wadia 830, at $2500, rewrote my rulebook. Next, there was the original Simaudio Moon Eclipse, and the Oracle, and the Wadia 861, and... before I knew it, $5000, $6000, and maybe even a bit more than that, seemed pretty reasonable prices for topnotch CD players.

But take a quick look at the price line in the specifications sidebar for the Burmester 001: $14,000. Fourteen thousand dollars. Even as far down the rabbit hole as I am, smack dab in the middle of multi-thousand-dollar interconnects and phono cartridges, $100 component feet, and God knows what else, a $14,000 CD player stops me in my tracks. Just what makes it so expensive? More important, can it possibly be that good?

Scary as it seems, if you look at Burmester's line, $14,000 kind of makes sense. The 001 is Burmester's best single-box CD player, and slots into the third of their four tiers of products. Their entry-level line, Rondo, consists of a CD player ($3695), an integrated amp ($4495), and an FM Tuner ($3095). Next up is the Basic series, which includes a CD player, separate amp and preamp, and a tuner, ranging in price from $6000 to $9000. The Top series is next, and includes either the 001 single-box player or a separate transport and DAC, an amp and preamp, and another tuner. At $14,000, the 001 is about the middle of the range. Finally, there's the Reference series, where everything is à la carte. Even the preamp isn't really a preamp, but a chassis into which you load specific cards to give it the functionality and connectivity that you need. Price? As they say, if you have to ask...

What does $14,000 buy you? The 001 isn't just a CD player—it's also a fully functional preamp for a digital-only system. There are four digital inputs of different types, selected by a front-panel button, and an indicator LED to confirm that the unit has synced to a digital input. All digital inputs, including the onboard disc transport, are upsampled to 24-bit/96kHz via a proprietary Burmester DSP algorithm, prior to D/A conversion. The 001 also has three types of digital outputs, should you, for some reason, want to bypass its multi-kilobuck filter, DAC, and analog stages—or, in my case, drive a CD recorder.

Description: Remote-control CD player with external data inputs, switchable digital filter, and volume control. D/A conversion: proprietary, DSP upsampling to 24-bit/96kHz and digital filtering prior to D/A conversion. Output level: variable, or fixed at 4V at 1kHz (0dB balanced, 2V unbalanced) or 8V at 1kHz (0dB balanced, 4V unbalanced). THD+noise (1kHz, 0dB): <0.0025%. Output impedance: 75 ohms unbalanced, 150 ohms balanced. Frequency response: 10Hz–20kHz, +0.1dB, –1.1dB. Digital inputs: 2 S/PDIF (RCA), 1 AES/EBU (XLR) w/transformer, 1 optical (TosLink). Outputs, analog: 2 pairs unbalanced (RCA), 1 pair balanced (XLR). Outputs, digital: 1 S/PDIF (RCA), 1 optical (TosLink).

Dimensions: 19" (482mm) W by 4.5" (115mm) H by 13.5" (340mm)

D. Weight: 24 lbs (11kg).

Serial number of unit reviewed: 394035.

Price: $14,000. Approximate number of dealers: 10. Warranty: 3 years, parts & labor.

Manufacturer: Burmester Audio- systeme GmbH, Kolonnenstrasse 30G, 10829 Berlin, Germany. Tel: (49) 030-787968-0. Fax: (49) 030-787968-68. Web: www.burmester.de. US distributor: Immedia, 1101 Eighth Street, Suite 210, Berkeley, CA 94710. Tel: (510) 559-2050. Fax: (510) 559-1855. Web: www.immediasound.com.
Burmester 001

On the analog side are both single-ended and balanced outputs, and the 001 can be set for either variable or fixed analog output level by simply turning the unit off and back on while holding down the Volume button. In the variable output mode, which lets you connect the 001 directly to your amps and sell your preamp on eBay to help pay for the Burmester, the volume is varied in 60 discrete steps, and the level is displayed on the 001's front panel. Volume control is entirely electronic — no potentiometers — and done in the analog domain. And since the 001's output stage is essentially the same one used in Burmester's line stages, it's capable of driving any combination of cable and power amplifier. However, you do use a preamp, the 001's fixed outputs can be set for one of two levels, 6dB apart, to better match the level of your other sources. The 001 also offers a choice of two different analog filters; according to Burmester, the Soft filter "is tuned to a spatial and warm sound," and the Linear filter "offers optimally linear phase and frequency characteristic in addition to spatial and warm sound."

Burmester is pretty tightlipped about just what's under the 001's hood, describing their specific component choices and the details of their implementation as "a secret that's as tightly kept as the recipe for Coke." But the basics include a belt-drive transport assembly that's built in-house, using only the laser head assembly from a Philips CD Pro unit. Attention to detail in its construction includes such exotica as: a "superprecision ball bearing" that runs on a sapphire bearing surface; a belt that's frozen, shaped, and cut at -40°C, for stability and long life (90,000 hours); and the entire assembly is mounted on a massive aluminum slab, itself suspended by a complex system of elastomer mounts. Upsampling and digital filtering are done via DSP algorithms, followed by D/A conversion via four matched D/A chips in a balanced configuration.

Measurements

As it has an external data input, I was able to test the Burmester 001 with both 16-bit CD data and with external 24-bit data, sampled at 96kHz. The volume control operates in 60 steps, but with digital data at 0dBFS (the maximum level), the player's output clipped at volume-control settings above "54." The output level at this setting was 6.495V from the balanced jacks, 3.234V from the unbalanced, which is 4.2dB higher than the standard 2V. The output impedance was commendably low, at 66.2 ohms from the unbalanced RCA, this doubling to 132 ohms from the balanced, as expected. Neither figure varied across the audioband. Error correction was good, the Burmester coping with data dropouts up to 1.5mm in length without audible glitches.

The top pair of traces in fig.1 show the CD response with the reconstruction filter set to Linear. It is perfectly flat. Switching the filter to Soft drops the output at 20kHz by 0.55dB (fig.1, middle traces). Feeding the Burmester with external 96kHz-sampled data, the response trends were continued, the Soft filter's -0.6dB at 20kHz reaching -1.53dB at 45kHz. With the Linear filter, the flat response is maintained to 32kHz, above which it starts to roll off, reaching -0.42dB at 45kHz. The audioband response with de-emphasized data (fig.1, lower traces) is basically the same as with regular data.

Channel separation (not shown) was better than 115dB in both directions below 10kHz, with just a slight decrease evident above that frequency. Fig.2 shows spectral analyses of the player's balanced outputs while it decoded a dithered 1kHz tone at -90dBFS with 16-bit, CD data (top) and 24-bit external data (bottom). The increase in bit depth drops the noise floor by 15dB or so in the treble, implying DAC performance close to 19 bits, which is excellent.

There might be a faint hint of some second-harmonic content, but the traces in this graph are otherwise free from spurious and power-supply spikes. Good engineering.

Linearity error, measured with CD data (fig.3), remained below 2dB down to -110dBFS, which is excellent, implying low noise. This, along with the excellent DAC bit matching, is confirmed by fig.4, which clearly shows the correct three-level shape of an undithered 16-bit, 1kHz sinewave at -90.31dBFS. Increasing the word length to 24 bits gives an excellent

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Fig.1 Burmester 001, balanced outputs, frequency response at -12dBFS into 100k ohms, with de-emphasis (bottom) and without (top). (Right channel dashed, 0.5dB/vertical div.)

Fig.2 Burmester 001, balanced, %-octave spectrum of dithered 1kHz tone at -90dBFS, with noise and spuriae, 16-bit (top) and 24-bit data (bottom). (Right channel dashed.)

Fig.3 Burmester 001, balanced, left-channel departure from linearity, 16-bit data (2dB/vertical div.)

Fig.4 Burmester 001, waveform of undithered 1kHz sinewave at -90.31dBFS, 16-bit data.
On the analog side, the op-amp–based circuitry is Burmester’s X-amp topography: fully balanced, DC-coupled, and pure class-A. The identity of the specific devices used is, you guessed it, proprietary. But nothing about the 001 is “standard,” not even its feet: rather than simple elastomer pucks, they’re complex assemblies of carbon springs.

System and Setup
The 001 spent the better part of three months in my system, where it was paired with my VAC CPA1 Mk.III pre-amp at times, and at other times, run — as I’ll discuss later — directly into either VTL Ichiban or Mark Levinson No.20.6 power amplifiers. The 001’s tenure overlapped with both the Audio Physic Virgo III and Thiel CS6 loudspeakers. My primary bases for comparison were either the Simaudio Eclipse Moon CD player or analog: VPI’s TNT Mk.V-HR turntable-tonearm combo fitted with a Grado Statement Reference cartridge.

I experimented a bit with cables, but mostly used Audience’s Au24 interconnects and speaker cables. However, when I ran the 001 directly into either amp in the balanced configuration, I used Wireworld’s Gold Eclipse II. Power arrived via FIM outlets, MIT’s ZCenter and ZSystem conditioning system, and Audience PowerChord AC cords, and was further treated when I

Measurements

sinewave shape, even at this very low level (fig.5).

Not only was the 001’s noise floor very low, so was distortion. A 1kHz tone at 0dBFS reproduced with just 0.0017% THD from the left channel, 0.001% from the right. (This was with the volume control set to “54.”) The spectrum of this signal is shown in fig.6; the second and third harmonics hover at or just above the ~100dB level, with the fourth at ~110dB. “Not bad,” as we say in my native UK when presented with outstanding performance. Intermodulation distortion was also very low, though it differed slightly according to which filter was used. Soft (fig.7) was slightly better than Linear (fig.8) with respect to the level of the higher-order components at 18kHz and 21kHz.

Possibly of more concern than conventional intermodulation is the appearance of what appear to be symmetrical sidebands at non-signal-related frequencies to either side of the fundamental tones in these two graphs. Yes, these are at a very low level, but they imply insufficient rejection of word-clock jitter. It was with some surprise, therefore, that when I tested the Burmester 001 for jitter with the Miller Audio Research Analyzer, I got an extraordinarily good result: just 104.1 picoseconds peak-peak of jitter. This is the lowest I have ever measured. Even driving the Burmester 001 with external data via a TosLink connection only increased the level of jitter-related sidebands to 118ps.

Fig.5 Burmester 001, waveform of undithered 1kHz sinewave at –90.31dBFS, 24-bit data.

Fig.6 Burmester 001, volume control at “54,” unbalanced spectrum of 1kHz sinewave, DC–1kHz, at 0dBFS into 8k ohms (linear frequency scale).

Fig.7 Burmester 001, unbalanced, Soft filter, HF intermodulation spectrum, DC–24kHz, 19+20kHz at 0dBFS into 600 ohms (linear frequency scale).
installed AudioPrism's QuietLine filters in each of the house's circuits. Everything but the amplifiers and turntable was supported in a Finite Elemente Pagoda equipment rack; the speakers were supported by footers.

Listening: Phase One
As open-minded as I try to be, sometimes a component arrives and I can't help but develop preconceived notions about how it's going to sound. In the case of the Burmester 001 — massive, chrome-plated, Tectonic to the nth degree, jam-packed with engineering and features — I just knew it would sound cold, sterile, over-detailed, and have disconcertingly spectacular performance at the frequency extremes. After all, they'd even included a second, "softer" analog filter.

I was about as wrong as I've ever been in my life. After letting the 001 break in for about a week, I configured the system with it running into my VAC preamp and cued up Susan Tedeschi's Just Won't Burn (Tone-Cool CD TC 1164). "Rock Me Right" is a bit on the lean, edgy side, so I wasn't expecting a great match with the 001. But within just a few seconds, I found myself thinking, "Hmmmm, this isn't too bad."

In fact, through the 001, Just Won't Burn was way better than "isn't too bad." The first thing that jumped out which is the second-lowest I have measured! Fig.9 shows a narrowband spectrum of the 001's analog jitter while it decoded the Miller test signal. Other than a smattering of low-frequency sidebands around the central 11.025kHz tone, at 15.6Hz and its first four harmonics, the only other sidebands visible are at ±2993Hz and ±3210Hz (purple "6" and "7" markers).

But I was still worried about those sidebands in the intermodulation graphs. I therefore repeated the Miller Jitter Test using 48kHz- and 96kHz-sampled external data. I haven't shown the graphs here, because the spectra were taken with different hardware and aren't directly comparable with fig.9. However, the important point to note is that the very low measured jitter level of 118ps with 44.1kHz-sampled data rose to a high 900ps with the other sample rates. It appears that the Burmester 001's rejection of word-clock jitter has been optimized for CD-sampled data. This makes sense — it is a CD player — but my eyebrows did rise a little.

Nevertheless, for CD playback, the Burmester 001 offers superb measured performance. I was not surprised to learn that Brian Damkroger liked how it sounded in his system. And I didn't find any significant differences between its performance in unbalanced and balanced modes that would explain either why Brian preferred the latter or found the former to sound too warm. — John Atkinson

1 There is another implication of these results, which is that the Burmester 001 has been engineered to perform well on the specific test signal used by the Miller Jitter Test. Such gamemanship is not unknown — witness how many CD players mute their outputs when they sense "digital black" data, in order to give an unrealistically good measured signal/noise ratio. But it's hard to see how something similar could be done with the Miller signal without affecting performance elsewhere.

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Stereophile, December 2003

FIG. 8 Burmester 001, unbalanced, Linear filter, HF intermodulation spectrum, DC-24kHz, 19+20kHz at 0dBFS into 600 ohms (linear frequency scale).

FIG. 9 Burmester 001, unbalanced, High-resolution jitter spectrum of analog output signal (11.025kHz at -6dBFS sampled at 44.1kHz with LSB toggled at 229kHz). Center frequency of trace, 11.025kHz; frequency range, ±3.5kHz.
was the density of tonal colors and textures. Tedeschi's vocals had a weight and density that, unlike with most other CD players, suggested a person behind the voice—a chest and body rather than just a throat and mouth. Her guitar, too, seemed denser and more detailed. Rather than a constricted, two-dimensional portrait dominated by transients and strings, it was a bluesy, swampy mix of fundamentals and harmonics, with an immediacy that dropped me right into the middle of a cramped, overheated bar.

The Burmester—once I'd actually listened to it—was as far as could be from the sterile, analytical sound I'd expected to hear. It was rich, warm, lavishly textured and detailed, and, if anything, a bit to the lush side of absolute neutrality. And this was using its Linear analog filter.

The more I listened to the 001, the more I was struck by its portrayal of inner detail, tonal colors, and textures. Antony Michaelson's clarinet on Mosaic (Stereoideal STPH015-2) was a great example. It was a bit warmer and more obviously woody than with other players, and a little more detailed in the sense that I could better feel, or imagine, the textures of the sound—the reed vibrating, the moving column of air, the interaction of the instrument's soundfield with the surrounding space.

Similarly, the vibes on the Smithereens' "In a Lonely Place," from Bloom to Smithereens (Capitol CDP 8 31481 2), had a much denser, more complex ring than I'm used to, and I noted that the background vocals were "finally, obviously Suzanne Vega," something I'd been used to on vinyl but had rarely heard with CDs.

Images were wonderfully solid and three-dimensional with the 001. In particular, the 001 excelled at the depth dimension, opening up the rear portion of the soundstage and tangibly portraying the back edges of images. Although the soundstage from my Simaudio Moon Eclipse was wider, it couldn't match the 001's depth, and actually sounded a bit forward and two-dimensional in comparison.

On the other hand, the 001's images were slightly larger than with other players, with edges not as sharply defined. Similarly, though its images were rich with inner detail, there wasn't the sort of laser-photo portrayal of microscopic detail that I've heard elsewhere. This is more of a comment than a criticism, however; the Burmester's imaging more nearly matched what I hear in a club or concert hall. Its images were always correctly sized, and all of the soundstage's distances—between instruments, between the listener and the soundstage, and the size of the stage itself—added up to a coherent, realistic perspective.

To make a long story short, the 001 was a bit too gorgeous-sounding.

Warmth, richness, lush tonal textures—these are all good, provided they mirror the natural characteristics of the instruments and voices, and are not seductive colorations added by the system. Since my listening notes were rapidly filling up with such words as warm, rich, and lush, I thought I'd better back off, recover my "objectivity," and listen carefully to the 001.

Associated Equipment

Digital source: Simaudio Moon Eclipse CD player.
Preamplifier: VAC CPA1 Mk.III.
Power amplifiers: VTL Ichiban, Mark Levinson No.20.6.
Accessories: Finite Elemente Pagoda equipment rack; Immedia String Suspension Concept footers; Nordost ECO3, Disksolution CD-cleaning/treatment fluids; MIT ZCenter, ZSystem power-conditioning and delivery systems; AudioPrism NoiseSniffer AC line analyzer, QuietLine AC filters; VPI HW 16.5 record-cleaning machine and cleaning fluid, Zerostat 3 Mity, ZeroDust Onzow and Lyra SPT stylus cleaners, Echo Buster room-treatment devices.

—Brian Damkroger

was a gorgeous-sounding player—a bit too gorgeous-sounding.

First, there were those slightly soft image edges I mentioned. It also had a warmer-than-neutral tonal balance and a slightly imprecise bottom end—not objectionable, but there. Ray Brown's bass on The Poll Winners (Contemporary/JVC XRCD 0019-2), for example, was slightly too prominent, as well as softer, richer, and kind of spotlit, almost as if it were glowing.

In fact, there was a beguiling golden glow across the frequency range. On "Chuck E's in Love," from Rickie Lee Jones' Naked Songs (Reprise 45950-2), Jones' voice was wonderfully sweet and lush, instead of having the reedy edginess that it should. Other notoriously distinctive voices—Guy Clark, Nanci Griffith, even Dwight Yoakam—were similarly softened and sweetened by the Burmester's golden richness. Lovely, yes, but not quite the truth.

Finally, there were slightly softened dynamic transients. Edgy discs such as Just Won't Bum me became more listenable, but on others there was a lack of air around and above instruments—in other words, a reduced sense of space between performers—and a slight loss of drive and pace. As gorgeous as the Burmester sounded, switching to the Simaudio opened up the stage on The Poll Winners noticeably, and made it sound as if the trio had awakened and had their first cup of coffee.

So: used as a fixed-output CD player to drive my standard reference system, the 001 presented me with a quandary. On one hand, I absolutely loved it. It was gorgeous, seductive, rich, and absolutely wonderful, with detailed, solid, three-dimensional images and incredible tonal colors and textures. Every time I turned it on, I was swept away by its beguiling sound, and the connection that it established between the music and me.

But as a reviewer, I couldn't ignore the fact that it had a distinct personality—and shouldn't any component costing this much be perfectly neutral? After all, $14,000 for a CD player is getting pretty close to "price no object" engineering. But maybe that's the point. The Burmester 001 sounds the way it does because it is the product of a price-no-object exercise: how it sounds is exactly how Butmester wants it to sound.

Perhaps Trish made the most telling assessment of the Burmester. One evening, when we were listening and talking about the 001's character—
istics, she said, “Oh, you’re right, but I don’t care—I love it. With the Burmester, when you’re not around, I’m always in here listening to music. Without it in the system, the only time I listen is when you are. I think about listening but somehow, it just doesn’t seem that appealing… it’s just not worth the trouble.”

Listening: Phase Two

One of the Burmester 001’s selling points is that, with its switching capability, variable output, and topflight analog output stage, it can be used as a preamp as well as a CD player. Over the years, I’ve auditioned many players with similar capabilities—on paper, at least—but for the most part, they didn’t deliver on the promise. Often their I/O capability was, at best, limited; for the most part, I preferred their sound through a preamp.

My first attempt to use the Burmester 001 sans preamp involved simply switching it to variable output and moving the Audience Au24 unbalanced interconnects from the preamp’s output to the 001’s. The sound was undeniably better. There was a reduced noise floor, most noticeable as a deeper soundstage, blacker silences, and a much better sense of the air and space around instruments. But the major components of the 001’s personality—the warm tonal balance, the softened transients, the larger images, the lack of air—were all still there.

But the Burmester is a true balanced design. Someone smart once said to me, “You’re paying for two sets of circuitry. Why would you use just one?” So I moved on to configuration three, replacing the unbalanced Au24 runs between the 001 and Levinson No.20.6s with balanced 6m lengths of Wireworld Gold Eclipse II.

The first line in my listening notes is “INCREDIBLE!!!!!!,” underlined twice. Yes, it was still the same player, but its strengths were magnified. The incredibly three-dimensional images were even more solid, and the soundstage went from merely “really deep” to cavernous. I could hear between and around images, and directly back, way back to the farthest rear corners of the stage. Silences were blacker still, and the warm, burnished colors even more rich and vibrant. And the textures of the sounds—the clarinet’s woodiness, or Rickie Lee Jones’ vocal nuances—were even more detailed and realistic.

But more significant, the characteristics that had made the 001 seem a bit too gorgeous in my first configuration were now gone, or nearly so. Dynamics were now realistic, from the tiniest subtleties to the most explosive transients. In fact, in this configuration, the 001 smartly leapfrogged my reference setup in terms of immediacy. On The Poll Winners, Ray Brown, Shelly Manne, and Barney Kessel not only woke up, I was now in the studio with them—umpteen layers of electro-mechanical processing had been removed from the music.

The Burmester 001 is a superbly engineered CD player and analog preamp that’s incredibly versatile, easy to use, and built to last until the next millennium.

It was a similar case with Naked Songs—I was magically transported to Rickie Lee Jones’ show. Her guitar snapped and rang exactly as it should, and her voice not only regained its myriad inflections, it was rendered with a natural ease and body that made my reference system sound strained, two-dimensional, and a bit thin. Edge definition sharpened up as well. Her voice was more sharply defined in space, and the image of her guitar was more distinct, with a tightly focused picture of the pick against the strings, surrounded by the larger, resonating body.

The 001 wasn’t a different player, but it was now better in every way, and much better in some. There was still a bit of extra warmth—but less, for example, than in Albuquerque’s Paperjoy hall, where I’ve spent many an evening. The 001’s soundstage still wasn’t as wide as the Simaudio’s, nor did it have quite the Sim’s airiness and shimmer around cymbals, but these were now in much smaller differences, and not intrusive at all. I scratched my head a great deal trying to understand and rationalize the Burmester’s performance. Its personality, regardless of configuration, remained constant, but the differences in magnitude between its use as a conventional CD player and driving the power amplifiers in balanced mode without a preamplifier caught me a bit off guard. Perhaps the combination of my VAC preamp and the 001 were synergistic in a way that accentuated some of the Burmester’s inherent characteristics. Another possibility is that the pairing of the 001, the Wireworld cables, and the Levinson No.20.6s simply clicked in the other direction.

Or maybe the Burmester simply behaved differently through its balanced outputs, which is something I’ve seen before, and which John Atkinson’s measurements might illuminate. Unfortunately, the last combination—the 001 feeding the VAC via balanced Wireworld interconnects—was one that I couldn’t explore; the VAC doesn’t have balanced inputs.

And that leaves us where…?

The hard facts are beyond dispute. The Burmester 001 is a superbly engineered CD player and analog preamp that’s incredibly versatile, easy to use, and built to last until the next millennium. It’s also, in my book, very expensive. My original question—Is it worth $14,000?—gets us to its sonic performance, where things aren’t quite so straightforward.

Used as a “normal” CD player feeding my standard reference system, the 001 sounded gorgeous. I was totally, completely seduced by it. I loved it. Everyone who heard it loved it. Undeniably established that direct, emotional connection to music that we’re all looking for.

On the other hand, it had a distinct, overt personality, arguably, more overt than one should expect from a $14,000 unit. The bottom line is that if you’re going to use it as a straight CD player, arrange an audition. I can guarantee that it will tug at your heart, but only you can decide whether or not it’s going to win over your head and pocketbook as well.

But as the centerpiece of a digital-only system, running balanced from stem to stern, the Burmester 001 is the best digital front-end I’ve ever heard. As expensive as it is, I’ve heard digital setups that cost several times as much and didn’t match the Burmester’s magic. I’m not about to give up my turntable, but the 001 had me thinking “It’s not really that much trouble to switch interconnects around when I move from analog to digital, is it?”

I can’t afford a $14,000 CD player, but if I could, the Burmester CD 001 would be my choice. It’s worth it. It really is that good.
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The Ph.D. doesn't even have a power cord. Instead, 16 alkaline D cell batteries line the sides of the chassis. After about 800 hours of playing time (roughly half the life of a cartridge), a red light will indicate that your batteries are running low. Replacements cost about a buck a piece.

The Ph.D. turns on the moment your stylus is stimulated. From there, the unit automatically looks for a signal every half-hour for just a fraction of a second. If it doesn't find a signal, it will stay on for an additional half-hour with a yellow light indicating that it is preparing to turn off.

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Since 1991, Acarian Systems’ Carl Marchisotto has brought home the bacon by focusing most of his efforts on conventional dynamic, three-way, floorstanding designs in the $2000–$7000/pair range—28 different loudspeaker designs in 12 years, 13 of them still in production. That’s why Home Entertainment 2001 showgoers who were familiar with previous Alón efforts were taken aback when Marchisotto unveiled a new flagship for his Alón speaker line: the Exotica Grand Reference, a $120,000 line-source ribbon/dynamic hybrid system comprising four 7' towers. For those attracted to cost-no-object designs, the debut of the Exotica Grand Reference was quite a spectacle.

My tastes—and those of my bank account and my wife’s decorator—still run in the direction of three-way dynamic systems, however. Still, I’m a fan of certain Alón products; I own pairs of the Circe ($12,000/pair) and Alón’s original bookshelf design, the Petite ($1000/pair, before being dropped from the line several years ago). But none of the Alóns I’ve owned or reviewed over the years could come close to approaching the dynamic realism of the Exotica Grand References at Home Entertainment 2001. From the subtle pianissimos to fortissimo blasts, the music ebbed and flowed continuously, as it does in a live performance.

A conversation with Marchisotto revealed that the dynamic magic I was hearing at HE2001 stemmed largely from Alón’s new proprietary crossover topology, employed only in the Exotica. He was uncharacteristically secretive about this “magic black crossover box,” which intrigued me even more. Since that launch two years ago, Marchisotto has trickled down this crossover topology to other designs, and now every Alón speaker in the $4000–$12,000/pair range includes the new technology.

What does all this bumpf have to do with all the tea in China—or, more to the point, my quest for the ultimate budget speaker? Well, two years before that show, in 1999, Alón had launched its first sub-$1000 two-channel speaker, the Lil Rascal, a $500/pair bookshelf design. I’d been approached to review it, but had declined—my dance card was already full. Early this year, Marchisotto called me again: “We’ve incorporated the Exotica Grand Reference crossover topology in a new version of the Lil Rascal, which I think you’ll like better than your Petites.”

But we had to raise the price to 600 bucks.”

Mr. Marchisotto, you’ve captured my attention.

The Design
The Alón Lil’ Rascal Mk.II is a two-way minimonitor with its magnetically shielded drivers mounted in a front-ported 16-liter enclosure. The 6.5” bass/midrange driver uses a paper cone treated with a proprietary layer. The high frequencies are handled by a 1” silk-dome tweeter. The crossover features air-core linear inductors, polypropylene capacitors, and hand-wired circuit boards. The Mk.II’s drivers are unchanged from the original design; the upgrade comprises the proprietary crossover topology. When I pressed Marchisotto a third time for more details about the crossover, he replied, “I don’t gotta show no leg.”

The Lil Rascal Mk.II’s MDF cabinet has rounded corners to optimize diffraction. Other colors besides the standard black, which is attractive but not imposing, are available on special order. I tested the speakers using metal Celestion Si stands loaded with lead shot and sand. Although Acarian Systems recommends using the Lil Rascals with their grilles removed, I tested them both ways. Leaving the grilles on resulted in slightly reduced detail and transparency but no change in tonal balance.

The Listening
I fired up the Lil Rascals, wondering if I’d catch a glimpse of the dynamic performance I’d heard from the Exotica.


Dimensions: 15.5” H by 8.25” W by 11.75” D. Weight: 14 lbs each.

Finishes: Black; other finishes on request.

Serial numbers of units reviewed: 0757, 0760.

Price: $595/pair. Approximate number of dealers: 50.

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Grand References at HE2001. After the first listening session, I was convinced that I had, as the Rascal had three strengths unusual in a bookshelf speaker of this size and price: 1) lifelike dynamic contrasts, from the softest soft passages through the most bombastic fortissimos; 2) detail resolution, transparency, and natural transient articulation akin to what I'd expect from a more expensive speaker; and 3) a linear and uncolored mid/upper bass region realistic not only in timbre, but also in its ability to breathe and bloom as live music does.

But such accolades would be meaningless if the Rascal didn't get the midrange right, which it did. Robert Taub's interpretation of Milton Babbitt's Piano Works (CI), Harmonia Mundi HMC 5160) puts the piano through a wide range of tonal and dynamic colors. With the Lil' Rascal, I was drawn to Taub's virtuosic playing in the lower middle register of the instrument, and was able to follow his signature bombastic yet delicate style on his rich and resonant instrument. I have never heard this region of the piano keyboard reproduced more naturally by a small speaker.

Similarly, male and female vocals were naturally portrayed with great dimensional body. Madeline Peyroux's highly individualistic channeling of Billie Holiday on "Hey Sweet Man," from Dreamland (CD, Atlantic 82946-2), was rich, resonant, and uncolored, the Rascal revealing every subtlety of her phrasing. I did, however, notice that sibilants were rather prominent on this recording.

After auditioning a wide range of program material, I concluded that the Rascal had a crisp presentation of frequencies in the upper-midrange/low-frequency range that tended to highlight instruments with significant energy in this region. It wasn't a brightness, harshness, or brittleness, but certain instruments, such as Fender Stratocasters (Mighty Sam McClain's Give It Up to Love CD, JVC JVCX 0012-2) or dobro (Mark Ribot's work on the Peyroux disc), sounded as if they'd been turned up a jot in the mix. Vocalists such as Peyroux, although sounding natural, appeared to have been very closely miked. The crispness in this range was more noticeable with my Creek 5350SE integrated amplifier than with my Audio Valve/Audio Research tube combo.

**Measurements**

The Alón Lil Rascal Mk.II's voltage sensitivity was very slightly higher than specified, at 89 dB/2.83 V/m, which is also 2 dB above the average I found in my 1999 articles on speaker measurements. Its plot of impedance magnitude and phase (fig.1) revealed it to be an easy load for the partnering amplifier to drive, its impedance dropping below 8 ohms only in the lower midrange. Both sensitivity and impedance values indicate that the Rascal would be a good match for the inexpensive amplifiers with which it is likely to be used.

However, a glitch in the impedance traces at 230 Hz implies the existence of a cabinet resonance of some kind at this frequency. Fig.2, a cumulative spectral-decay plot calculated from the output of an accelerometer fastened to the center of the speaker's side wall, shows that not only does a very strong resonance exist at this frequency, but so does an even stronger one at 360 Hz. I could detect the higher-frequency resonance only on the sidewall, the lower-frequency one on every surface. I'm puzzled that BJR was not bothered by any lower-midrange congestion that could result from these resonant modes. They were very audible when I listened to the cabinet-wall output with a stethoscope.

The saddle at 44 Hz in the impedance-magnitude trace suggests that this is the tuning frequency of the 2"-diameter reflex port on the front panel. However, the corresponding minimum in the woofer's response (fig.3, red trace) occurs a little lower in frequency, at 40 Hz, while the maximum in the port's output (blue) is higher, between 60 Hz and 80 Hz. However, the complex sum of the two nearfield
This tonal crispness didn't otherwise detract from the Li'l Rascal's extended and natural high-frequency performance. Classical violins and the upper partials of woodwinds were extended, natural, and airy. In particular, I was smitten by the Rascal's performance of percussive high frequencies. George Crumb's chamber works make considerable use of cymbals, bells, and unorthodox percussion, and I found myself following each cymbal attack and decay in Night Music (Candide 31113). Crumb's scores often incorporate long silences, and long decays of the sounds of solo instruments; the combination of the Rascal's high-frequency transient articulation and its rendition of ambiance and room sound added to the realism of such moments.

On the opposite end of the frequency spectrum, rock and jazz fans should appreciate the Li'l Rascal's rendering of acoustic and electric bases. Although the Rascal was natural and uncumbered in the reproduction of all strings, especially the bass instruments, I was most impressed by the uniformly dynamic bloom throughout the midbass region. Through most budget bookshelf speakers I've auditioned, bass guitar descending into the lower register tends to sound compressed and dynamically constrained. Not so through the Rascal. Gary Wilson's Fender bass on "When You Walk Into My Dreams," from You Think You Really Know Me (CD, Motel MRC1007), traverses the entire range of the instrument. Each note was uniform in timbre, attack, and presence on the Alón.

Similarly, classical fans will appreciate the Li'l Rascal's rendition of bass drums (Stravinsky, The Firebird, Mercury 90226) and timpani (Kohjiba, Transmigration of the Soul, from Festival, Stereophile STPH007-2). These were tuneful and natural, and about as dramatic as I've heard from a bookshelf speaker. Don't expect much bottom octave, however—the lower organ-pedal notes in John Rutter's Requiem (CD, Reference RR57-CD), although uncolored, were significantly down in volume and didn't shake the room much. But I'll be interested to see John Atkinson's measurements on the Rascal's low-frequency extension—aside from the organ-pedal recording, the Rascal never once sounded bass-shy.

Well-recorded works, as on the Stra-

---

**Measurements**

responses (black) is -6dB at 44Hz, which is just above the lowest note of the four-string bass guitar and double-bass. Note that all of these low-frequency traces are affected by the nearfield measurement technique, which assumes a half-space acoustic environment. This boosts the level of the traces by 3dB below 200Hz or so, which means the Li'l Rascal's absolute LF extension will be a little more restricted. However, it is fair to note that BJR felt the speaker offered good in-room extension for its size.

Higher in frequency, there is a small peak in the port's output between 600Hz and 800Hz, which coincides with a small peak in the Rascal's farfield response. Note the notch just above 1kHz, which coincides in frequency with a discontinuity in the impedance traces, with an even smaller peak. These, along with the shelved-down lower mids, might contribute to BJR's finding the speaker to have a "crisp presentation." The top audio octave is boosted by 5dB, which, all things being equal, correlates with BJR's finding the Li'l Rascal to exaggerate vocal sibilance.

Of course, all things are never equal. The Li'l Rascal's horizontal dispersion plots (fig.4, actual responses; fig.5, differences in response) show that the tweeter's output falls off rapidly above 1kHz at more than 20° to the speaker's sides. In larger rooms, this will tend to off-set the Rascal's shelved-up-on-axis response, but the region between 8kHz and 11kHz will still be tipped up in absolute terms.
vinsky and Festival CDs, demonstrated the Rascals' resolution of detail and depiction of precise dimensional images on a wide, deep stage. Furthermore, the Rascal's ability to delineate hall sound and reproduce wide dynamic swings might make it the ideal speaker for the orchestral music fan with limited money and space. I did note, however, that on the Stravinsky, the trombones and trumpets had a slight "blurry" quality that might be related to the Rascal's crisp upper-midrange/high-frequency reproduction.

Fans of rock music will appreciate the Rascal's ability to follow separate instruments in electronic mixes. On "2," from Café Tacuba's Reves/Abajo (CD, Luaka Bop 47574-2), I was amazed at the wide timbral and dynamic colors the composers extracted from the bass synthesizers and drum machines that dominate this mix. Listening to "How Am I Different?" from Aimee Mann's Bachelor No.2 or The Last Remains of the Dodo (CD, Super Ego SE002), I imagined myself as the recording engineer, analyzing each fade, EQ, and compression of the instruments, thinking, "How Would I Have Mixed Different?"

The Rascal shines best as a jazz speaker. On "I'm an Old Cowhand," from Sonny Rollins' Way Out West (CD, JVC VIC 160088), Rollins' tenor sax was natural and vibrant—but I found myself ignoring everything but the drums. I was analyzing Shelley Mann's wonderful clip-clop syncopation throughout the head, and following every subtle dynamic inflection of the uncolored snare and ride cymbal during his solo. I then began seeking out other drum-solo recordings to hear through the Rascals, but couldn't find my copy of The Sheffield Drum Record—I'll need to borrow Art Dudley's copy.

The Others
I compared the Li'l Rascal Mk.II with the usual suspects: the Paradigm Atom ($189/pair), the Polk RT25i (discontinued, $319/pair, when last offered), the

Measurements
Note that in fig.4, the suckout between 1kHz and 2kHz persists at all off-axis angles. A week or so after I had measured the speaker and shipped it back, I received an e-mail from Alón's Carl Marchisotto saying that the Rascal was intended to be listened to, not on the tweeter axis, but halfway between the tweeter and woofer. The speaker's vertical-dispersion plot (fig.6) does indicate that the suckout begins to fill in 5° below the tweeter axis. However, it doesn't do so completely until the listening axis is actually below the woofer. It deepens even further above the tweeter; the Li'l Rascal should be used on high stands. The 24" stands used by BJR imply a low listening seat that places the listener's ears around 32" from the floor, unless the speaker is tilted back slightly.

In the time domain, the step response on the tweeter axis (fig.7) reveals the HF unit to be connected in inverted acoustic polarity, its positive-going overshoot almost coinciding with the woofer's positive-going step. The small glitch just past the timeline in what would have otherwise been a smooth curve indicates that Carl Marchisotto was correct: the best integration between the two units will occur just below the tweeter axis. But there is also a strong reflection apparent about 450µs after the main arrival. This is just the right delay to give the interference suckout noted in the frequency-domain measurements.

Finally, the Li'l Rascal Mk.II's cumulative spectral-decay plot (fig.8) is very clean throughout the tweeter region. The on-axis notch above 1kHz is associated with delayed energy, which tinges with the strong reflection seen in fig.7. Overall, the Alón's measured performance is about average—not bad, considering its low price.

Measurements Postscript
When I received the Li'l Rascal samples back from Bob Reina, now sporting thin felt rings around their tweeters, I didn't expect to find much measurable difference. I was wrong, however. The blue trace in fig.9 shows the speaker's quasi-anechoic response above 300Hz without the felt ring (it's the same curve shown in fig.5). The red trace is the same sample but now with the felt ring; the black trace (offset by 3dB for clarity) shows the difference between the two responses. (Ignore the ripples below 2kHz in the differen-
NHT SB3 ($600/pair), and the Alón Petite ($1000/pair, discontinued).

First up was the nearest price competition, the NHT SB3. The NHT had a more liquid presentation than the Rascal, with a silky midrange and smoother but less detailed highs. The dynamics were excellent but not in the Rascal’s league, and the high frequencies were less airy. This midbass was also slightly warmer. On balance, the NHT SB3 was slightly more romantic, more polite, and less revealing than the Rascal.

On the lower end of the price range, the Polk RT25/1 was impressive in its midrange and resolution of high-frequency detail, and was very natural and intimate in its overall presentation. Vocals were not as sibilant as on the Rascal, nor were they quite as dimensional or involving. Although the Polk’s midbass region was uncolored, its bass extension and high-level dynamic performance were far inferior to the Rascal’s.

Further down the price ladder, the Paradigm Atom was smooth and fairly uncolored throughout its range, but with fairly good detail resolution and dynamic performance. High-level dynamics were the least impressive of the group, with high frequencies that were not as extended or as airy as the Lil’ Rascal’s. But remember—the Lil’ costs less than a third as much as the Rascal.

The “final answer” question for me was “Does Alón’s $595/pair Lil’ Rascal Mk.II outperform their $1000/pair Petite?” Overall, the Alón Petite was uncolored, with detail resolution, transparency, and low-level dynamic articulation that equaled the Rascal’s. The Rascal had far superior high-level dynamic capabilities, as well as more extended and dramatic midbass performance. On balance, however, I found the Petite’s HF presentation to be more delicate, articulate, and sophisticated. One should keep in mind that, although the Petite design is nearly a decade old, it has the same tweeter as the original Alón IV ($3500/pair).

ence plot, which are due to the slightly but unavoidably different FFT windows used for the two sets of measurements.)

Despite its thinness, the felt ring has improved the speaker’s treble balance, in that it is smoother, just as Carl Marchisotto claims. While the top octave is still “hot” in absolute terms, the region above 7kHz now has a little less energy, while the mid-treble has been reinforced by 1-2dB. Both of these correlate with BJR’s finding that the speaker now had a more satisfying balance.

It is important to note that the rings are way too thin and of the wrong texture to provide any damping action. What they do is to change the speaker’s dispersion, pushing more or less energy off-axis to smother the on-axis behavior. This can be seen in fig.10, which shows the revised speaker’s lateral radiation pattern. Comparing this graph with fig.5, it can be seen that the overall dispersion with the tweeter ring is smoother overall, wider above 7kHz, and no longer has the off-axis “horns” at 6.5kHz.

I echo Bob Reina’s recommendation, that owners of early Rascals upgrade their speakers with the tweeter rings.

—John Atkinson
The End

Overall, Alón by Acarian Systems has made quite a splash with its latest entry in the budget loudspeaker market, the Lil’ Rascal Mk.II. In several areas, Carl Marchisotto may have set a new standard of performance for an inexpensive bookshelf design. I was pleased with how the Lil’ Rascal satisfied musically over a wide range of program material. I am most impressed, however, that a speaker designer has been able to trickel a design element from a $120,000/pair speaker all the way down to one costing only $595/pair. That’s an achievement.

Addendum

When I’d completed this review and an edited version had been sent to the manufacturer for comment, it occurred to Acarian Systems that my samples of the Lil’ Rascal Mk.II — Carl Marchisotto’s own pair — might not be representative of current production.

When the original Lil’ Rascal was introduced in 1999, its tweeter was fitted with 1”-wide felt rings around the circumference of its dome, to modify re-radiation of high frequencies from the cabinet edges. According to Marchisotto, the ring purifies and smooths the speaker’s high-frequency response. The first production run of the Mk.II version, however, was sold without the rings. The idea was that a ringless speaker would produce a livelier high-frequency presentation, and thus be a better match for inexpensive electronics with less revealing high-frequency response.

Marchisotto ultimately changed his mind, and the Lil’ Rascal Mk.II now comes with diffraction rings. As it turned out, my review samples were of the early, ringless variety; JA felt that I should listen to them — and that he should remeasure them — with rings installed. Acarian Systems mailed me a pair of rings, and I fitted them to my review samples.

The diffraction rings tamed some of the vocal sibilants I’d noted on the Madeline Peyroux recording: the highs sounded smoother and more refined, and Mark Ribot’s dobro was a touch less metallic. The difference was less noticeable on Mighty Sam McClain’s Give It Up to Love — with the rings, the reproduction of vocals and cymbals was almost indistinguishable from the sound without the rings—but the Fender Stratocaster’s high-frequency attacks were tamed a bit. (The latter difference was akin to turning down the Twin Reverb amplifier’s treble knob one number — more subtle, in guitar terms, than flipping off the Bright switch, or swapping a silver-plate, 1970s-vintage amp for a mellow pre-CBS version from the early 1960s.) The more highly modulated passages of Janis Ian’s “Walking on Sacred Ground” (LP, Breaking Silence, Analogue Productions CAPP027) were less forward and more natural with the rings fitted, but there was very little difference on the low-level passages.

Overall, the effect of adding the tweeter diffraction rings was subtle, and more noticeable with some recordings than with others. The effect was not as great as switching from the Creek to the Audio Research amp, for example. On balance, however, the rings resulted in a more balanced, musical, and involving presentation overall. Acarian Systems has promised to provide diffraction rings free of charge to owners of early-production Lil’ Rascal Mk.IIs. I recommend that they be taken up on the offer.

Associated Equipment

**Analog sources:** VPI TNT IV turntable, Immedia RPM tonearm, Koetsu Unshii cartridge; Rega Planar 3 turntable, Syrinx PU-3 tonearm, Clearaudio Virtuoso Wood & Aurum Beta S cartridges.

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

**Preamplification:** Vendetta Research SCP-2D phono stage, Audio Valve Eclipse line stage.

**Power amplifier:** Audio Research VT100 Mk.II.

**Integrated amplifier:** Creek 5350SE.


**Accessories:** Various by ASC, Bright Star, Celestion, Echo Busters, Salamander Designs, Simply Physics, Sound Anchor, VPI.

— Robert J. Reina

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"YOU'RE GIVING ME A HEART ATTACK!"
As names go, "Reference 3A" is awful. It sounds less like a company than it does a model number, as in the Dudco Reference 3A (on sale now wherever Fourier speakers used to be sold); I find it hard not to expect a Reference 3B with each new year. Add to that a cumbersome and somewhat meaningless model designation, "MM de Capo i"—what do the Ms stand for? what does the i stand for? haven't there been other de Capos in audio recently?—and my poor brain becomes utterly confused. And the older I get, the less I can tolerate being confused. Forgive me if, during the course of this review, I get lazy and fall back on the lazy and admittedly somewhat Clinton-esque this speaker.

In every other meaningful way, the Reference 3A MM de Capo i is as unforgettable as your favorite song, and some people will consider it just as lovable. Difficult though it is for me to wrap my tired mind around its name, it's also hard for me to think of another $2500/pair speaker that combines this one's superb musical flow and feel with such a very fine sense of scale, acceptably low coloration, and much greater than average electrical sensitivity. This is one hell of a nice thing.

I've just finished listening to Glenn Gould's performance of Brahms' Intermezzo in A, Op.118 No.2, from the new collection ...and Serenity (Sony Classical SK 90538), a beautifully conceived sequel to last year's A State of Wonder, and this speaker was satisfying in virtually every way important to me. Pitch certainty was superb. Timbre was fine. When Gould eased back on his arpeggios and the tempo became almost march-like for eight bars or so (beginning at about 2:45), this speaker signaled the change in flow and feel so effectively that the hairs on my arms stood up. And on the same disc, the de Capo even did a stunning job of reproducing the low B that comes 50 seconds into the Largo of the Sibelius Sonatine in E—and did so without making it sound small or pinched. Good grief—my physically much larger Lowther Medallions can't do that.

What accounts for that sort of performance?

The MM de Capo i

At first glance, this speaker looks like a thousand other stand-mounted two-ways on the market: stubby if nicely made things with sloped front baffles for physical time alignment, as well as chamfered edges, presumably to mitigate the nasty effects of treble splash.

Reference 3A MM de Capo i loudspeaker

The MM de Capo i, which was designed by company founder Daniel Dehay, is built around a proprietary midrange/bass driver common to all Reference 3A loudspeakers: a 7" cone of woven carbon fiber, executed here with an unusually flexible rubber surround and a blunted phase plug. A multilayered wooden disc called a Vibra-Puck (as distinguished from VibraPod, Vibro-Lux, or WonderPuck®), intended to control unmuusical resonances, is cemented to the back side of the motor, and in a move reminiscent of the one-piece baffle-frame assembly of the Epos ES11 woofer (and other designs like it), the Vibra-Puck is stubbily bolted to a wooden brace inside the cabinet.

Said cabinet is, in fact, well-braced throughout, and nicely assembled from 3/4" MDF. The rear baffle incorporates a reflex port, which measures 2.5" in diameter and bends 90° toward the bottom of the box. My review pair was finished in an attractive maple veneer that contrasted prettily with the black fabric grilles, and which is one of two standard finishes (the other is the same wood stained red). A little more money can buy a pair of these speakers in black lacquer.

Reference 3A calls their woofer a "hyperexponential" cone, and the company takes obvious pride in its design and manufacture: because it's made to such exacting tolerances, and because its response is tailored so specifically to


Dimensions: 15" H by 11" W by 13" D. Weight: 27 lbs.

Finishes: Maple veneer, cherry red-stained maple veneer; "piano-grade" black lacquer, add $250/pair.

Serial numbers of units reviewed: D2636L & R.

Price: $2500/pair. Approximate number of dealers: 32.

Manufacturer: Divergent Technologies Inc., 342 Frederick Street, Kitchener, Ontario N2H 4L8, Canada. Tel: (519) 749-1565. Fax: (519) 749-2863. Web: www.reference3A.com.
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What that means is I'm not talking about some cheap, slap-it-together particleboard junk. This is furniture that was engineered from the ground up with proper placement of A/V gear in mind.

I'm talking open architecture for max mum heat management. Shelves made of 3/4" thick medium density fiberboard...the preferred material for resonance damping. Heavy-gauge tubular steel framework. It even comes with premium adjustable carpet spikes for proper isolation.

Wait a minute, I lied...

Not every shelf is made of acoustically sound MDF. You also have the option of frosted glass. And not just any glass. I'm talking 10 mm thick glass that's tempered for strength and safety. Speaking of options, let's not forget about the pillars. They come in your choice of black or silver. Either way, they receive a tough premium electroplated finish.

But, a pillar, after all, is just a pillar. Let's get back to the real beauty of Euro Furniture, the shelves. I already mentioned glass. But your options are open. You could always choose beautiful real hardwood cherry veneers. Or, if you're a purist, you'll go for the special acid-catalyzed black lacquer. That's what I'd do.

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their own loudspeaker designs, they say, this handmade driver can be run flat-out, driven directly by the user's amplifier, with no filter components of any sort between it and the input terminals. The tweeter, for its part—a 1" fabric dome that the company says is made to their specifications—is saddled with only a single capacitor as a high-pass filter.

That, as much as anything else, is responsible for this speaker's higher-than-average electrical sensitivity. Combine that with an amplifier-friendly impedance curve—8 ohms for the most part, with no unpleasant bending—and you have a distinctly efficient speaker. Consequently, like other Reference 3A designs past and present, the de Capo has garnered lots of attention from enthusiasts of single-ended triode (SET) tube amplifiers.

All the materials used in making the MM de Capo i are first-class. The above-mentioned filter component is a chunky, old-style oil cap, and similarly retro-looking wool felt appears here and there for sound absorption. The connecting wire is halogen-free van den Hul, and the double sets of speaker connectors (for biwiring) are from Cardas, as are the oddly shaped solid-copper links, which resemble the things people throw at each other in the film Zardoz (or was it Planet of the Apes)?

Construction quality is superb—all Reference 3A manufacturing is now

**Measurements**

The MM de Capo i's voltage sensitivity was above average, at an estimated 91dB(1)/2.83V/m, which is slightly but inconsequentially less than specified. Its impedance (fig.1) was reasonably benign, dropping below 6 ohms only in the lower mid-range and the high treble. (The speaker is thus both sensitive and efficient.) The minimum value was 5.1 ohms at 10kHz, and the electrical phase angle was generally mild. Note that the shape of the impedance curve means that using this speaker with a tube amplifier having a high source impedance will pull down its mid-range level compared with solid-state drive. The significance of this will become apparent.

There are three significant glitches in the impedance traces, between 400Hz and 900Hz, which indicate the presence of cabinet resonances. Examining the panel's vibrational behavior with a plastic-tape accelerometer reveals some major resonances to be present, particularly on the rear panel (fig.2). However, it is fair to note that Art Dudley didn't comment on any coloration that could be traced to this behavior.

The saddle at 46Hz in the impedance-magnitude trace indicates the tuning frequency of the 2.5"-diameter port on the rear panel, which was confirmed by nearfield measurement of the woofer's output. Its response curve (fig.3) is marked by a sharp null at the same frequency, due to the port resonance applying sufficient back pressure at this frequency to hold the woofer cone motionless. As can also be seen from fig.3, all the speaker's acoustic output then comes from the port. The port's response is basically smooth within its passband, but is marred by three midrange peaks. Not coincidentally, these lie at the frequencies of the glitches in the impedance traces.

The woofer is driven without any low-pass crossover filter intervening, so the upper-frequency rolloff seen in fig.3 is its natural behavior. With the tweeter filtered by a single series capacitor, the two drive-units cross over between 4kHz and 5kHz, the tweeter having a little too much on-axis energy in its top two octaves. As AD found, this will be ameliorated by aiming the speakers straight ahead rather than toeing them in to the listening seat.

AD remarked on the speaker's mid-range "bump." This can be clearly seen in fig.3 as an excess of energy in the octave between 500Hz and 1kHz. I would have expected this to add a distinctly nasal coloration, and AD did comment that the speaker made "violins sound a little thicker than they
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done in Canada, having moved there from Switzerland—and it would be a shame not to mention the robust carton and packing materials used to ship these speakers, including individual cotton sacks that I found helpful for keeping the speakers dustless when not playing music.

**Set-up**

Using ancient metal stands and adjustable spikes, I raised the de Capos about 29" off the carpeted floor, with little dabs of Blu-Tack between the stands and the bottoms of the cabinets. Coming so soon after my experiences with the Ayre AX-7 amplifier (*Stereophile*, October 2003), I'd rather not blow a thousand words on another setup saga; suffice it to say, these speakers confirmed my early efforts at placement, and it took a lot of wallzing around to get them sounding spacious and unfussy.

Interestingly, although the de Capos are "handed" in the usual way—the tweeter is closer to one edge of the baffle than the other—the manufacturer recommends an unusual approach to room placement, with the tweeters on the outermost rather than the innermost edges. The manual also recommends aiming the speakers straight ahead; thoroughness and an immature desire to be contrary led me to try toe-

### Measurements

are." However, it is also possible that this response shaping adds an articulate character to the speaker's presentation.  

Fig.4 shows the Reference 3A's responses averaged across a ±15° horizontal window on the tweeter axis. The midrange bump can again be seen, as can the excess energy at the top of the tweeter's passband, but the curve is otherwise reasonably even. The MM de Capo's bass looks flat in this graph, but as the nearfield measurement technique should boost the upper bass by 3dB, the speaker's low-frequency tuning is actually a little on the overdamped side. The measured -6dB point was a respectable 42Hz, or about the lowest note of the four-string bass guitar.

Fig.5 shows how the speaker's balance changes to the sides of the tweeter axis, with those on the tweeter side of the baffle shown to the front of the graph. On this side, the radiation pattern is marred by a major suckout between 3kHz and 6kHz, which I assume is why Reference 3A recommends setting up the speakers with their tweeters on the outside edges. Conventional wisdom holds that using a drive-unit as large as the de Capo's woofer will result in severe beaming at the top of its passband. To my surprise, while the midrange peak and subsequent suckout persist off-axis, the de Capo's dispersion is quite broad on both sides of the tweeter, especially on the side opposite the tweeter. This graph also shows that the tweeter's output rolls off quite quickly to the sides above 10kHz, which is why the MM de Capo's top-octave balance can be adjusted by experimenting with toe-in or the lack thereof.

In the vertical plane, the use of a minimal crossover results in rather a messy-looking radiation pattern (fig.6), though it does look as if the low-treble balance smooths out a little if you sit just below the tweeter.

![Figure 5](image1.png)

**Figure 5:** Reference 3A MM de Capo i, lateral response family at 50°, normalized to response on tweeter axis, from back to front: differences in response 90°-57° off-axis on side opposite tweeter; reference response; differences in response 5°-90° off-axis on tweeter side of baffle.

![Figure 6](image2.png)

**Figure 6:** Reference 3A MM de Capo i, vertical response family at 50°, normalized to response on tweeter axis, from back to front: differences in response 45°-5° above axis; reference response; differences in response 5°-45° below axis.
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It's hard to imagine improving on a product like the Acoustic Signature turntables. Their high level of quality and sophistication is hard to find, and improvements on such high-quality products are even more rare. The new Mambo from Acoustic Signature, however, has pushed the envelope even further. Twenty brass cylinders are pressed into the Silent Platter and each one is additionally isolated by 2 rubber o-rings. The resulting flywheel effect creates greater inertia and also nearly all ambient vibrations are absorbed.

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Harry Pearson, August-September, Absolute Sound. Reprinted with permission

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ing them in anyway, but the sound that resulted was spatially fussy and tonally relentless. For once, I agree: Straight ahead is the way to go.

Two more placement notes: First, the manual recommends that people with smaller rooms try placing the de Capos along the long wall, firing across the room's short dimension. An earlier experience with one of this speaker's floorstanding predecessors (Listener, Vol.6 No.5) bore that out, but when I tried it with the de Capos in my 228-square-foot, medium-small listening room, I wasn't similarly rewarded. Then again, with a brand-new pair of $2500 speakers and the rest of your life ahead of you, you'd be crazy not to try everything.

Second: Irrespective of how nice that black cloth looks against the pale maple veneer, the best thing you can do with the grilles is to lose them: Having them in place changed the de Capos' sound for the worse. As I hinted a moment ago, those cotton sacks will give you all the protection you need when you're not actually using your hi-fi.

**Sound**

Of course if you demand the same sorts of things from a hi-fi system as I do, a pair of MM de Capo i's won't see a lot of down time in your house. But be aware that these did take a while to run in. At first they sounded grainy — very grainy, in fact — as well as hooty and a bit shut in. Over time, presumably as that tweeter loosened up, these speakers sounded considerably more open and airy.

**Whatever the flaws, they were dwarfed by this speaker's tremendous expressiveness.**

This speaker never lost every iota of that hooty coloration, though, leaving me to think of its response as very slightly lumpier than the ideal, with a midrange boost here that made violins sound a little thinner than they are, and a notch there that robbed voices of a bit of texture — that which gives keening voices their keen. Likewise, Peter Wispelwey's cello in Saint-Saëns' Concerto 1 (Channel Classics CCS SA 16501) always sounded a small shade thicker than I think it should. These worries were slight: You'll hear them if you compare the Reference 3As with something more unambiguously flat, like classic Spenders, but I doubt you'll be troubled.

And whatever the flaws, they were dwarfed by this speaker's tremendous expressiveness. It was impossible to hear Bill Monroe's "Lonesome Moonlight Waltz" (from MCA's fine four-CD retrospective, MCAD4 11048) without picturing those big, old gnarly hands of his coaxing — sometimes inelegantly — from his mandolin that beautiful combination of wood tone and barnyard cluck of which only he seemed capable. All the subtleties of Melora Creager's cello playing, as well as her well-used singing vibrato, were brought to the front on Rasputina's "Thanks for the Ether" (Sony CK 67504), an album that's held up brilliantly well over the eight years since its release. Likewise the one-handed rolls that punctuate so many of drummer B.J. Wilson's lines on Procol Harum's debut LP, recently reissued by Classic Records (LRZ 1001).

**Measurements**

axis. This is confirmed by the MM de Capo i's step response (fig.7), which suggests that the tweeter is not stepped back quite enough for absolute time coherence on its axis. Sitting a little lower than the tweeter will push back the sharp up/down spike in this graph to coincide exactly with the woofer's step response. I am not convinced that such time coherence is worth achieving if it is at the expense of other, more directly audible factors, such as good dispersion and flat perceived response. But it is fair to note that AD was impressed by much of what this speaker did.

Note the ringing in the step response, which appears from its period to be associated with the midrange bump in the frequency response. This is confirmed by the speaker's farfield cumulative spectral-decay, or waterfall, plot (fig.8). Even without a low-pass crossover filter on the woofer feed, the decay in the treble is superbly clean. But oh, look at the enormous ridges of resonant energy between 600Hz and 1kHz. I am surprised that AD wasn't bothered more by this behavior.

—John Atkinson

![Fig.7 Reference 3A MM de Capo i, step response on tweeter axis at 50° (5ms time window, 30kHz bandwidth).](image)

![Fig.8 Reference 3A MM de Capo i, cumulative spectral-decay plot at 50° (0.15ms risetime).](image)
More than most speakers its size, the de Capo I had a wide enough frequency range to sound convincing on orchestral music. The Bernstein recording of the Barber Adagio (from the recently released The Essential Bernstein set, Sony Classical SK 90581) mesmerized me from beginning to end, thanks not only to the speaker's tight grip on sustained pitches but its good orchestral weight and presence as well. And while the de Capo's bass response was not as deep as that of, say, my Quad ESL-989s, it left no doubt when the deeper instruments were played near the bottoms of their ranges. It's not that I simply heard them, or anything so coarse as saying I felt them — but I simply became aware of their importance the way I do in real life. That's part of what I regard as musically natural or organic presentation, and that's what the de Capo had in spades.

But more than anything, I kept coming back to piano music with these speakers. For one thing, the de Capo was free of the gross colorations that can make piano music fatiguing to listen to in more than small doses: Even my Lowthers, God bless their presence and immediacy, are too bumpy in the upper mids to prevent certain notes from standing out or ringing, and that, too, makes my brain tired after a while. (Of course, my Quad ESL-989s, which I also love, are free from such nastiness, and for that reason as well as their own successful-if-different way with scale, they too have increased my enjoyment of piano music at home — albeit at close to four times the de Capos' price, and requiring several times as much amplifier power.) The two-disc edition of Josef Hoffman's Casimir Hall recital — Vol.6 in Marston Records' complete and irreplaceable Hoffman series (Marston 52014-2) — drove the Reference 3As to great emotional peaks several evenings in a row at my house. While the Canadian speakers were ruthless in exposing the flaws in the original 1938 recording (hiss, weird resonances, etc.), they were made up for it by telegraphing Hoffman's wild and sometimes outrageous performances of the standard repertoire — especially Beethoven's "Waldstein" Sonata, which hadn't sounded this exciting to me since I'd last heard the great Jerome Rose play it in concert (quite differently, of course).

Spatially, these speakers pulled off the very neat trick of combining precise image placement — the woodwinds on the Pierre Monteux recording of Brahms' Symphony 2 (LP, Philips 835 167 AY) were right there — with the ability to convey both the size of an orchestra and the distance between the listener and such things as the horns in the back row. Usually, when describing small speakers that sound big, reviewers talk about space and air and other things that don't really have anything to do with music (except maybe Cage's). What the Reference 3As did was not that sort of phasex, reverberant bigness; rather, they made the music itself big and substantial when called for. Incidentally, these speakers sounded best when heard at close range, I thought. Suits me.

Of the three amps I own, my favorite with the de Capos was the Audio Note Kit One, which uses a single 300B tube per side for a Schwarzeneggerish 7W or so. My second favorite was the Fi 2A3 Stereo, a 3Wpc amp that actually controlled the bass better — but only at volume levels much lower than the realistic. My 35Wpc Naim NAP110 drove the de Capos all right, but the presentation was somewhat poorer than with the two aforementioned tube amps, with less of a sense of flow and a more mechanical and less organic presentation overall. Is that a large enough sampling to suggest that these speakers preferred tube amps to transistors? I don't know.

Perhaps neatest of all, when I tried to push the de Capos beyond their apparent dynamic limits, they didn't sound strained: The very loudest bits just didn't get louder. So while it's fair to say these speakers compressed the music when pushed too far, I think I'd rather have that than egregious distortion: mushiness, fuzziness, other "uh" words.

You might be interested to know how the de Capo fared when measured in my listening room with the AudioControl spectrum analyzer: From their best overall positions, which were well away from the wall behind them, they were flat down to 80Hz and approximately 4dB down at 63Hz, with useful if attenuated output all the way down to 31.5Hz. (I say "approximately" because bass performance

Associated Equipment

- Analog sources: Linn LP12 turntable, Naim Armaggeddon power supply, Naim Aro tonearm; Rega Planar 3 turntable, Rega RB-300 tonearm; ZYX Airy S, Lyra Helikon Mono, Dynavector DV10X5 cartridges; Tamura L2-D, Audio Note AN-S2 step-up transformers.
- Digital source: Sony SCD-777ES SACD player.
- Preamplifiers: Audio Note M3, Naim NAC32-5, Fi Preamplifier.
- Power amplifiers: Audio Note Kit One (300B), Fi 2A3 Stereo, Naim NAP110.
- Lowspeakers: Quad ESL-989, Lowther PM2A in modified Medallion horn.


Accessories: Mana stands under Linn turntable, Naim power supply, Sony SACD player, Audio Note preamp; Audiotech stand under Naim amp, preamp; Rega wall shelf under Rega turntable; Loricraft PRC3 record cleaner.

—Art Dudley

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below 80Hz was affected by small shifts in microphone/listener position relative to the wall behind it—a normal effect in a room of this size, and one that could probably be made slightly less severe by devoting even more time and work to placement."

The spectrum analyzer also confirmed that toeing-in the de Capos was a bad idea. Aimed straight ahead—ie, with the tweeters heard somewhat off-axis—the performance was flat, apart from a 4dB bump at 630Hz that I could never get rid of. With the speakers toed-in and the tweeters heard on-axis, although the top-end response was now only 2dB down at 20kHz, there was also a nasty 4dB bump at 12.5kHz, the likes of which would tend to exaggerate hiss on older recordings and other musical artifacts.

**Conclusion**

The capsule review: A nice-looking small speaker with much higher sensitivity than average for the breed. Goes loud and big easily, and has decent if not earth-shattering bass. Some superfluous darkness in the mids, but everything’s balanced nicely overall, and it communicates sonic textures brilliantly. Rhythmically fine, with good pitch definition and an utterly superb sense of flow and human feel. Can be driven by some SETs in a small to moderate room, although very-low-power amps (2A3s, 45s, etc.) are doubtful. Decent value, high recommendation.

**The Reference 3A MM de Capo i is a nice-looking small speaker with much higher sensitivity than average for the breed.**

Nothing—nothing—about the Reference 3A MM de Capo i could prepare you for how good it is: not its name, or its appearance, or any description of what’s gone into it. I wish this review could do the job, but that may fail as well, leaving you no choice but to hear it. Do it: This speaker is utterly worth whatever time you spend with it, and every penny of the asking price.
### DVD Players

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Pioneer SACD/DVD Player</strong></td>
<td>World's first bargain-priced DVD/SACD/DVD-Audio/CD/CDR &amp; more DVD players. Only $179!</td>
<td><strong>SACD!</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Philips SACD/DVD Player</strong></td>
<td>Five disc DVD/SACD/DVD-Audio/CD/CDR &amp; more player. Only $249.95</td>
<td><strong>DCDI</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Philips/Faroudja SACD/DVD Player</strong></td>
<td>Bargain-priced player with Faroudja DCD Video Processing, Bulby Digital &amp; more, Only $499</td>
<td><strong>DCDI</strong></td>
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<tr>
<th>Model</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Boston Acoustics Receptor Radio</strong></td>
<td>Offers the best reception of any cable radio we've tested. AM/FM, 20 presets, dual alarms &amp; comes in three colors, Only $159.00</td>
<td><strong>FREE!</strong></td>
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<td>Great sounding highly portable rechargeable weather resistant radio designed by Henry Kloss. Available in eight colors, only $129.00</td>
<td><strong>Kloss-Designed Clock Radio</strong></td>
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### Headphones

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<th>Model</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Grado SR-80</strong></td>
<td>Dynamic headphones, reg. $499, now $210</td>
<td><strong>Sale!</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Adcom DVD Audio Proprietary Player</strong></td>
<td>Proprietary circuitry for unsurpassed audio &amp; video performance. Black or Silver, $999.95</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Vibrapod Feet</strong></td>
<td>Best-selling component isolation feet for CD/DVD players &amp; more VIBRA442 holds 16-32lbs $24.00</td>
<td><strong>Vibrapod</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Clean Dirty RCA Connections</strong></td>
<td>Best-selling one-step audio connection cleaner. Sennheiser &quot;Recommended.&quot; Kentlab is $39.95</td>
<td><strong>Clean Dirty RCA</strong></td>
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### Maximum Power Protection

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<tr>
<td><strong>PS Audio P500</strong></td>
<td>New from audio innovator Paul McGowan. The P500 expands on the technology of the critically-acclaimed PowerPlant powerline conditioners. Features 8 outlets &amp; 500-watt capacity. Regular $1995, order now and get a FREE S250 PS Audio xStream Plus Power Cable! Call us or visit us online for details.</td>
<td><strong>PS Audio P500</strong></td>
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### PS Power Port

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<th>Model</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Premium custom-built isolated-ground in-wall receptacle improves A/V performance. PS Audio Power Port, $49.95</strong></td>
<td><strong>NEW!</strong></td>
<td><strong>NEW!</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Monster Cable H-T Power Strip</strong></td>
<td>&quot;HTS-2000 transformed the system's sound,&quot; says Bob Harley. 12-outlet, RF filtering and more. HTS-2000, only $199.95</td>
<td><strong>NEW!</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>PS Ultimate Outlet</strong></td>
<td>**HTS-2000 transformed the system's sound,&quot; says Bob Harley. 12-outlet, RF filtering and more. HTS-2000, only $199.95</td>
<td><strong>PS Ultimate Outlet</strong></td>
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### Analog Upgrades

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<tr>
<td><strong>Perreaux SXV-1 Phono Stage</strong></td>
<td>Perreaux's SXV-1 delivers clean quiet, exceptionally detailed sound with any phono cartridge. Highly adjustable. Sound competes with phono stage at twice the price! Only $349.90</td>
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<td><strong>Epos ESL-3C</strong></td>
<td>New Epos center channel $299.95</td>
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<td><strong>Best-selling component isolation feet for CD/DVD players &amp; more VIBRA442 holds 16-32lbs $24.00</strong></td>
<td><strong>Littlite</strong></td>
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### Infinity Intermezzo 2.6

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<tr>
<td><strong>Grado Headphone Amps</strong></td>
<td>Reg. $299/Call S499.95</td>
<td><strong>Infinity Intermezzo 2.6</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Energy Veritas 2.1 Sale</strong></td>
<td>Audiophile monitor featuring advanced cabinet construction &amp; aluminum drivers, regular $1,000, while they last only 499.95/pair</td>
<td><strong>Energy Veritas 2.1 Sale</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Wharfedale 8.1</strong></td>
<td>&quot;Anstching&quot; Hi-Fi News. Only $199.98 a pair</td>
<td><strong>Wharfedale 8.1</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Epos ESL-3</strong></td>
<td>Reg. $999/Call S499.95/pair</td>
<td><strong>NEW!</strong></td>
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### Record Doctor II

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<tr>
<td><strong>Record Doctor II</strong></td>
<td>&quot;Least expensive way to effectively clean records&quot; says Stereophile. You get cleaning machine, brush &amp; 4 ozs of cleaning fluid for $199.95</td>
<td><strong>New!</strong></td>
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### Top-Rated Speakers

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<th>Model</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Creek Amps</strong></td>
<td>OBH-8 headphone amp, reg. $225, now $199; OBH-25E deluxe phone amp, $450/999</td>
<td><strong>Creek Amps</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Kloss-Designed Clock Radio</strong></td>
<td>Get great sound and great reception with the new Henry Kloss-designed mambo AM/FM clock radio. In cherry wood, $199.95</td>
<td><strong>Kloss-Designed Clock Radio</strong></td>
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### Perreaux Headphone Amp

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<th>Model</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>exclusive!</strong></td>
<td>The extremely quiet, exceptionally detailed, and warm sounding SXH-1 headphone amp with two headphone jacks. Intro price only: $349.90</td>
<td><strong>Exclusive!</strong></td>
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### World Radio History

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<th>Model</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Best Bm Antenna</strong></td>
<td>The best indoor/outdoor FM antenna we've tested. Period. Momentum/DynaLab ST-2, $99.95</td>
<td><strong>Best Bm Antenna</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Infinity Intermezzo 2.6</strong></td>
<td>Featuring high-quality components, these speakers perform like no other, $1,000, while they last only 499.95/pair</td>
<td><strong>Infinity Intermezzo 2.6</strong></td>
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### Recommended Audio Racks

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<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Details</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lovan Sale Rack</td>
<td>Triple-isolated four-shelf 36&quot; rack. Reg. $399, now $199.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salamander Rack</td>
<td>Rigid, adjustable, expandable. Standard 5.0 in black: $220/169.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sanus Add-A-Shelf</td>
<td>Expandable non-resonant audio EB48. S-shelf: $380/779.95</td>
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### Cutting-Edge Audiophile Components

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<tr>
<th>Model</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CEC Single-Ended CD Player</td>
<td>New ultra-smooth and extremely detailed CD Player features the world's first single-ended solid state output stage. Only $499.95.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parasound Halo P3 Preamp</td>
<td>“This is an outstanding preamp,” raves homeCinemaHifi.com. The P3 offers phone, balanced in/out, direct-bypass &amp; more! Only $799.95.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Magnum/Dynalab Tube Tuner</td>
<td>The M400 Triode FM tuner offers superb FM reception plus a natural sounding Class A triode tube output stage. Only $1,495.00.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Creek 5350SE Integrated Amp</td>
<td>Stereobie Class “A” Rated stereo integrated power amp. Regular $1,495, now only $1,345.</td>
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Even in its present chastened straits, the classical record business paid tribute this year to the 50th anniversary of the death of Sergei Prokofiev (1891–1953), even if the releases were only a modest follow-up to the wave of discs that had helped mark the centenary of his birth in 1991. Everything helps when it comes to Prokofiev, though; perhaps no other major 20th-century composer could so use the wider exposure. Despite his still-lingering reputation, the versatile, virtuosic Russian was not only the rhythmic provocateur of his enfant terrible years, but also one of the master melodists of the modern age.

There is far more Prokofiev to experience than just his long-ubiquitous "greatest hits": the "Classical" Symphony; the children's favorite, Peter and the Wolf; the Piano Concerto 3 and Violin Concerto 2; the suites from the great ballet, Romeo and Juliet; and the march from the opera The Love of Three Oranges. Although the Alexander Nevsky cantata, the Fifth Symphony, and, in recent years, the Cello Sonata have been added to the common repertoire, Prokofiev's oeuvre runs much more broad and deep.

**Classic Russians**

In his notebooks, pianist Sviatoslav Richter wrote, "As long as Prokofiev was alive, you could always expect a miracle, as if in the presence of a conjurer who, with a wave of his magic wand, could produce the most fabulous riches: Swish! There are your Cinderella and Stone Flower!"

Richter also wrote that Prokofiev was an intimidating person who not only had successes in Paris and America in the 1920s and '30s, but nourished a still-burning creativity during the early years of Stalin's repression and the Second World War. In later, even more repressive years, though, Prokofiev came to rely on a younger generation of interpreters for a wider public profile, especially pianists Richter and Emil Gilels, violinist David Oistrakh, and cellist Mstislav Rostropovich.

Oistrakh led the way for several of Prokofiev's violin works, and several official and myriad unofficial recordings exist of him in this repertoire. The latest release to feature Oistrakh in the two violin concertos is a Harmonia Mundi boxed set (HMX 2905255.59) devoted to East Berlin Radio recordings led by conductor Kurt Sanderling; dating from 1965 and 1971. Oistrakh's live performances have here a sound quality leagues beyond the pirate discs.

If Gilels hasn't been as lucky in the reissue stakes, his longer-lived contemporary Richter has a seemingly endless flow of unofficial and official releases in the bins. Among Richter's most celebrated recordings is a Deutsche Grammophon Originals disc of Prokofiev's Piano Sonata 8 and Piano Concerto 5 (DG 449-744-2). Recent releases include Richter Rediscovered which has several striking Prokofiev performances in the best possible archival sound (RCA/BMG 09026-63844-2).

Although of limited availability, Richter's first volume in Philips' Great Pianists of the 20th Century series (Phillips 456-946-2) includes vintage accounts of all the stirring "War" Sonatas, Nos.6-8.

The youngest of these performers, Rostropovich was perhaps closest to Prokofiev. The composer dedicated his Symphony-Concerto and Cello Sonata to the cellist, and Rostropovich made a death-bed promise to Prokofiev to record the opera War and Peace. Several of his later recordings are discussed below, but EMI's 13-disc Rostropovich: The Russian Years (7243 5 72016 2 9) includes more than a disc's worth of historic Prokofiev performances.

And in one of the most vital of Prokofiev performance documents, Rostropovich can be seen on an EMI Classic Archive DVD-Video (7243 4 90121-9-6) giving a searing rendition of the Symphony-Concerto for French TV in 1970.

Subsequent generations of Russian performers took up the mantle of Prokofiev—most notably, pianist-conductor Vladimir Ashkenazy. As a pianist, his set of Prokofiev's five kaleidoscopic piano concertos, recorded at London's acoustically resplendent Kingsway Hall in the mid-'70s with the London Symphony Orchestra under André Previn, remains a benchmark. They are available in a two CD set (Decca 452-588-2) or in a three CD set with other concertante works (Decca 473-259-2). And Ashkenazy's classic 1967 readings of Prokofiev's Piano Sonatas 7 and 8, showcased on a beautifully remastered Decca Legends reissue (468-497-2), boast not only rare fire but grace.

Ashkenazy the conductor recorded Prokofiev's ballet Cinderella in 1983 (Decca 289-455-349-2), achieving far warmer results with the Cleveland Orchestra than did Lorin Maazel in his widely praised 1973 Romeo and Juliet (Decca 289-452-970-2). Even more than Romeo and Juliet, Cinderella contains some of Prokofiev's most affectingly lyrical inspirations. Ashkenazy's version belongs alongside Previn's fine EMI set (7243-
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Before the pall fell over the record industry, Gergiev was able to document all of Prokofiev's major operas on disc for Philips: the absurdist romp The Love for Three Oranges, a hit when produced in Chicago in 1920 (462-913-2); The Gambler, with the Dostoevsky story set to still-challenging music (454-559-2); The Fiery Angel, a tale of religious possession saturated with an expressionistic score (460-078-2); the nationalistic Roman Kofo, judged by Richter as "without doubt the finest Soviet opera" (464-605-2); Betrothal in a Monastery, a lyrical Restoration comedy (462-107-2); and War and Peace, Prokofiev's masterful, melodious vision of the Tolstoy epic (434-097-2).

With most of the earlier Russian recordings of Prokofiev operas out of print—and many of those cut and/or in execrable sound—Gergiev virtually has the field to himself, except when it comes to War and Peace. For his live 1991 recording of the opera, Gergiev faces keen competition from Richard Hickox (Chandos 9855) and Rostropovich (Erato 0927-49638-2). The Hickox set, recorded live at the 1999 Spoleto Festival, boasts the best sound the opera has ever received on disc. In its newest incarnation within Warner Classics' sizable Prokofiev Fifty-fifth Anniversary Edition, the 1986 Rostropovich studio recording, made for French Radio, is bold and crystal-clear; yet the 24-bit recording for Hickox has superior depth and warmth. Although Chandos' producer-engineer Ralph Couzens didn't eliminate the live stage noise, he trumped Gergiev's Philips team with greater focus and a richer string sound.

Yet for the actual performances, Gergiev wins the War and Peace. Hickox's mix of young Russian and American singers makes for a game cast, and Rostropovich's lineup includes some top names giving their all. But the linchpin character is Natasha. For Hickox, soprano Ekaterina Morozova has a disappointing squall. But Rostropovich's controversial Natasha—his wife, Galina Vishnevskaya, reprising in her early 60s a role she'd created three decades before—has a hectoring quality that makes Morozova seem soothing. Gergiev's Natasha, Yelena Prokina, comes across with a girlish lyricism that is far more apt and alluring. Although the Prokofiev video titles that Gergiev originally issued on Philips are out of print, his darkly theatrical War and Peace is newly available as a two-disc DVD-Video set in improved Dolby Digital sound (Kultur D2903).

Prokofiev's major music for films has also provided grist for Gergiev. With his "other" orchestra, the Rotterdam Philharmonic, he recorded the oratorio arranged from the score for Eisenstein's oppressive Ivan the Terrible (456-645-2), which teems with dark-hued, very Russian sounds. Gergiev pushes the Dutch players to idiotic extremes as they accompany a riveting Kirov Choir and Slavonic soloists. Gergiev's sequel to this showcases the Kirov Orchestra and Choir in the cantata drawn from the score for Eisenstein's Alexander Nevsky, captured in 2002 at the inaugural Moscow Easter Festival (Phillips 289-473-600). Again, the results are fervid beyond desire, with mezzo-soprano Olga Borodina singing the battlefield lament with tragic nobility. As so often on disc, the Nevsky is paired with the Syrian Suite, Prokofiev's response to Stravinsky's Rite of Spring. The Gergiev-Kirov performance of this undervalued piece thrills with its primal compulsion; thanks to the Philips engineers, the sunburst denouement explodes with suitably cosmic force. While the Nevsky-Syriah combos of Neeme Järvi (Chandos 8584) and Claudio Abbado (Phillips 447-419-2) would disappoint no one, Gergiev's has the edge.

Prokofiev's Romeo and Juliet remains one of his most popular scores for good reason: his 1938 ballet traces Shakespeare's tragedy not only with romantic lyricism, but with rhythmic vitality. Gergiev's complete 1991 Kirov recording of the ballet was remastered at 24-bits/96kHz for Philips' 50th-anniversary line (289-464-726-2), and now competes neck-and-neck with Ashkenazy's full set. Although a Gergiev highlights disc exists (it's not remastered, however), there is endless rivalry in the realm of R&J excerpts.

Valery Gergiev

Over the past decade, the signal Prokofiev interpreter on the podium has been Valery Gergiev. Born in 1953 in Moscow, the iconic conductor of the Kirov ensemble of St. Petersburg's Mariinsky Theatre has done more for his country's music than anyone since Rostropovich—and, in terms of Russian opera, more than any conductor ever.
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There is Paavo Järvi's recent DSD recording with the Cincinnati Orchestra of Prokofiev's three formal suites from the ballet (Telarc 80597), as well as the young Esa-Pekka Salonen's stylishly played disc of excerpts with the Berlin Philharmonic (Sony Classical SRK 89740). Both yield to the Michael Tilson Thomas–San Francisco Symphony set of choice highlights (RCA 09026-68288), surely the ticket for theatrical élan allied to demonstration-quality sound.

Ranging easily from motoric to elegant, Gergiev also leads one of the most individual and involving complete sets of Prokofiev's piano concertos, featuring big-toned Russian pianist Alexander Toradze and the Kirov in deep-bottomed Philips sound (289-462-048-2). In addition to the Ashkenazy-Previn, there are competing sets by such disparate interpreters as deet-quick Kun Woo Paik (Naxos 8.550565 and 8.550566). That's not to mention discs of individual concertos by other estimable artists. Martha Argerich gives an early, glittering No.3 with Abbado (DG 447-438-2), as well as more refined 1998 accounts of 1 and 3 with Charles Dutoit (EMI 7243-5-56654-2). Then there's Evgeny Kissin with Abbado in Concertos 1 and 3 (DG 439-898-2). Even if Toradze and Gergiev don't offer the last word on every concerto, they boast a uniquely potent rapport.

**Prokofiev on Chandos**

No single company has served the Prokofiev cause more devotedly than British independent Chandos, which has been recording his complete works over the past two decades—including premiere recordings, and music practically unheard since the composer's ink dried. The greatest portion of the Chandos project involved Estonian conducting patriarch Neeme Järvi and the Royal National Scottish Orchestra, including a definitive complete cycle of the seven symphonies (8931-34) that blows away Seiji Ozawa's too-steady Berlin set (DG 463-761-2). Only in the Haydnque (and over-recorded) "Classical" Symphony and the dynamic, melodious Symphony 5 does Järvi face stiff competition. In particular, Herbert von Karajan's 1969 Symphony 5 with the Berlin Philharmonic (DG 463-613-2) fully deserves its model status, communicating on a cinematic scale that dwarfs such loud-laundered versions as the Szell-Cleveland (Sony Classical MHK 63124).

Neeme Järvi and his well-drilled Scots offer their own performance for the ages. The long *Largo*—this symphony's blood-red heart—sings a song of operatic grief, setting aspects of Wagner's *Parsifal* in the Steppes. The bittersweet dissonances in the winds come across with a disquieting tang, and Järvi's climaxes register with chest-rattling impact.

In addition to the symphonies, Järvi recorded all of Prokofiev's symphonic suites from his ballets and operas across a series of five discs; with these, the conductor did Prokofiev lovers a priceless service. Suites from *Semjon Koko* (8803) and *The Gambler* on one disc make the best of these operas easily accessible and highly persuasive, as do those for the ballets *Goun* (8729) and *Le Pas d'Avier*, again on one disc. Such orchestral rarities as the *Symphonic Song* are also in the mix (8728). And a new anthology dedicated to Prokofiev's tender-hearted, tough-minded waltzes from *Cinderella, War and Peace*, and other scores (X10077) reminds us that the composer was a genius not only of propulsive machine-age rhythm but of lilting 3/4 time made for the 20th century.

When it comes to Prokofiev's nine all-important piano sonatas, Chandos has a class option: the complete set by Boris Berman (9637). He doesn't necessarily face down all the contemporary challenges in individual sonatas from Gavrilov (3, 7, 8, DG 459-312-2), Pletnev (2, 7, 8, DG 457-588-2), or French newcomer François-Frédéric Guy (6, 8, Naxos V4898). But against complete sets from Frederic Chiu (Harmonia Mundi 2907301), Yefim Bronfman (Sony Classical MA 53273 and 52484), and Bernd Glemser (Naxos 8.553021 and 8.554270), it is Berman's stylistic command from the introspective to the grotesque—in addition to a warm, resonant rendering of Karajan's grand, grave *Adagio* will probably never be surpassed.

Even more than 5, Prokofiev's Symphony 6 is his most original and intense symphonic utterance, standing comparison with Shostakovich's most biting, heartrending symphonies. Referring to 6 and its genesis in the trauma of World War II, Prokofiev said, "Each of us has wounds that cannot be healed. One has lost those dear to him; another has lost his health. This must not be forgotten." In their Gramophone Award-winning recording of 6,
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in the best Chandos tradition—that makes his set the one to have. Caveat emptor: When buying Berman's traversal as a three-disc set, you don't get his renditions of the brilliant piano transcriptions and encore pieces that fill out his nine single-disc releases.

In recent seasons, Chandos has continued its Prokofiev project in Russia, with collections of rarities from cellist-scholar Alexander Ivashkin and conductor Valeri Polyansky. Ivashkin's collection of pieces for cello and piano (10045) can't match a similar anthology (Black Box BBM 1027) from Piatigorsky student Raphael Wallfisch, who boasts a far more expressive palette in the Ballade and Adagio from Cinderella. Polyansky's productions of such rarities as the composer's last Diaghilev ballet, On the Dnieper (10044), are especially enjoyable. But, bravely, the conductor's discs also document Prokofiev struggling to accept the Soviet yoke by composing such works as the cantata Hail to Stalin (10056) and the patriotic Songs of Our Days (which is on the Dnieper disc). Unlike Shostakovich, Prokofiev strove to maintain his musical standards even when forced to compose for political purposes; still, only scholars will want to listen to these compromised pieces more than once.

What Prokofiev admirers will want to hear repeatedly is the recent Chandos recording of his magically colorful ballet The Tale of the Stone Flower, performed by the BBC Philharmonic under Gianandrea Noseda (10058). With the Milanese conductor's expressive elegance and a beautifully produced 24-bit recording, the Chandos version now edges out the praised Janowski-Hanover version (CPO 999385). Looking forward to the 2004 Chandos schedule, there will be a Polyansky recording of a major Prokofiev work long unavailable on record, the visionary early cantata Seven, They Are Seven.

**Warner Classics’ Fiftieth Anniversary Edition**

In league with the Prokofiev Association, Warner Classics has dedicated to the composer a lavish Fiftieth Anniversary Edition 24-CD boxed set (092749147-2). Within a single box the edition is divided into five multi-disc sets—Symphonies, Concertos, Instrumental & Chamber Music, Stage Works & Film Scores, and War and Peace (each available separately)—and features many rare images within its booklets. The accompanying essays are excellent, too, although the sets irritatingly dispense with indicating the original provenance of the recordings.

Musically, the Warner edition's contents are hardly defrative. There are compelling performances alongside mediocre ones, as well as inexcusable repetitions and omissions. Beyond a substantive Lieutenant Kije suite by Klaus Tennstedt and the London Philharmonic, Stage Works & Film Scores (0927 49636-2) fails due to too many wan performances by the Monte-Carlo and Strasbourg orchestras. The faults and lures of Rostropovich's War and Peace are detailed above. His 1980s cycle of the symphonies isn't as bad as its reputation (0927 49634-2). True, his stolid tempos keep the French National Orchestra from being ideally incisive, but their version of Symphony 7 has an uncommon gravity.

The Concertos box (0927 49635-2) is attractive, especially for Rostropovich's authoritative 1987 take on the Symphony-Concerto with Ozawa and the LSO. Still, there are competitive options for even this piece, as in the recent Gramophone Award-winning disc from Ha-Na Chang (EMI 7243-5-57438-2). But the Warner box also includes an electric Violin Concerto 1 by Maxim Vengerov (with Rostropovich conducting) and, nearly as good, Violin Concerto 2 with Vadim Repin (with Kent Nagano). Vengerov's performances of both concertos are now available together (on a separate mid-priced disc, though), and other contemporary versions of the violin concertos are legion. Combining tonal wisdom with youthful vigor, one of the best is Gil Shaham's 1996 disc (DG 447-758-2), which also includes the Solo Violin Sonata.

The Warner box devoted to Prokofiev's Instrumental & Chamber Music (0927 49637-2) also has its issues: it features only three piano sonatas, and in middle-rank performances at that. Yet the set does feature top accounts of the two violin sonatas and the Five Melodies by Vadim Repin and Boris Berezovsky, who surpass in subtext the high-profile disc by Gidon Kremer and Martha Argerich (DG 431-803-2). This set also features top-class renderings of the Quintet and the Overture on Hebrew Themes by the Berlin Soloists.

Obviously produced with the best intentions, Warner Classics’ Fiftieth Anniversary Edition is ultimately a curio for completists or a handy—if expensive—starter kit. Those who buy the full edition do get a fascinating bonus disc that comprises piano rolls recorded by the composer, and snatches of him talking and warbling tunes from Ivan the Terrible. Although a distinctive pianist, Prokofiev made only a handful of recordings beyond those early piano rolls; an expertly transferred Naxos disc (8.110670) reveals his way in the flesh with several short pieces and the Piano Concerto 3, recorded at Abbey Road in 1932 with the LSO.

**Outside the Box**

Looking beyond the usual, the Emerson String Quartet provides the best-priced, best-recorded option for Prokofiev’s two string quartets, as well as the Sonata for Two Violins (DG 431-772-2). A recent Orfeo release (436-031) showcases soprano Claudia Barainsky in a piquantly sung selection of the composer's songs. Also new from Orfeo is Gerd Albrecht's recording of Prokofiev's complete stage music for Eugene Onegin and Egyptian Nights, with the West German Radio Orchestra (258031). Despite boomy live sound, the Onegin has a special atmosphere in this account, which includes native Russian narration of Pushkin's verse.

One of my favorite Prokofiev recordings, though, is a hard-to-find 1991 disc that collates the incidental music from Eugene Onegin and Hamlet, sans narration (Saison Russe 788027). Prokofiev tapped some of the deeply touching tunes from Onegin for the ballroom scenes of The War and Peace, yet not all of them were picked up, and Muscovite conductor Vladimir Ponkin's intimately intense performances of the complete original cues will hypnotize you—if they don't break your heart.
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Recording of the Month

RANDY NEWMAN: The Randy Newman Songbook Vol. 1
Nonesuch 79689-2 (CD) 2003
Mitchell Froom, prod.; David C. Boucher, eng.; Steven Rhodes, asst. eng. AAD 7 TT: 47:22
Performance ****
Sonic ****½

As jagged, ambitious musical talents go, few have been as misunderstood, or have so thrived on that discord, as Randy Newman. He has amassed one of the most melodically fruitful and slyly humorous song catalogs in pop history, one that mixes the influences of Tin Pan Alley, Stephen Foster, and Fats Domino. But he's most famous—or, if you're Jewish, Southern, or a legal midget—most infamous—for the way he's insulted your particular minority.

But Newman's brashness and willingness to assume other personas has always hindered his career—he's just too damned sharp, sly, and funny to ever be mainstream-famous. This sonber, formal solo collection for acoustic piano and voice, reprising 18 originals from his extensive catalog, emphasizes those qualities to their highest powers. You can be insulted by Newman only if you've missed the point. Consider "Rednecks," a tune that epitomizes Newman's cutting, smart-aleck mind at work. The opening line, "Last night I saw Lester Maddox on a TV show," accompanied by those familiar piano chords, will bring a smile if not a spontaneous sing-along to the lips of every Newman fan. The song then goes on to skewer both "some smart-ass New York Jew" (Newman is himself Jewish) and "College men from L.S.U. / Went in dumb, come out dumb too," before sprinkling plenty of repetitions of the N-word throughout the chorus. For many listeners, that was enough to make them label Newman a bigot, or worse, and never listen to him again. That he goes on to shine a harsh light on the notion that Northern blacks are "free"—"free to be put in a cage in Roxbury in Boston," as he puts it—was missed by many when it first appeared on his 1974 masterpiece, Good Old Boys.

Such misunderstandings have blurred for some the fact, illustrated over and over again in this splendid collection, that Newman is a national treasure among US songwriters. Few have ever had his wit, his eye for detail, his check always full of tongue. His voice and piano stick ain't bad either.

Here, in pristine sound that, wisely, has not been close-miked to death, Newman is very relaxed, singing with a more triumphant tone than in the past. He is, by turns, full of fumbling, do-it-yourself self-condemnation ("Marie"), outrageous, naughty as hell, and loving it ("It's Money That I Love"); and frankly, happily horny ("You Can Leave Your Hat On").

But it's when his melodies and his lyrics, not to mention his avuncular New Orleans piano professor performing florishes, fuse into a hugely sentimental yet pointed whole that Newman the artist comes into full view. (This is the opposite of what happens with, say, "Short People," not included here, whose words are all anyone hears.) "Sail Away," from the 1972 album of the same name, receives here a reappraisal that's quietly definitive and emotionally raw, and is perhaps the best example of why this album of older material reprised by an older, wiser Newman works so well: he has much more to say.

Although he has often preferred to set his music for chamber-sized orchestras, Newman's music benefits from being stripped down, as in this version of "Sail Away," to its most elemental genius. To a likable, ragtime-influenced melody, an 18th-century slaver's pitch to African natives becomes a scathing siren's song, "In America you'll get food to eat / Won't have to run though the jungle / And scuff up your feet / You'll just sing about Jesus and drink wine all day..." Yet even here, in this curious but tuneful ramble he manages to leaven his point with one well-chosen, ridiculous word: stuff. Yet by the end, the song working on several different levels, the overwhelming feeling evoked for me is abject sadness.

Perhaps the grandest irony of his career, considering his often acerbic wit, is that his ability to write melodies—not to mention his family's legacy in film work, led by uncle Alfred Newman, who won nine Oscars—has made him a sought-after film composer. In this album's three instrumental interludes from his twenty-odd film scores—"Avalon," "When She Loved Me" (from Toy Story 2), and "Ragtime"—his astonishing lyrical gifts for composing incidental music are anything but incidental.

Producer Mitchell Froom stayed out of the way during these sessions, letting Newman weld his quixotic way through these finely etched vignettes, which have no equal in the history of American music.

—Robert Baird
perform—-that it makes us wonder anew at what happened to this composer when it all went to his head and his "spirituality" became completely self-indulgent.

One version of "Balulalow," for solo voice (Johanna Maria Rose) and Baroque harp, is followed by Richard Rodney Bennett’s 1963 arrangement for three voices; the effect is dreamy and fascinating. The Irish "Good People All" is sung lightly and smoothly by Marsha Genensky, with Andrew Lawrence-King backing her up angelically on Irish harp. Geoffrey Burgon, well-known in Britain for his TV and film music (he scored Bridgeshead Revisited, among others), offers a brief, simple arrangement of the 15th-century "A God and Yet a Man?" And even Henry VIII chimes in with the familiar-sounding "Greene Growth the Holy," arranged for the voices.

Throughout, Andrew Lawrence-King accompanies the voice or voices with care. In his solos, the delightful twang of the brass strings of the Irish harp in a dance number contrasts nicely with the more mellow gut of the Baroque; the psaltery solo of a traditional Irish melody is as gentle as a Lamb.

Harmonia Mundi has kept out of the way, production-wise; the sonics are warm, clear, and true, and never do we experience the Large Empty Hall syndrome. This CD may be for Christmas, but I had no trouble listening in October. I suspect it will give pleasure all year round.

—Robert Levine

BEETHOVEN

Fidelio

Angela Denoke, Leonore; Jon Villars, Florestan; Laszlo Polgar, Rocco; Alan Held, Pizarro; Juliane Banse, Marzelline; Rainer Trost, Jaquino; Thomas Quasthoff, Don Fernando; Arnold Schoenberg Choir, Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, Sir Simon Rattle


Performance **½

Sonics ****

This recording presents a "new edition" of Fidelio, one in which, we are told in the accompanying booklet, "there are countless differences in articulation, dynamics, timbre, orchestral scoring and even the actual notes." Since there are no further details given, it is hard to tell which differences we hear are "real" and which are merely conductorial choices.

To be sure, there are odd moments. There’s a very long pause early in the overture, before the entry of the solo pianissimo horns, which may or may not be an eccentricity; "Mir ist so wunderbar" is taken at a peculiarly fast clip; the march that announces Pizarro is jauntily jolly and worthy of a marionette theater; and, conversely, "O namenlose Freude" is so slow that it sounds as if it’s being played at rehearsal tempo. (Leonard Bernstein used to take this duet slowly as well, but here it’s exaggerated uncomfortably.)

Elsewhere there is welcome emphasis on inner wind lines, a touching lightness of string playing before the Prisoners’ appearance, and, in general, a very late-Classical approach to the opera, with the Singspiel elements very strong. I wouldn’t be surprised if this is a reduced Berlin Philharmonic—who, incidentally, play gorgeously throughout. The dialogue has been cut to the barest minimum and is delivered in an underscored, artificial manner—the only word spoken after the climactic Act II quartet and before "O namenlose Freude" is "Leonore." The effect is ridiculous.

The two great performances are in the smallest roles: the Jaquino of Rainer Trost—youthful, eager, tonally alluring—and the imposing, simply beautiful Don Fernando of Thomas Quasthoff. Laszlo Polgar’s Rocco is dumb but sweet, and he knows how to cower in his scenes with Pizarro, but there’s nothing special to it—though his "gold" aria is charming. Alan Held’s Pizarro is well sung rather than shouted, and presented in a nicely clipped, snappy fashion; but he does not terrify as great Pizarrors do. Juliane Banse’s Marzelline has actually been thought
through and is accurate and attractive; her only problem is that she does not sound young.

The two principals are the weakest links: Jon Villars’ Florestan is not bad, and his first “Gott”—explosive and briefer than the norm—is nicely desperate. But his tenor lacks the true weight for the role, and he’s missing the crucial element: pathos. Simply dreadful is Angela Denoke’s Leonore, perhaps the shabbiest on discs. In addition to being undistinguished dramatically—just compare her to Christa Ludwig, Jessye Norman, or Hildegard Behrens and you’ll realize how superficially she approaches the role—she has serious pitch problems throughout Act I, and her tone is unattractive. Her Act II is somewhat better, but by then there’s no interest in her plight.

We’re left with a beautifully played performance with a superb chorus and excellently taken minor roles. Aside from the mediocre leads, Fidelio tends to be a conductor’s opera, and Rattle’s viewpoint is unclear. It lacks the depth, potency, angst, and, eventually, joy of Klemperer’s on EMI (with Ludwig, the heartrending Jon Vickers, and Walter Berry’s menacing Pizarro); the majesty of Furtwängler and Flagstad (on Verona and elsewhere, all in terrible sound); or the clarity and poise of the Classically approached, dark-horse candidate on Naxos led by Michael Halasz. No cigar. Not even close.

—Robert Levine

**Record Reviews**

**Greg Brown**

**If I Had Known: Essential Recordings 1980–1996**


Performance ****½

Sonicity ***½

When Greg Brown plays “the poet game,” as he called it on his 1994 album of the same name, there aren’t many who can top him. For nearly a quarter century, the Iowa troubadour has created one small masterpiece after another—at this point, nearly 20 albums’ worth. It’s about time someone collected the cream of that prodigious crop on a single CD.

Trouble is, all of Brown’s best tunes won’t fit on a single CD. Rather than make it a double, Red House simply (and, seemingly, somewhat arbitrarily) cut this collection off at 1996. In a way, it’s understandable: Brown’s output since then has been of remarkably high quality. Choosing what to include (especially since none of his songs have ever been hits, per se) would have been maddening.

Still, the songs that have been collected here offer a good representation of Brown’s back catalog, including “Our Little Town,” “Driftless,” “Where Is Maria,” “The Train Carrying Jimmie Rodgers Home” (which was covered memorably by Brown’s wife, Iris DeMent, on last year’s Going Driftless: An Artist’s Tribute to Greg Brown), and “The Poet Game.”

Even if dyed-in-the-wool Brown fans already own those songs, the package boasts a bonus DVD that alone is worth the price of admission. It’s a 1993 documentary, Hackelbarney Tunes, that delves into Brown’s life and small-town Iowa surroundings. Brown talks about his family and his work and performs several songs on the DVD, too. Would that all career retrospectives contained such a treat.

—Daniel Durchholz
GUIDED BY VOICES

Earthquake Glue


Performance ★★★★

Sonics ★

Robert Pollard knows a thing or two about glass ceilings. With his revolving cast of players known as Guided By Voices in tow, Pollard has been: 1) rock-'n-roll's oldest rookie (he was 36 by the time the band signed to a label in 1993); 2) the beer-guzzling prince of the indie underground (1994's Bee Thousand and 1995's Alien Lanes are holy relics of that era's lo-fi movement); and 3) a pop-radio hopeful (a turn-of-the-millennium stint on TVT Records once paired Pollard with producer and ex-Cars leader Ric Ocasek).

But just when it seemed Guided By Voices might get close to emerging from the cellar of popular song, a memo was delivered from a remote province called reality: Fortysomething ex-schoolteachers from Dayton, Ohio, do not pop stars make. Earthquake Glue, the second album GBV has released on Matador since the TVT letdown, is a kind of noble retreat. Back to the basement, boys, and don't tell that tall, skinny dude from the Cars—he'll try to come over and double the vocal line with a new-wave keyboard.

Earthquake Glue sees Pollard & Co. operating in their comfort zone, where introspective, acoustic snippets with left-field lyrical imagery ("My Son, My Secretary and My Country") segue into anthemic, Who-like rovers ("I'll Replace You with Machines"). That the guitars sound a little tinny and the drums a bit dull only lends the album a kind of intentional classic-rock charm—it doesn't bear the four-track hiss of Guided By Voices' early output, but it's not slickly produced, either.

Of course, quality album production has never been a selling point for the band. GBV records—there are many of them—are judged by how many of Pollard's sometimes maddeningly catchy melodies burrow themselves into your brain, teasing the imagination with such nonsensical titles as "A Trophy Mule in Particular." On this score, Earthquake Glue is somewhere in the middle of GBV's catalog. What boosts the album's rating is the evenhanded playing of guitarist Doug Gillard, a member since 1997, who comes alive when he needs to (the solo on "Beat Your Wings") and lays off when the tune has momentum ("The Best of Jill Hives").

Like Ween or the Flaming Lips, Guided By Voices is getting cozy with its cult; buy Earthquake Glue if you wanna be prepared for when the UFO lands.

—Matthew Fritch

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**LOVE WITH ARTHUR LEE**

*The Forever Changes Concert*

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

Apollo, the god of music, must be smiling. *Forever Changes*, the great late-1966 album that was every bit the equal of such period classics as the Beatles' *Revolver*, the Beach Boys' *Pet Sounds*—even Bob Dylan's *Blonde on Blonde*—is as alive today as it was back in those tumultuous times. But unlike those masterworks, Arthur Lee and his West Coast band's magnum opus was barely heard back in the day, and never cracked *Billboard*'s Top 150. But for the fortunate few who did pick up on this glorious blend of folk, rock, country, jazz, and political culture (Love was a multi-racial band, after all), it was a gift that kept on giving. The songs on *Forever Changes* reflected society's upheaval and tension without ever losing sight of the omnipresent beauty and mystery all around.

For decades after its release, this best-kept-secret grew in popularity with critics and music lovers, who often speak of it in hushed tones. Because *Forever Changes* was not a hit, its songs never suffered from the overexposure that has dampened such favorites as "Stairway to Heaven" or *Abbey Road*.

Perhaps that's what makes this new, live, 35th-anniversary re-enactment so thrilling. Not only do the songs sound fresh and contemporary (heck, they could have been written last week), the playing, by a dazzling new incarnation of Love—an L.A. group of Love lovers formerly known as Baby Lemonade—could not be truer to the spirit of the original recording. The album also includes a half-dozen additional live bonus tracks, all forever-young-sounding treasures from the Love canon.

Arthur Lee himself has done the impossible: He's turned back the hands of time. Though Lee was 57 when this album was recorded in London in January 2003, his voice sounds like that of the 22-year-old bandleader who wrote most of these songs during the year of the Summer of Love—only better. Here, Lee adds new subtleties as he gently caresses the words to "Old Man" (a rare non-Lee original written by his former bandmate, the late Bryan Maclean) and "You Set the Scene," the existential beauty that gets my vote as the best album-closer of the rock era.

Then there's the brawny band itself, including the rhythm section of bassist Dave Chapple and drummer David "Daddyo" Green. Remember how punched-up and new "I Want to Tell You" and "If I Needed Someone" sounded on George Harrison's *Live in Japan?* Well, listen here to "A House Is Not a Motel" and "The Daily Planet." Finally, the nine-member Forever Changes String and Horn Ensemble delicately hits every flourish and nuanced trill.

As "You Set the Scene" builds to its climax, horns and strings calling and responding, you can sense the thrilled crowd's imminent wild ovation. Listening at home, I welled up a bit as I
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marveled at how this remarkable music, from one of my five all-time favorite albums, has stood the test of time, including a lengthy prison stint by its creator. Poetic justice, indeed. —David Sokol

**MY MORNING JACKET**

*It Still Moves*


Performance ★★★★★

Sonnics ★★★½

T he first thing you need to know about this Kentucky combo is that, despite recent mass trendster attention (*Entertainment Weekly* just named them an “It” band), My Morning Jacket had already sparked a quiet revolution among the indie-rock musos and jam-band heads who’d discovered MMJ’s two previous lo-fi albums, *The Tennessee Fire* (1999) and *At Dawn* (2001). MMJ’s theory reads: Who says you can’t fuse DIY sensibility (Guided By Voices, Flaming Lips) to deep-roots classicism (Neil Young, Grateful Dead), along with the occasional reverse curveball (Stax-Volt, pre-Dark Side Pink Floyd)?

The second thing you need to know is that, even with a major-label budget, MMJ still wears the badge of its ecclecticism. High-warble singer Jim James drapes his vocals in enough reverb to make Duane Eddy weep, and with producer Niko Bolas liberally thumbing the desk’s echo-chamber button, the combined effect is, well, weird, but in a good way—like Phil Spector recording an orchestra in a shower stall. Plus, the band’s got tunes.

Lord, do they ever. The twangy “Early Morning Rebel” suggests a summit between the Rolling Stones of *Exile on Main Street* and the Byrds of Untitled. “Dancefloors” bears the rootsy stamp of The Band, from James’ Levon Helmish vocals to the rousing horn section. (MMJ tapped Al Green’s Memphis-based producer Willie Mitchell for the charts.) And the suite-like transformation of “Run Thru”—from woozy blues to atmospheric folk-pop to galloping, synth-littered psychedelia, then back again—speaks of a sophistication of songwriting and arranging well beyond these twentiesomethings’ actual ages.

Here’s the last thing you need to know: At a point when the music world seems downright terrified of taking risks, My Morning Jacket stands out like a thick boil on J.Lo’s sculpted tush. Unique in its ability to draw on several decades while carving out a signature sound, MMJ might just be the freshest thing going. “It” band or no.

—Fred Mills

**IGGY POP**

*Skull Ring*


Performance ★★

Sonnics ★

R emember when Neil Young dutifully accepted the honorary title “Godfather of Grunge” about a decade ago? Suddenly, old Neil seemed pretty spry, rocking the free world with Pearl Jam as his sympathetic foot soldiers; 1995’s *Mirror Ball* charted higher than anything he’d done in more than 20 years. It was a smart move on Young’s part, introducing MTV kids to a legend (and his sizable back catalog).

But for Iggy Pop, *Skull Ring* is a rather large missed opportunity. The current garage-rock craze has made Iggy and the Stooges famous again, and it just so happens that Detroit is ground zero for the genre’s comeback. If Pop were going to dip into a younger talent pool to back him on some new songs, why not draft some hometown players? (The White Stripes are but one possible pick; there are also the Sights, the Von Bondies, the Gore Gore Girls, etc.) But Iggy Pop won’t be called the godfather of garage anytime soon; he’s more like its estranged, creepy uncle.

The 56-year-old Pop did dial 911 for musical help on *Skull Ring*, but it’s arrived in a clown car, not an ambulance: Sum 41 (a juvenile skate-punk band from Canada), Green Day (an over-the-hill skate-punk band from California), and Peaches (a foul-mouthed female novelty rapper from your worst nightmare) spill out onto a total of five tracks here as co-writers, backing bands, or guest vocalists. Another four tracks feature Pop reuniting with his old Stooges mates, brothers Ron and Scott Asheton.

The result is confused and confusing. Three of the first five tracks are cut with the Stooges—the churning guitars of “Little Electric Chair” even recall 1970’s “TV Eye.” But while *Skull Ring* begins with that song and the droning, fuzzbox-encrusted chords and stomping drums of vintage garage fury, it takes a too-hard left turn into two crisp, radio-ready songs with Green Day (“Private Hell,” whose chopping rhythm recalls “Passenger”) and Sum 41 (“Little Know It All,” a snotty teen-punk anthem that only puts Pop’s age into sharp relief).

Could *Skull Ring* have been saved had Pop played with the Stooges throughout the record? Would it have been better as a fully collaborative, generation-bridging modern rock album with today’s MTV
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stars? These questions should have been asked before *Skull Ring* was recorded. Iggy Pop: now less than ever.

—Matthew Fritch

### JOSH ROUSE

**1972**


Performance ★★★½

Sonic ★★★★

Heavy concept alert! From the retro sleeve art, which is decked out in have-a-nice-day fonts and depicts Nashville-by-way-of-Nebraska singer-songwriter Josh Rouse looking like a young Don McLean, to the rock-lite music itself, 1972 doesn't aim for subtlety or breadth. On his previous three albums, Rouse displayed an uncommon knack for fusing roots-rock grittiness to tender pop reverie. Here, he tilts wholeheartedly in the latter direction, admitting as much in the liner notes (and nostalgically revealing that he was born in 1972).

On the one hand, a song like "Love Vibration," despite having slightly cringe-inducing lyrics (as the title telegraphs), is undeniably catchy with its loungey electric piano, perky horns, and sunshiny vocal harmonies. It also nods, rhythmically and melodically, to the old *Welcome Back Kotter* TV theme song—speaking of retro. And a white-soul number like "James," all Herbie Mann flute trills, sweet Rouse falsetto, and tasteful strings, is clearly inspired by Marvin Gaye a "Got to Give It Up." Other tunes evoke Steely Dan, Boz Scaggs, Stevie Wonder, Carole King, Rupert Holmes, and Paul Simon (vocally, Rouse's nearest antecedent).

So is 1972 homage or pastiche? The answer depends on the listener's frame of reference. Where were you in '72? While some of us gleefully hopped a hell-bound train with the unruly sounds of Jethro Tull, King Crimson, and Funkadelic, others were seriously bumming out at the hands of Watergate, the Munich Olympics, and post-Vietnam malaise, and music to save the savage neurons was just the ticket. If that was you, here's your flashback. Rouse sings at the beginning of the album, "She was feeling 1972 / Groovin' to a Carole King tune / Is it too late, baby? / Is it too late?"

Probably. But have a nice day anyway.

—Fred Mills

### THE SHINS

*Chutes Too Narrow*


Performance ★★★★½

Sonic ★★

There are two types of indie rock bands: those born in a basement, and those that work out of the garage. We've seen plenty of the latter category bubble to the mainstream's surface in the past couple years (White Stripes, Hives, Strokes, *et al*); it's the basement bands—the quiet ones that believe in Tascam multitracking instead of live first takes—that have remained, well, underground.

The Shins are the Great White Hope of basement pop. The Albuquerque-based quartet has the requisite record library (most popular authors: Beach Boys, The; Beatles, The; Lee, Arthur), and has closely studied the sweet science of pop songwriting (more than one hook per tune; actual key changes). But the Shins' greatest advantage is an actual fanbase. The band's 2001 debut, *Oh, Inverted World*, was initially greeted with indifference, but the album's slow build at college radio turned the Shins into nouveau torchbearers for dusky, psychedelic pop. The Shins' acclaim peaked when a track from that album, "New Slang," was chosen as the music for a McDonald's commercial. You'd expect cries of "Sellout!" but nobody...
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made a peep. A standout slice of incense-scented Donovan folk with a snaky, Cat Stevens–like vocal melody, “New Slang” was that good.

As a follow-up, the 10-song, half-hour Chutes Too Narrow is nearly unassailable. Singer-guitarist James Mercer, usually a mild-mannered midrange warbler, manages his first scream on the first track, “Kissing the Lipless.” The song is indicative of the confident swagger the Shins possess on Chutes, which not only feeds on the candy-colored psych of the 1960s, but also bellies up to ’80s new wave (“Mine’s Not a High Horse”) and meandering ’70s country-folk (“Saint Simon”).

But for many, the real litmus test is whether Chutes contains another “New Slang.” The pedal-steel guitar weeper “Gone for Good” proves a worthy rival, and is the Shins’ second three-minute miracle; they’re one away from sainthood.

Chutes Too Narrow sounds as if it was recorded in a basement — guitars and drums dulled to a cozy midrange, noticeably multitracked vocals. Well, it was: Mercer brewed this vintage-sounding batch entirely in his home studio. May it age like wine, and the guys in the garage can drink beer.

— Matthew Frisch

V A R I O U S  A R T I S T S

No Thanks: The ’70s Punk Rebellion
Elektra/Rhino R2 73926 (4 CDs). Various prods., engs. Tt: 5:04:31
Performance ****
Sonics to ****

You could argue that a deluxe, four-CD boxed set is not the way to experience punk rock, and you’d be right. But admit it: You’d like to go down in the basement and haul out that box of punk-rock singles right now about as much as you’d care to go to the bathroom at CBGB’s in 1978, which is to say not at all. So let’s proceed.

Now that punk has been co-opted by the likes of one-dimensional platinum “punks” Blink 182 and a commercial for Carnival Cruise Lines (which uses Iggy Pop’s “Lust for Life” as its soundtrack — sans the line “Yeah, I’ve had it in the ear before,” natch), it’s instructive to go back to a time when the idea of punk becoming something desirable to mainstream society was laughable. Punk was music made of, by, and for a certain subset, and even within that group there were further divisions. Which bands you liked and which you disdained wasn’t an issue of mere taste or fashion — it was a total lifestyle statement.

Years after the fact, it’s possible that those lines are now down and fans of one

(Ramones, Blondie, Television, Talking Heads, Dictators, Pati Smith, Richard Hell); London (Clash, Buzzcocks, Damned, X-Ray Spex, Sham 69); and California (X, Dead Kennedys, Black Flag, Germs, Fear). It doesn’t, however, overlook important bands from places in between (Devo, Pere Ubu, Iggy Pop).

The most obvious omission is the Sex Pistols, who likely were holding out for more money. It’s their loss that they did not participate in this otherwise terrific set. If listened to in the privacy of your own home, it reveals once and for all what it’s like to hear punk rock’s greatest hits without getting gobbed on.

— Daniel Durchholz

J A Z Z

B A R R Y  H A R R I S

Live in New York
Barry Harris, piano; Charles Davis, soprano & tenor sax; Roni Ben-Hur, guitar; Paul West, bass; Leroy Williams, drums
Performance ****
Sonics ****½

With Dizzy Gillespie and Thelonious Monk, Charlie Parker invented bebop, and he once said that his goal was to play fast and clean and find the pretty notes. That’s the game plan of pianist Barry Harris, 74, the dean of beboppers and a man who knows the language of Bird, Diz, and Monk inside out.

Though he offers a bit of speed on this 2002 date from the Birdland Jazz Club in Manhattan, Harris has played faster — both in his prime, on, say, 1969’s Magnificent! (Fantasy OJC-1026), and currently, as he continues to recover from a stroke in the late 1990s. But this disciple of the bebop heroes — in turn an influence, via his playing and teaching, on his peers and on subsequent generations — has always delivered the choicest notes in rhythmically succinct packages. He does that here, over and over again.

Like Parker, Harris has a motto: Bebop is the music of the future (because, he says, “so few can do it”). Well, the stuff on Live in New York may sound like the past to some, for the pianist is not one to try to push the envelope. (Another Harrisism: “Music hasn’t progressed, it’s regressed.”) This past/present/future argument about bebop is best answered by how the music makes you feel now. For my money, this

— Matthew Frisch

New York’s answer to the Brady Bunch: The Ramones.
set makes me feel great — now, today.

The numbers range from classics — Tadd Dameron's "Casbah," Monk's "Round Midnight" — to the bossa-ish "7-4-3," a number Harris and his band made up on the spot, drawing on numbers between 1 to 8 (the range of a major scale) suggested by the audience. "Casbah," based on the chords of "Out of Nowhere," finds relaxed, warm-noted statements from saxophonist Charles Davis, with his breathy, whispered tone, Roni Ben-Hur's solidly ringing guitar, and Harris' gently touched piano. "Monkling Around" is much faster, with a decided Monkish flavor in Harris' comping and solos. "Round Midnight" is an opportunity for Davis to reveal the depth of his unique, softly crying sound, and for Harris to serenade listeners with flowing, telling lines.

The beauty of all this music is deftly captured by the sound, which offers a large soundstage, crisp details, and the dynamic swirl of air one gets in an intimate nightclub.

— Zan Stewart

GEORGEF KEEZER

Falling Up

Geoffrey Keezer, piano, Fender Rhodes, vibraphone, marimba, gong; Scott Colley, bass; Karriem Riggins, drums, percussion; Keole Beamer, acoustic guitar; 'Oli hano ihu (bamboo nose flute); Paul Bollenback, acoustic guitar; Ingrid Jensen, flugelhorn; Steve Wilson, alto flute; Tim Garland, bass clarinet; Joe Locke, vibraphone; Laurence Cottle, acoustic bass guitar; Richard Cottle, keyboards; Claire Martin, vocals; Moanalani Beamer, ka 'eke 'eke (tuned bamboo pipes)


DOD TT: 66:01

Performance ****½

Sonic ****

On a recent trip to Southern California, I caught the Wallace Roney Quintet at the Catalina in Hollywood. The music was fierce, harsh, and highly accomplished. Roney neither smiled nor announced tunes, and his brother Antoine, on reeds, took the same solo on every number. It was a take-no-prisoners, strident, hell-raising, brilliant solo. There were about 20 people in the audience.

If jazz is ever going to break out of its current quarantine as art music played for a small cult, it will be musicians like Geoffrey Keezer who find the path. Falling Up is uncompromised jazz that is capable of appealing to a non-cult audience.

Keezer is a pianist with monster chops, a melodic narrative gift, and impeccable jazz credentials. He toured with Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers when he was 18, and has played with such musicians as Art Farmer, Joshua Redman, and Christian McBride. Now in his early 30s, Keezer has recorded 10 widely varied, mostly well-received albums as a leader, but nothing he has ever done has quite prepared us for Falling Up. It is the most intriguing, most unusual, most addictive recording he has ever made.

Keezer starts with closely coordinated colors and textures and timbres. They include — in addition to his own piano, the firm central intelligence of this music — Hawaiian slack-key guitar, bamboo nose flute, tuned bamboo pipes, vibraphone, flugelhorn, alto flute, bass clarinet, and (in two brief appearances that leave you desperate for more) the smoky voice of Claire Martin. Not one of these elements is jagged or shrill. Individually and collectively, they are utterly seductive to the ear. The recorded sound, mostly by engineer Joe Ferla, is warm and rich yet precisely detailed.

Another reason this music is so engaging has to do with Keezer's use of material from Hawaiian folk music. Traditions like "Shiny Shell Lullaby" and "The Horsewoman" are deceptively simple microcosms of lyrical grace, luminous with the soft glow of guitars and muted horns. Keezer contributes five originals that are varied in structure and instrumentation (from solo piano to eight-piece ensembles), and each is in keeping with, and is an elaboration on, the unity of affirmation that is Falling Up. The most captivating piece is "Navigating By Starlight," an allegory in sound as vast and slow-moving and radiant as a night sky, full of treble glitterings from vibraphone and Fender Rhodes and flugelhorn and guitar.

The mission statement of the young MaxJazz label includes "a commitment to making jazz approachable for a wider audience." Falling Up is stunningly successful in meeting that goal.

— Thomas Conrad

ROMARE BEARDEN REVEALED

Romare Bearden Revealed

Brannon Marsalis, tenor & soprano sax; Joey Calderazzo, piano; Eric Revis, bass; Jeff "Tain" Watts, drums. With: Wynton Marsalis, trumpet; Delfeayo Marsalis, trombone; Ellis Marsalis, piano; Jason Marsalis, drums; Doug Wamble, guitar; Harry Connick, Jr., piano; Reginald Veal, bass


Performance ****

Sonic ****½

Romare Bearden Revealed exceeds even the high expectations that accompanied the launch of Marsalis Music in August 2002. For this sixth release on Branford Marsalis' new label, the physical package is beautiful, the recorded sound is truly exceptional (whoever "Wacko" Hunter is, he rocks), and the music is alive with inspiration. A deeply embedded concept unifies
and informs this album. Romare Bearden (1911–1988) was born in North Carolina, raised in Harlem during its Renaissance, and was one of the visionary American painters of the 20th century. His work was powerfully influenced by jazz. Not only did jazz musicians and scenes appear in his paintings and collages, he explicitly sought visual translations of the improvisational creative processes of jazz. Branford Marsalis created Romare Bearden Revealed to accompany a major retrospective of Bearden’s work that opened in September 2003 at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC.

It is an act of imaginative faith for a musician to try to “play the paintings” of a great visual artist. Marsalis succeeds. He succeeds because he uses material such as James P. Johnson’s “Carolina Shout” and Tommy Ladnier’s “Steppin’ on the Blues” (from 1924) — works from Bearden’s milieu that share titles with Bearden paintings — and celebrates them with authenticity, passionate enthusiasm, and modern inflections. (Branford’s wailing soprano solo on Jelly Roll Morton’s “Jungle Blues” fractures Sidney Bechet into Coltrane-like trills.) In the contemporary pieces, such as Wynton Marsalis’ “J Mood” (the title track from his 1986 album, with cover art by Bearden) and “Tain” Watts’ “Laughin’ & Talkin’ (With Higg),” Branford and his band remain in character and on theme, convincingly evoking the vibrant colors, life pulse, and liberated imagery of Bearden’s art. Marsalis succeeds because, like Bearden at work on a collage, he assembles divergent elements into a single aesthetic whole: music from different eras; Doug Wamble’s stunning, countrified solo guitar piece (Bearden’s roots were rural); live concert material inserted into a studio recording; and guest musicians shuttling in and out.

Both Branford and Wynton Marsalis (who plays on three of the nine tracks) are capable of dominating an album with technical virtuosity. Here their mission imposes focus and economy. Branford speaks in the subtle understatement of forebears like Lester Young on “Seabreeze,” an old song to which Bearden wrote lyrics. Wynton is thoughtfully articulate on “J Mood.”

The examples of Bearden’s art reproduced in the liner booklet are gorgeous, even in miniature. As this project intends, they expand and deepen the meaning of the music, and are expanded and deepened in turn.

— Thomas Conrad
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Editor:
To paraphrase Mark Twain: The rumors of our death have been greatly exaggerated.

We were shocked and surprised to learn that Wadia products had been delisted from Stereophile's "Recommended Components" list in October because of "doubts over availability."

For the record, all of our products are actively shipping throughout our entire international network of dealers and distributors. Furthermore, we are preparing to launch our new 900-series statement Decoding Computer System, which will be demonstrated in January at the Consumer Electronics Show. The new reference product joins the recently introduced 302 CD player, expanding our lineup of world-class products.

In conclusion, we would like to thank our customers, dealers, and distributors for their past and continuing support. We look forward to seeing as many of you as possible at the forthcoming CES, where we hope you will not mistake us for the Grateful Dead.

Team Wadia

Bel Canto PRe6

Editor:
The PRe6 and eVo6, which Kal Rubinson has reviewed in his recent "Music in the Round" columns, represent Bel Canto's desire to bring the performance of high-quality two-channel audio to the multichannel world. His reviews reflect our goals of producing multichannel equipment that is compatible in any two-channel music lover's system. I look forward to hearing how the PRe6 performs in Kal's "big rig" two-channel system. Indeed, our internal design brief for the PRe6 started with the requirement that it excel in a two-channel world, yet be able to integrate into the most sophisticated multichannel system.

Additional flexibility is built into the PRe6 platform through the inclusion of a daughterboard port. This port allows the addition of future analog processing options such as bass management, bass EQ, or crossover functions for multi-amplified loudspeaker applications, among other possibilities. This processing power can be introduced into the system without the additional cables, level controls, and connectors that outboard processing requires, eliminating the additional expense and performance degradation that these represent.

This capability further increases the PRe6's real value in the system. We are convinced that the combination of performance and flexibility make the PRe6 uniquely suited to today's two-channel and multichannel audio systems.

Thank you, Kal and John, for having the courage to investigate this new world of multichannel music. — John Stronzer
President, Bel Canto Design

Alón Li'l Rascal Mk.II

Editor:
Many thanks to Stereophile, Robert J. Reina, and John Atkinson for this thorough and wonderful review of the Alón Li'l Rascal Mk.II. We are often asked why we developed the $120,000 Exotica Grand Reference. Well, one of the reasons is that the Exotica Grand Reference project motivated us to develop new and improved technologies, and some of these, it turns out, can also be applied to much less costly products. In the case of the Rascal Mk.II, this is just what happened, and it resulted in a significant sonic improvement with only a modest increase in cost.

What makes the Rascal Mk.II special is the overall performance package vs its modest price. We have a bookshelf model with a more extended bass (~6dB at 44Hz anechoic, per JA) than many budget floorstanders, and an 89dB sensitivity with an easy-to-drive impedance that allows a wide range of choices in matching electronics. However, the high resolution provided, as BJF found, clearly depicted the differences between the Creek integrated and the Audio Research. The important point to the consumer, however, is that the Li'l Rascal Mk.II makes music—and this is what it is all about.

In summing up, we could not have stated it as well as the review states: "In several areas, Carl Marchisotto may have set a new standard of performance for an inexpensive bookshelf design."

Thanks again.

Carl Marchisotto
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Stereophile, December 2003
The week I wrote this column, it seemed that every day, reading the newspaper on the train to work, I found another piece of bad news about the music business: Universal laying off 11% of its workforce; sales of recorded music dropping 10% annually; major labels suing the unborn because their parents heard the word "download" at a cocktail party. Each day, by the time I'd arrived at Stereophile HQ in New York's Union Square, I was almost afraid that I'd boot up the computer to find that the Beatles had been a hoax.

As the gloom gathered, John Atkinson and I spent time playing snatchs of Led Zeppelin's "How the West Was Won" and James Brown's The 50th Anniversary Collection and reminiscing about when the Zep, the Beatles, and the Stones were all simultaneously on the scene—not to mention Bob Dylan, Otis Redding, Gram Parsons, etc.—a time that Mr. Atkinson aptly refers to as "when giants walked the earth."

But despite our nostalgia trip, there is much hope for the music. It ain't over until the fat lady, or at least Ringo, sings (again).

For starters, I firmly believe that if the talent is out there, it will be found, by labels large and, particularly, small. Faulty talent scouting—the failure to turn over every stone—has nothing to do with the pickles that major labels now find themselves in.

Fortunately for those of us not in litigation with the RIAA/major-label anti-download, scare-you-straight legal machine, there is still music out there—not the music business, but music—that's worth hearing. Indeed, there are even mini-trends to follow, two of which were suggested to me by two pairs of recent releases.

When I saw Doug Morris, chief executive of Universal Music and one of the last "record guys" in the record business, quoted in the New York Times as saying that the time for "outrageous" record deals had "gone the way of the dinosaurs," I found two dinosaurs of a sort—call them "rhythm'n'blues velociraptors"—who still have much worthy to say as artists, and so have added much to this season's version of the annual end-of-year crush of new records.

First comes Delbert McClinton's Live (New West Records). To see McClinton in concert is to wonder why he hasn't made more live albums. The problem is, live albums are trickier than they look. Often, if they know the tape is rolling, artists don't really let it all hang out. Or the band is not all on the same page. Or, most likely, the sound in the venue is akin to that found in a coal mine. McClinton's Live has none of these problems (see p.81 for more).

Released at nearly the same time as McClinton's Live was Van Morrison's What's Wrong With This Picture? Five years younger and from a different continent from Delbert, the Irish Morrison also began as a blues singer, a place he returns to on the new album, his first for formerly jazz-only Blue Note Records. Morrison and McClinton have paid enough dues and been smart enough to stay close to their roots that their versions of the blues (or, more correctly, R&B) don't sound like old white men trying hard to sound like young black men. While they may want to be Otis, they'll settle for being Van and Delbert. Morrison's pop side shows itself in the title track and in "Evening in June," which has some of the snap of such long-ago hits as "Domino."

From the future, or from bands young enough to have a career ahead of instead of behind them, come the Kings of Leon's full-length debut album, Youth & Young Manhood, and the long-awaited sophomore record from The Strokes, Room On Fire (both on RCA/BMG).

Named after their father and grandfather, both Leon, the Kings are a Tennessee-based quartet of three brothers and a cousin, all named Folkwillow, who grew up in the Pentecostal church and now channel the musical muses of Lynyard Skynard, AC/DC, and Elvis Costello. Songs like the Tom Petty-ish "Wasted Time" and the hokey pop anthem "California Waiting" show much promise. In fact, "California Waiting" sounds like a Strokes tune: strummed guitars, verses at oblique angles, lots of attention paid to accessibility.

As influences go, The Strokes—those poor little privileged youths from uptown Manhattan who went to school downtown—are hard to overestimate these days. Still, after the success of their debut, Is This It, they had to face the sophomore crunch, which has permanently wrecked bands with much stronger debuts than The Strokes' admittedly charming first album.

I'm happy to say that, while Room On Fire is not as strong as Is This It, it's a solid follow-up that at least gets them past the Curse of the Second Album. Funny thing, though—the best tune on this record is "I Can't Win," which sounds like an outtake from Is This It. Still, "Reptilia" (great title) and "Meet Me in the Bathroom" (don't ask) show that Julian Casablancas is growing as a songwriter, and the band as a whole is expanding their strummy, Television-influenced, ensemble-rock-band sound, albeit in small ways. The Strokes go on tour soon; their opening band will be the Kings of Leon. It should be one for the ages.

While these young bands may not be giants yet, and may never be, at least they're walking the earth and moving the music forward. At this point, that's half the ballgame.
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