The concept of the new Contour line updates the classic tradition of the previous range, while bringing to life a completely new landscape of sound. This was the development goal for the new Dynaudio Contour models, an ambitious target that could only be realized through drawing on the company’s 25 years of experience in engineering advanced loudspeaker designs and its strong focus on research and development. The synergy of Dynaudio’s advanced driver technologies and furniture-grade cabinets, built from the finest materials, hand-crafted to the highest degree, and precisely manufactured to the tightest tolerances, leads to a level of quality that simply brings to life the essential nature of sound - the nature of feeling is reflected in the passion of music.

The New Contour Range.

More information and brochures: call 630.238.4200; Loudspeaker models: Contour S 1.4, S 3.4, S 5.4; Contour SC Center and SR Surround models are available for home theater applications.
There's this really awful joke:

After another long day in the city, recording jingles and soundtracks, a viola player is driving his car back home from the train station when he sees that his street has been blocked off by police cars, their lights flashing. He pulls over, gets out of his car, and walks to the top of his street.

To his horror, he sees fire personnel and EMTs going in and out of his house. The police have already put up barriers of yellow "crime scene" tape. He gets the attention of the two policemen who are keeping the gawkers at bay by blurt ing out, "I live there!"

One of the policemen walks over and says, "You the viola player?" The viola player nods wordlessly. The policeman calls for a detective. The detective arrives, puts his hand on the violist's shoulder, and says, "Hey, buddy, sorry to give you the bad news. Your manager went crazy, came to your house, killed your dog, raped your wife, killed her, set fire to the house, and then killed himself."

In stupefied bewilderment, the viola player asks wonderfully, "My manager came to my house?"

This joke immediately came to my mind when I heard the latest in a continuing series of audio retail horror stories. This one involves the mis-spending of more money than my parents paid for their first house. And so, brothers and sisters, brace yourselves for another sermon...

I was chatting with a high-end audio retailer. I mentioned that I really love the Brand A amplifier. I said I wished that I could hear it with Brand B's Model 1 loudspeakers. The dealer then told me that, although he was not a Brand B dealer, he had just taken a pair of Model 1s in trade. He hadn't even played them yet.

I was flabbergasted. The Model 1 is Brand B's newest speaker — so new that, when this conversation took place, it had not yet been formally reviewed by any print magazine. In my humble opinion, the Model 1 is one of the best loudspeakers in the world. As well it should be — it costs more than $20,000/pair.

I refuse to believe that someone who has bought a pair of Model 1s can't get exceptional sound out of them through some combination of speaker and listening-chair placement, room acoustical remediation, and attention to associated equipment. Believe me: starting with Model 1s, you are not, as they sometimes say in our military, "in AOS mode" (All Options Suck).

Getting exceptional sound out of nearly any loudspeaker requires a certain amount of expertise and a certain amount of just plain work.

I think the dissatisfied customer had been seriously let down by the dealer from whom he had bought the Model 1s. Getting exceptional — as distinct from acceptable — sound out of nearly any loudspeaker, especially one with full frequency range and dynamics, requires a certain amount of expertise and a certain amount of just plain work. This is not expertise that can be imparted over the phone, and this is not work that can be done over the phone. Somebody has to get off his keister and actually get out to his customer's house.

I am not proposing that dealers work for free. If someone hasn’t yet bought a pair of loudspeakers but is a bona fide prospect (especially for a pricey model), the dealer should be willing to make a brief scouting visit at no charge, and make general recommendations about which speakers will do well in the room, and where they should be positioned. Any more involved pre-purchase consultation, such as measuring room dimensions, calculating bass modes, or computer-aided room analysis and layout, should be billed and paid for at rates appropriate for the locale.

Most purchasers of loudspeakers costing more than a month's worth of groceries should get free local delivery, and free setup by rough rules and ear. By the same token, customers should expect to pay, one way or another, for acoustical analysis and in-room testing. (I can't imagine an audio shop being able to give discounts off list price and do free in-home acoustical analysis, and long stay in business. After all, no one who buys a video projector and screen expects free installation and free ISF calibration. In that regard, the home theater business is running rings around two-channel.)

Listen up, all you audio dealers: You put a music CD in a computer and sound comes out. You put a music CD in a home theater system and sound comes out. Many cars today come with CD players standard; for those that don’t, the option is not expensive. Computers, home theaters, and cars all play CDs — some of them surprisingly well, especially the cars.

So when you try to sell two-channel audio, you're trying to sell a different — and vastly more expensive — version of something that people have bought and paid for at least three times already.

You and I know that a great home audio system will do things a car stereo never can. But that word is not getting out there. Too often, the word that is getting out there is: Some people spend huge amounts of money on high-end audio and then aren’t happy, and then lose a lot of money trading up, down, or sideways.

Dealers: We are not in AOS mode. Here are your action items:

• You have to “become the customer.”
• Spend his or her money as if it were your own.
• Don’t take the customer’s money unless you would be willing to listen to that system, and no other, all the days of your life.

Advising people how to spend money to bring music more deeply into their lives is a sacred trust. Don’t just go for the quick buck. Keep the faith by doing whatever is necessary to provide long-term satisfaction and value.

Make these your personal and professional goals: No buyer's remorse, and no ruinous hasty trade-ins. Go forth, sin no more — and get out and visit some houses!

1 My last sermon was the "As We See It" in the March 2002 Stereophile (Vol.25 No.3) on "The Tragedy of the Commons" (www.stereophile.com/anwseet/547).
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Stereophile, May 2004

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Over and over, magic is what I heard ...”
- Jeff Fritz, SoundStage! on the Studio 100 v.3

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Enough Musical Fidelity?
Editor:
So now you’ve started reviewing every new Musical Fidelity product twice (March 2004). Come on, guys, isn’t this getting a little hard to explain?

Jim Taylor
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A solution?
Editor:
Why not give Musical Fidelity’s Antony Michaelson his own column? Eliminate the middleman and free up your writers for other worthy components.

Musomi Kimanthi
mikmanthi@comcast.net

See this issue’s “Sam’s Space” for more on this subject. –JA

Holt vs Dudley
Editor:
If Art Dudley were a tube, he would be a 50C5. If J. Gordon Holt were a tube, he would be an EL34. I don’t believe I need to say any more.

Allen L. Schmidt
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Holt and Dudley
Editor:
I began reading Stereophile in 1971, so I believe I have some idea of J. Gordon Holt’s viewpoints. In addition, I read most issues of Listen, so I had an appreciation of Art Dudley’s perspective before he began writing for you. I guess I missed a major point, because I do not see these two writers as being so far apart. They both emphasize the ability of a given component to produce sound that is recognizable as that of a live instrument(s) playing the same melody. They both trust the ear over the eye (reading a meter or ‘scope). They both look for pleasure in their listening experiences. And they both hold a well-developed sense of humor, although Gordon’s is even dryer than Art’s. So in my mind, they are not such polar opposites as recent letters and exchanges would suggest.

Name withheld
Deederoobo@aol.com

Keep on keeping on
Editor:
Almost every year since 1971, Stereophile has garnered an annual renewal check from me. This practice shall hereby cease. Due to the lack of reverence toward political and religious matters by Art Dudley and other contributing editors, I will not be forwarding another payment to you this year. If you continue to allow Mr. Dudley and others to persist in finding humor in the USA’s Christian and conservative roots, I will be forced into taking further action. In 2006, when my current subscription expires, I shall, again, feel compelled to renew for another three years.

This magazine’s style of self-effacement, capacity to question everything, and frequent doses of humor are essential to my reading pleasure. Please continue to vifly those holier-than-thou whiners who trot out their MIS’s, MS’s, and PhDs, along with their BS’s. They confuse our Constitution with the Bible and are mistaken about our religious foundations. (One would think that, with those educational credentials, the Holy Rollers would know that many of America’s Founding Fathers were Unitarians or Universalists, not Christians.)

Mirthfully going off subject injects interest and fun into Stereophile’s articles and gives one pause to contemplate issues wider than, simply, soft- or hardware. I appreciate the occasional convoluted path that some authors traverse when leading us toward audio enlightenment. Please don’t be goaded into self-censoring your colorful prose. Politics, religion, sex, drugs, and rock’n’roll influence music and marketing, those subjects should not exist beyond scrutiny.

Lately, I’ve been more alarmed by the narrow-minded ignorance displayed by some voters and angry letter-writers than anything found in 33 years of Stereophile articles. I wonder, could this be due to the current trickle-down effect occurring in this country? So keep on keeping on, and please and love to you all.

Jay Orvis
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Missing the point
Editor:
I know it has been written about many times before in “Letters,” but after reading the March Stereophile, it is perhaps worth saying again: This hobby/passion is supposed to be fun.

Some of the letters Art Dudley printed in his March “Listening” were just plain scary. The “cancel my subscription” letters, while entertaining, show just how much people miss the point of what I feel music re-creation is all about. This point was recently driven home by my daughter, age 26 months: The other day, the music room was suddenly called “Daddy’s playroom.”

The more I thought about it, the more I realized how right this little munchkin is. In “Daddy’s playroom” we jump and dance to the music, sometimes we sit quietly, sometimes we give her little sister (four months) her bottle in the listening chair, and sometimes we watch little sister kick her legs in excitement as we run around because the music is happy and it feels good. We are just plain enjoying music in all its glory and having fun. In a two-year-old’s world, this place is indeed Daddy’s playroom.

My system gives me tremendous satisfaction when I sit in the listening chair. It gives me even greater joy to know that I am passing on the most important aspect of music to my children: that it is fun.

John Valvano
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That’s A-Open, JA
Editor:
In the March article on JA’s new Deep River recording, he mentioned that he used a computer with an “A-One” tube mother- board. Did he then go home and put an A-Open steak sauce on his steak? I will continue to use a PC with an A-Open motherboard — an intriguing product with audiophile aspirations; I think a full review is in order — and leave the A-One gear to Wile E. Coyote.

David S. Olegar
olegar@dchs.swa.gov

Sorry about my brainfade, Mr. Olegar. The UnitQps computer did indeed use the A-Open
_Letters_

motherboard. Our Web reprint at www.sterowhile.com/musicrocordings/304deep has it correct. And I am thinking about reviewing the A-Open tube motherboard. —JA

That's incorrect

Editor: I look forward to hearing Cantus' Deep River CD. However, I have deep reservations and concerns about the premise of the recording. In March (p.53), Erick Lichte is quoted as trying to create a recording that mirrors the African-American experience and goes on to attempt to re-create the ideals of Burleigh, Hairston, and Work.

None of this works. How can a bunch of guys who live in the American Heartland and have been trained in the classical tradition possibly understand the African-American experience, musically or otherwise? The African-American spiritual descends from shared conditions and beliefs strengthened by tremendous emotion and conviction. The tradition was not of a god to be feared but of one that could provide the believer a release from bondage and servitude. The European tradition is one of retribution and the power and beliefs of the Catholic church, even when the religion wasn't Catholic. The European church was the final salvation but not the savior. I may not be saying it right, but the belief system was quite a bit different. The African-American tradition in music and in beliefs in religion is not the European tradition.

If one believes that gospel music and spirituals are actually different, rather than an evolution in the condition of the practitioners, then the thought pattern needs a rethink. The attempt to intellectualize the music is the very problem with the approach: It's intellectually dishonest. The group's attempt to "elevate" the music with "sophisticated compositional techniques" reeks of disrespect and a lack of appreciation for the music.

Further, this trying to give it a Harlem Renaissance ideal misses the point of the music. The composers and writers of the Renaissance had ideas in trying to fit in and may have been a bit arrogant, but they believed the "race" needed to be elevated through actions to show that they were the equal of whites. No such elevation is needed or required today.

Dan Williams
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“Marian" spiritual. African-American others. believed equal music
tuitioners, philecom/musicrecordings/304deep spirituals classical and
tions That's red. motherboard.
Letters music or
descends to the church, the ground of the Savior. the tenors, none on exactly the tenors who sang this music, hasn't been enslaved like the people who sang this music, and didn't live as the people who sang this music, Cantus could never understand what this music is about and that our performances of it are therefore dishonest. By this argument, wouldn't you also be saying that black African choirs are not fit to perform Bach? That Chinese violinists should stay away from Mendelssohn? That Mexican tenors better not touch Mozart? By your reasoning, none of these people "understand" first-hand the times and culture that birthed this music. Is this music off-limits to them as well?

While you question Cantus' right to perform the spiritual, something tells me that you wouldn't say this about other races and cultures performing Western music because it would sound racist. It is.

I can't argue that there is always something special when you can hear people performing their own music — Finns singing in Finnish, Argentines playing tangos, etc. However, Cantus works hard to intellectually lend each piece of music we perform and also to open our hearts to the times and the people from whence that music comes. Only then can anyone perform any style of music with integrity. I feel that Cantus has certainly accomplished this with Deep River. We have done our best to pay tribute to this great American music.

I hope you buy Deep River, Mr. Williams. After you have heard it, let me know what you think. I also hope you can hear the amazing job John Atkinson has done capturing the emotional commitment that 12 singing men have put into this remarkable American music. Close your eyes and forget about the color of our skins.

—Erick Lichte
Artistic Coordinator, Cantus
Maple Grove, MN

_The Explorer amplifier_

Editor: I immensely enjoyed Art Dudley's review of the ASL Explorer 805 DT monoblock amplifier in March. Extremely impressive, and tempting.

John Atkinson may not know that a parallel-fed design can tune the output capacitor and transformer to peak out in the bass exactly as his curves show. It is not necessarily a feedback phase-shift scenario. May I also suggest that JA's final footnote should have read "Compressed transient peaks relax the psychoacoustic into perceiving greater low-level timbral detail and die-away, exactly as Art observed." JA should know that "instantaneous harmonics" are imperceptible, as at least 11 milliseconds duration is needed even for young, alert people to notice them. Finally, Art, it is a slur when acoustic feedback is called "amplifier oscillation." They sound similar to the experienced.

I hope that this letter doesn't seem too arrogant, but I have been scratch-building and selling my own designs of tube amps and speakers, weighing up to 90 and 110 lbs, respectively, since 1958.

Jim Carlyle, subscriber
New Zealand (with the Hobbits)
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_The Shishido amplifier_

Editor: As a hobbyist-designer-builder of SET amps familiar with the designs of the late Nobu Shishido, I would like to share some insight as to the behavior of the Explorer 805 DT amplifier, sonically and electrically.

First, it is a loosely appropriated Shishido design from his book, published only in Japanese a couple of years before...
his death. It is similar to the Wavac designs, not just because it uses an interstage transformer, but because it wrings more power from the output tube than should be possible from a SET amp. That value is 25% or less of the tube’s plate dissipation (125W for the 805). One would expect about 30W output from this tube.

Shishido used a class-A2 arrangement with positive grid voltage and current to dramatically reduce the plate resistance of the tube and increase the power output. The price was rapidly rising distortion after a watt or so. His idea was that the “first watt” was what really mattered for sound quality, and the rest was dynamic headroom. As long as clipping was avoided, a rising distortion wouldn’t sound bad on peaks. Indeed, the 1W distortion is the classic evenly falling harmonic progression described by Jean Hiraga as pleasant and natural in character. The progression to 10% THD at full power is typical of this class of Shishido’s amps, as depicted in his book. He also used a little feedback, often cathode feedback to the output tube, but also a little global feedback to tighten up the sound of these amps.

Nobu Shishido didn’t use parallel feed in his designs that I know of. This amp does feed the output tube through a plate-loading choke, and capacitor-couples the output transformer to save it from a huge current flux that would hurt its performance or require it to be much larger and more complex. In “parafeed” designs such as this, the value of the capacitor coupling the output tube to the transformer is critical for stable operation. It determines the Q, or damping factor, of the tube-cap-transformer unit. Too small a cap gives an undamped resonance that may even be up in the audio range. This cap is so sub-optimal that the amp oscillates without feedback, something that no SET amp should typically do. The cap probably needs to be fully 10 times as big for this application. That might be bigger and more expensive than could be worked into the price-point concept of this design. It is also unlikely that it could be added later without grossly curving up the amp.

To emulate Nobu Shishido certainly shows a degree of sophistication, but to do so without attribution is not a positive sign. Wavac makes the Music Dandy Shishido amp to a more refined standard in the same price range, and gives credit where credit is due.

John Day
Austin, TX
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The Holvand amplifier

Editor:
I have been a reader and supporter of Stereophile for more than 15 years and thought I had seen it all. Maybe it’s just me, but how could Stereophile review an amplifier and send an advance copy of its Radia review to Holvand [Stereophile, March 2004]? Then, when Holvand reads the review, they don’t like it and say, “Wait a minute, we have a new version,” and you review that one? Whatever happened to “Tell it like it is”?

Stereophile owed its readers to publish the review of just the first, flawed amplifier. If Holvand then wanted to submit a revised amplifier, you should have reviewed it in a “Follow-Up.” Holvand knew they were having their amp reviewed. If they sent you an unrepresentative sample, then shame on them. At the start of the review Paul Bolin writes, “They will make no amplifier before its time.” He also writes, “In the case of the Radia, that meant a total of 25 years of experimentation with circuit topologies and parts.” So Holvand took 25 years to make the amp just to find out in year 26 that they had a design flaw.

Hovland could have made an honest mistake, but it is your job to review what they sent you. Is it Stereophile’s policy now to send manufacturers an advance copy of your reviews, and if the company doesn’t like it, can they submit another version? If this is the case, I guess someone could just keep sending you newer versions until they like the review.

Bryan Stewart
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Our policy has always been to send a manufacturer a preprint of the completed review, Mr. Stewart. This is both to allow them to alert us to errors of fact and for them to write a “Manufacturer’s Comment.” What happened with the Holvand review conforms to my policy of the past 17 years: If, when they receive the review preprint, a manufacturer can convince me that the review sample was faulty, they can submit a second sample. However, this is always on the condition that the problem, how it was fixed, and our comments on the first sample are published in the final version of the review, as they were in the case of the Holvand Radia.

So, yes, we reviewed a second sample of the Holvand, after both a long design period and a year of faulty production during which the Radia had been favorably reviewed by other magazines. By contrast, Stereophile told you about the problem with the amplifier, published measurements and comments on the sound quality of both samples, and left its readers in no doubt about what had happened. What would you have us do different?

--JA

No second sample

Editor:
What would I have you do different? I would have you report the findings on just the first amplifier. It just seems funny that a manufacturer could submit a product for review, then send you another version after you finish the review. Hey, if that is your policy then that is your policy, but I'm not sure how a manufacturer could ever get a bad review.

Bryan Stewart
bstev@carolina.rr.com

A review represents a large investment of time and resources on the part of the magazine, Mr. Stewart. I don’t want to waste that investment on a product that is not representative of what our readers can buy. If a manufacturer convinces me that their first sample was genuinely faulty — not just badly designed or inherently bad-sounding — then we will postpone publishing the review while we obtain a second sample.

Yes, there is always the possibility that a manufacturer will try this gambit to avoid a negative review being published, but there is a price to be paid for this. The revised sample could indeed perform better, and we report that fact. But with everything to do with both samples being “on the record,” the manufacturer is revealed as having, at best, inadequate quality assurance and, at worst, the inability to design and manufacture products to a consistent standard.

And manufacturers get only a second shot, never a third or a fourth, to prevent the reviewer and magazine becoming involved in an endlessly reiterative and inappropriately collaborative design process. I am confident that my policy best serves the magazine’s readership and the manufacturer whose products we review.

--JA

The passing parade

Editor:
I would prefer that Stereophile not use so much of “Industry Update” as an obituary column. The seeming deluge of death gives a depressingly portentous tone to the magazine and the industry as a whole. The cumulative impact of this material in Stereophile comes across as a barometer for problems in high-end audio and its prospects for the future. Browsing obituaries is the pastime of those in decline for whom the rearview mirror is more interesting or comforting than what is fast approaching through the windshield. I don’t feel these articles are the way to capture the imagination of motivated consumers or youthful adherents looking to see what business and technology may bring to the market. These are the people that may or may not be the future spon- sors of the industry.

With all due sympathy to the subjects of these columns, their families, and with appropriate respect for their past achievements, I don’t think it is appropriate fare for a consumer-oriented magazine.

David Elder
Bokos32@worldnet.att.net

I respect your opinion, Mr. Elder, but the subjects of these sadly too-frequent obituaries helped shape the world of music that audiophiles inhabit. I strongly feel their passing should be noted in what has turned out to be the US’s audio maga- zine of record.

--JA
US: SEATTLE & BOSTON
Barry Willis
During the first week of February, major record labels quietly launched small-scale test marketing of a new type of hybrid disc: a standard CD on one side, a DVD on the other.

The labels were testing consumer acceptance of the format with a dozen or so music titles placed in record stores in Seattle and Boston. Priced at $18.99 each—more than most CDs but less than most DVDs—the aptly named DualDiscs feature standard “Red Book” 16-bit/44.1kHz two-channel audio on the CD side and a variety of DVD content on the other, including “graphics, song lyrics, web links, photos, DVD-Video, and/or DVD-Audio,” according to one announcement. At the discretion of artists, producers, and label executives, the DVD side of the discs can offer a wide range of content, including 24-bit/96kHz two-channel audio, and multichannel audio as hi-rez DVD-A or Dolby Digital 5.1.

Backed by the music industry’s Big Five—BMG, EMI, Warner Music Group, Sony Music, and Universal Music Group—the DualDisc is something of a technical triumph, having overcome engineering obstacles that some pundits had predicted would make commercial production impossible. The emergence of DualDiscs indicates an increasing willingness by innovative engineers to push past the limits of the CD standard, now more than 20 years old.

The industry seems to be hoping that by physically bonding CDs to DVDs and thereby offering consumers a potentially more convenient and versatile entertainment format, it will see music sales pick up, literally on the backs of ever-more-popular DVDs. Yet while consumers may enjoy the convenience and novelty of the conjoined discs, they might not get quite everything they might have enjoyed had they purchased the same selections separately.

A limitation on disc thickness is rumored to confine the CD sides of DualDiscs to 60 minutes of music, as opposed to 74 minutes for ordinary discs. (References to limited running time popped up in several reports about DualDiscs, but we were unable to find any official verification.) The thickness of the two bonded formats supposedly limits DVD content to a single layer, meaning a DualDisc can provide only half as much entertainment as a dual-layer DVD. (Most movies that run two hours or longer are released on dual-layer DVDs.)

The disc-thickness limitation was a concession to automotive CD changers, which have extremely tight tolerances on disc dimensions. While convenient for consumers, DualDiscs’ compatibility with such players may ultimately scuttle the experiment. Changers are notoriously rough on discs, and scratched DVDs are notoriously glitchy, especially when played in inexpensive machines. This is due to the difference in wavelength between the CD laser and its DVD equivalent. A slight surface scratch has no effect on CD playback; to a CD laser, it looks like a hair. To a DVD laser, the same scratch looks like a fire hose. Many inexpensive DVD players will hang up or stop tracking when they encounter scratches. Upscale machines with more robust error-correction systems can play scratched DVDs without problems, but these aren’t the players owned by the majority of consumers—especially those likely to be seduced by the appeal of two-for-one discs.

Record labels may not be aware of durability issues with DVDs, but according to some reports, they have concerns that consumers could feel they aren’t getting everything they want with DualDiscs, despite the attractive price. Some marketing executives are said to favor packaging related CDs and DVDs together, such as a movie with its soundtrack or an accompanying CD, or a DVD with music videos and similar content on a DVD. (That experiment has already been tried, with promising results.) The industry is willing to try anything to win customers back to the packaged-goods model of recorded music, which may explain why Sony Music is trying DualDiscs while simultaneously backing the Super Audio CD. (In keeping with the company’s SACD

Those promoting audio-related seminars, shows, and meetings should fax (do not call) the when, where, and who to (212) 886-2809 at least eight weeks before the month of the event. The deadline for the July 2004 issue is May 3, 2004. 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 vg@salientinc.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.

CALIFORNIA
• Tuesday, April 20, 7-9pm: Audio Vision San Francisco welcomes Robert Suchy of Clearaudio and Garth Leerer of Musical Surroundings for a presenta-

Calendar

NEW YORK
• Thursday–Friday, May 6–7, 5–8pm: David Wilson of Wilson Audio will be at Innovative Audio Video Showrooms (Manhattan) to debut the Wilson Audio Alexandria X-2 and to discuss cabinet design and materials, driver and cross-
agenda, Sony Music DualDiscs do not offer DVD-Audio. In electronics as well as in recorded music, Sony can offer one line of products to a niche market of purists and another to the mass market without losing credibility with either. The DualDisc format has its own logo and website, but as of mid-March www.DualDisc.com was merely a placeholder.

YOUR DESKTOP
Jon Iverson
Audiophiles may bemuse the convergence of computers and high-fidelity equipment, but the trend is apparently as unstoppable as the earth’s progression around the sun. Every once in a while, however, an announcement appears to encourage hopes that the computer audio experience will eventually transcend its typical limitations. Case in point: a recent press release from Dolby Labs and Intel Corporation about a cooperative effort to promote “Intel High Definition Audio,” an improved PC audio experience based on Dolby surround-sound technologies.

The partners are launching a new “integrated audio codec” licensing program designed to enable software and hardware designers “to develop solutions that work with Intel HD Audio, Intel’s next-generation audio architecture formerly code-named ‘Azalia.’” The technology could give PC users many of the same benefits they would experience with home-theater systems, according to the announcement, including “Dolby Headphone, Dolby Virtual Speaker, Dolby Digital Live, and Dolby Pro Logic Ix.”

Although it does not specify the level of resolution offered by Intel HD Audio, the announcement does assert that “consumers will have the ability to enjoy a richer and more engaging experience from any audio source in virtually any listening mode,” including full surround sound, without the need for a 5.1-channel speaker array.

The introduction of yet another reputedly high-resolution audio format could be seen as unwelcome in a market still reluctant to fully embrace SACD or DVD-Audio, or as an inevitable expansion of the PC’s abilities. It’s worth noting that multiple formats of hi-def video haven’t hindered its acceptance. All that’s needed for any format to succeed are the tools to decode it. “The Dolby PC Entertainment Experience Initiative will provide consumers with the freedom to enjoy their entertainment the way they want to,” said Steve Vernon, Dolby’s vice-president of licensing technology. “Whether you want to listen through two speakers, a multichannel home theater setup, or headphones, Dolby technologies are now accessible seamlessly through your PC.”

Dolby and Intel will promote a “Dolby PC Logo Program” to help consumers select PCs with the Dolby audio technologies that best meet their entertainment needs, the partners announced at the Intel Developer Forum on February 17.

US: NEW YORK
Barry Willis
What’s in a name? In trademark disputes, enough to justify protracted and expensive litigation, as in the case of New Sensor Corporation vs CE Distributing, LLC, heard recently in US District Court in New York. At issue: the use of the name “Svetlana” on vacuum tubes distributed by both companies but made by different factories.

Svetlana tubes have almost mythical status in some audiophile circles. Until four years ago, there was no doubt about their authenticity because the brand name applied only to tubes made in the Svetlana plant in St. Petersburg, operated by a Russian corporation known as JSC Svetlana, and distributed from 1992 until 2000 outside the countries of the former Soviet Union by Svetlana Electron Distributors (SED), an American company incorporated in Alabama. Since then, a competing brand using the same name (and, according to court documents, built to “equivalent specifications”) has been made at the Xpo-pul factory in Saratov, home of Stereophile’s man in the Russian heartland, Leonid Korostyshhevsky. New Sensor Corporation distributes Xpopul–built tubes.

In the lawsuit, New Sensor sued CE Distributing, the current distributor of JSC Svetlana devices, over the use of the name, charging it with trademark infringement and unfair competition, and asserting that consumers could be confused by the existence of competing products with the same name. (Svetlana is also a common Russian female name, roughly translated as luminosity or luminary and similar to Dawn or Stella in English.) Original Svetlana tubes were marked with a stylized S logo and “Svetlana Electron Devices.” Both marks were regiserved with the US Patent and Trademark Office in 1997 by SED, and sold to New Sensor in 2001. For marketing purposes in North America, the name belongs to New Sensor. Despite this, JSC sued New Sensor over the use of the name. In 2003, both parties signed an agreement giving New Sensor the exclusive right to the use of “Svetlana” and giving JSC the exclusive right to use the “winged-C” logo (C is the Cyrillic С).

CE Distributing now handles Svetlana tubes made in St. Petersburg. In the 2003 agreement, New Sensor released CE and other customers of JSC “from any claims arising out of the use of the Svetlana mark in connection with the sale of inventory manufactured by JSC and purchased by CE and other customers before March 4, 2003.” With New Sensor’s approval, JSC sent a letter to its customers stating that tubes formerly branded Svetlana would henceforth be sold under the winged-C logo and the new brand name “SED St. Petersburg, Russia.”

So which Svetlana is the tube that is true? If you’re talking about “new old stock” (NOS)—i.e., tubes made before 2000—the words “Svetlana Electron

Calendar

over design, room acoustics, and strategies for speaker placement. RSVP required. Visit www.innovativeaudiovideo.com or call (212) 634-4444.

- Friday, May 21, 1–9pm and Saturday, May 22, 10am–6pm: Rhapsody Music & Cinema will hold an open house offering enthusiasts a chance to meet Jeff Joseph of Joseph Audio. For more info, call (212) 229-1842 or e-mail info@rhapsodytubes.com.
- Thursday–Sunday, May 20–23: Home Entertainment East takes place at the Hilton New York, site of the successful 2001 and 2002 events. (Thursday May 20 is for trade and press only) Details and advance tickets can be found at www.homeentertainment-expo.com/nyhome.html.
- Wednesday, June 9, 5–9pm: Rhapsody Music & Cinema will hold an open house offering enthusiasts a chance to meet Jeff Joseph of Joseph Audio. For more info, call (212) 634-4444 or e-mail info@rhapsodytubes.com.
- Thursday–Sunday, May 20–23: Home Entertainment East takes place at the Hilton New York, site of the successful 2001 and 2002 events. (Thursday May 20 is for trade and press only) Details and advance tickets can be found at www.homeentertainment-expo.com/nyhome.html.
- World Radio History

Stereophile, May 2004
“Halcro’s dm58: The Best Amplifier Ever!”
Stereophile, October 2002

“Halcro’s dm10 offers measured performance that is both beyond my ability to fully characterize and beyond reproach. Wow.”
John Atkinson, Stereophile, April 2004

Words by Stereophile. Music by Halcro.

“It stands alone as the everything-included-for-the-one-price preamplifier. Incredibly, Bruce Candy has done it again.”

“Transient speed plus silence and harmonic bounteouness here equaled virtual reality.”
Paul Bolin, Stereophile, April 2004

The Halcro dm10 & dm8 preamplifiers are the perfect complement to the Halcro power amplifiers. Levels of total harmonic and inter-modulation distortion are so low, they are immeasurable. As with our power amplifiers, soft forms are used for the outer casing, maintaining clean, simple lines. Halcro preamplifiers produce the finest sound stage in the high-end audio industry. For lovers of analogue sound, the Halcro dm10 preamplifier includes the most accurate and quietest reference-quality phono stage available.

It’s all about the music.

Listen for yourself.
Devices” and the stylized S are what to look for. For more recent issues, look for the winged C. The Svetlana name is still found on tubes made in Saratov.

Is this case about clearly defining the brand or about lawyers generating billable hours? Several readings of the court documents leave that question unanswered. In his February 3 ruling, Judge J. Glassner found in favor of CE Distributing and granted a summary judgment. No consumer confusion was likely to arise, he decided, because both companies sell only to “professional buyers” who presumably know one tube from another.

UNITED KINGDOM
Paul Messenger

Norman Crocker: March 28, 1927–January 28, 2004

Described by his contemporaries as “the epitome of an English gentleman,” Norman Crocker will be best remembered for his success in guiding British speaker manufacturer Tannoy safely through the turbulent 1970s and 1980s. However, his talents were not restricted to management and the boardroom. He was also in his element as a traveling ambassador for British hi-fi, and was notably effective in building strong business relationships in Japan and the Far East, where he was greatly respected.

In the early 1970s, Norman was managing the Plessey subsidiary Ferrograph when Harman International bought Tannoy and recruited him to run it. This at first involved managing Tannoy’s move from the London suburbs up to Coatbridge, in Scotland, and then coping with a change of ownership when Sidney Harman sold his commercial operations to Beatrice Foods in order to join Jimmy Carter’s administration. Even bigger steps came when Norman organized the subsequent management buyout from Beatrice, and then formed an alliance with two other UK loudspeaker manufacturers, Goodmans and Mordaunt-Short, to create the TGI Group. He also chaired the Federation of British Audio for a number of years.

Norman left Tannoy in 1987 to become chairman of TGI, and officially retired in 1994. He was not the retiring sort, however, and soon reemerged to apply his experience and contacts on behalf of new speaker technology company NXT, before finally leaving the industry at the end of the millennium.

Norman Crocker spent his working life serving the British hi-fi industry, and few can match the all-around contribution he made. He was a natural leader—fellow managers and staff alike remembering him fondly for his skill in dealing with people and building teams. Our condolences to his widow, Marjory, and to their three children.

US: SACRAMENTO
Barry Willis

On Monday, February 9, Tower Records, Inc. filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection at the US Bankruptcy Court in Wilmington, Delaware. Industry observers had predicted the move in the weeks leading up to the filing, MTS, Inc., as the company is officially known, listed “more than $100 million of assets and more than $100 million of debts in its filing,” according to a report from Reuters news service. “MTS expects to emerge from Chapter 11 within 45 to 60 days. It plans to swap $110 million of senior debt for $30 million of new senior notes and an 85% equity stake. Existing equity holders would retain a 15% stake,” the report continued.

$100 million in debtor-in-possession financing from CIT Group/Business Credit Inc. will keep Tower Records' 93
operating stores afloat during the reorganization. The Chapter 11 filing will "provide the greatest recovery for our bondholders," said the company's CEO, E. Allen Rodriguez.

The West Sacramento-based retailer had been fishing for a bailout since last spring, when it failed to make a scheduled $5.2 million interest payment on a $110 million bond debt. Having come up empty, the 44-year-old record chain had only one alternative: a Chapter 11 filing that would restructure its debt, take control of the company from the founding Solomon family, and make Tower more attractive to future buyers. Most of the company's creditors are said to have already approved what Bee staff writer Dale Kasler termed a "pre-packaged" bankruptcy filing.

One likely outcome of Chapter 11 protection would be a debt-for-equity deal that would leave bondholders in control of the company. The day-to-day operations of the stores shouldn't be affected by the bankruptcy, according to sources quoted by Kasler, who mentioned that Tower's business had picked up recently. Such a development would be in keeping with a general trend in the music industry, which is enjoying a 10% surge in sales so far this year compared to 2003, according to a February 5 report from Reuters news service that quoted figures supplied by Nielsen SoundScan, which tracks retail music sales.

Starting from a single store that opened in 1960, Tower reached a peak of 171 stores worldwide, with annual sales in excess of $1 billion. The stores were favorites of music fans because of Tower's policy of stocking "deep catalog"—reputedly, at least one copy in every store of every recording available—and because of its enthusiastic and knowledgeable employees. Tower's troubles began in 1998, when mass-market discounters such as Wal-Mart and Best Buy began selling CDs at near-wholesale prices, and when Internet file-sharing and CD-burning first became significant alternatives for music fans. Among the most likely buyers of a restructured Tower is Sun Capital Partners, Inc., the Florida-based investment group that last year acquired the Sam Goody record chain from Best Buy.

**UNITED KINGDOM**

**Barry Willis**

Contrary to popular assumption, music downloads and CD sales may reinforce each other. That's one reasonable interpretation of the mid-February music-industry statistics from the United Kingdom.

On February 10, 2004, the BBC reported that British consumers bought more than 150,000 singles online in January, making the virtual format the "second most-popular format for singles," exceeding 7" and 12" vinyl releases and DVD singles. Only CD singles outsold downloads, according to the British Official Charts Company (OCC), which began tracking online music sales in October 2003. The development marks the first time that an electronic format has outsold any of its physical counterparts, according to the OCC.

On February 9, the British Phonographic Industry (BPI) announced that shipments of CDs in the UK rose 5.6% in 2003. Because the London-based International Federation of Phonographic Industries (IFPI) claims that global music sales were off 11% during the first half of last year, this seems to run counter to the ongoing slump in the worldwide market for recorded music. The sales surge was attributed to a decline in prices and the surging popularity of several British

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artists, including Busted, the Darkness, Dido, and Will Young.

UK shipments of albums in all formats (CD, LP, cassette) rose by 4.9%, according to the BPI, but singles sales declined 31%. Perhaps music fans are downloading virtual singles but buying regular CDs in stores. If so, that would validate a somewhat heretical opinion held by some in the music industry: that downloads are one of the greatest promotional tools ever devised.

Despite declining CD sales, the music industry is beginning to enjoy at least token profits from online sales. A recent twist in downloadable offerings is recordings that will never appear on discs released from record labels, according to a March 1 story by Wall Street Journal reporters Ethan Smith and Nick Wingfield. The week after the Super Bowl, one of iTunes’ most popular downloads was Beyoncé Knowles’ rendition of “The Star-Spangled Banner,” as performed at the championship game.

Another popular outtake from the game was Green Day’s version of “I Fought the Law,” used in a commercial for Apple and Pepsi. The song—an iTunes “worldwide exclusive,” in the words of Apple marketing executive Rob Schoeben—sold 27,000 copies during the first three weeks it was available.

Like authorized bootlegs, otherwise unavailable recordings are proving irresistible to music fans, Smith and Wingfield report. Among the online lures are recordings from live performances, such as Knowles’, as well as outtakes from rehearsals. Artists are keenly aware of this previously untapped revenue stream, according to Scott White, co-owner of Fast Atmosphere, which builds and runs websites for musicians Norah Jones, Charlie Hunter, Gillian Welch, and others. “Artists are bringing computers on the road, plugging them into soundboards, and making digital recordings ready for download,” White told the WSJ.

THE INTERNET
Jon Iverson

Four years ago, rock band Metallica angered part of its fan base by going after downloaders who used the online file-sharing service Napster. At that time, the band provided Napster with the screen names of 335,000 users reputed to be pirating Metallica’s music, and demanded they be removed from the service. The group was also the first organization to sue the fledgling company.

While Metallica fans called for a boycott of the band’s music, it was the beginning of the end for Napster, which was eventually squashed and has been reborn as a pay-for-music service. Metallica will now try to clear its anti-Web karma by putting a wealth of new music files online via an authorized service.

Last week, Metallica revealed that it has entered into agreements with digital media distributors nugs.net and CinemaNow to make concert recordings from its new tour available for download. As part of the agreement, Metallica claims, its fans will be able to download audio of entire shows from each stop on the first leg of its North American tour “within days of the band’s performance.”

Here’s the part that audiophiles will find interesting: The unedited soundboard recordings of all shows will be released not only as standard lo-rez MP3 files, but also as higher-resolution Free Lossless Audio Codec (FLAC) files via a high-bandwidth delivery system using CinemaNow’s PatchBay technology.

The announcement also offers a glimpse of possible future pricing models for offering high-quality audio online as an alternative to the typical lo-rez, one-size-fits-all audio files currently selling via iTunes and Rhapsody. The cost of each two-hours-plus show is $9.95 for MP3s and $12.95 for higher-quality FLAC files. These are the same prices currently offered on similar live music services such as Phish’s LivePhish.com and LiveDownloads.com, which features the String Cheese Incident and other bands.

Metallica has also attempted to bypass the online format war brewing between iTunes’ AAC-coded files and Microsoft’s WMA files by choosing MP3 and FLAC. Both formats are compatible with the Windows, Mac, and Unix operating systems, and, once downloaded, can be burned to disc, transferred to portable players, or played through a computer. The band adds that each show also comes with printable booklets, tray cards, and labels for fans who burn the files to CD.

Metallica’s Lars Ulrich notes, “This is the next logical step in a process that began in 1991 when we first implemented the ‘Taper Section’ at our shows, where the fans were encouraged to bring in their own gear to record the show, and then take home their very own ‘bootleg’ of the concert they had just seen. This technology will enable our fans to get the best possible recording of the show, without having to hold a microphone in the air for the entire night!”

And, Ulrich might have added, Metallica now gets paid for what was once free.

JAPAN
Barry Willis

HD-DVD is ahead by a nose in its race against Blu-ray. On February 25, the 20-member steering committee of the DVD Forum voted to approve technology developed by Toshiba and NEC for use in the coming generation of high-density, high-definition DVD recorders.

The committee approved a read-only version of the HD-DVD system in November. The latest vote removes one of the last hurdles to commercial product development; Toshiba and NEC said they would probably introduce HD-DVD recorders for consumers sometime next year.

The two partners are contending with the rival Blu-ray format, which is backed by a 12-member consortium led by Sony Corporation, Matsushita Electric Industrial Company, and Hewlett-Packard. Both teams have developed prototype discs and recorders, but the Blu-ray group hasn’t won approval by the DVD Forum. Both formats claim the ability to capture data-intense high-definition television programming on standard optical discs. HD-DVD won approval by the Forum’s steering committee because it would require less retooling by manufacturers. The Blu-ray group is a splinter faction within the DVD Forum, and hasn’t submitted its format for approval.

It appears that Microsoft will have its finger in every HD-DVD pie. On February 27, the DVD Forum steering committee voted for preliminary approval to include Microsoft’s video compression technology in specifications for HD-DVD playback. Microsoft’s VC-9, the decoding technology in Windows Media Video, will probably be included in the final HD-DVD specification, as well as two other video technologies, H.264 and MPEG-2. Final approval should come within 60 days as licensing agreements are ironed out.

US: COLORADO
Jon Iverson

Pure technology developments don’t often have an audiophile angle, but a February 9 announcement from InPhase Technologies caught our attention. The Longmont, Colorado–based data-storage specialist is now shipping what it calls the “first blue laser holographic media,” which it claims is capable of storing 14 hours of high-definition video or 1500 hours of audio on a single disc.
Valkyra brings the reality (a word I chose carefully) of monofilament performance significantly closer to a great many more people, as well as offering a stepping stone to the stars... its nearer perfect than anything I've heard save Valhalla...” Roy Gregory. Hi Fi + Issue 23
Developed with financial aid from the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency (NGA), the Tapestry HDS5000 (presumably, "HDS" stands for "high-density storage") is intended for use in what InPhase calls "holographic recorders and players that will have terabytes of capacity on a single disc."

The disc is the outgrowth of previous work InPhase has done with green lasers. Lasers with colors near the blue end of the spectrum have shorter wavelengths; corresponding optical media can therefore pack more data into the same space. Blue-laser machines and discs using wavelengths in the range of 400–410 nanometers are the coming wave in optical storage.

The HDS5000’s level of audio resolution wasn't specified in the company's press release, and could vary tremendously depending on what type of compression scheme is employed. If "1500 hours" refers to storage potential for MP3-encoded files, that might make the discs useful as music servers for background applications. At the level of CD, SACD, and DVD-Audio, the technology would certainly interest audiophiles.

"Tapestry HDS5000 is a breakthrough in the marketplace and will satisfy the insatiable demand for low-cost, high-performance, high-capacity data storage," said InPhase Technologies CEO, Nelson Diaz. He added that the development "will help usher in an era of true all-in-one convergent devices that provide the performance and capacity of commercial products at consumer prices."

InPhase is developing a blue-laser recording disc drive, the Tapestry HDS-200R, projected to hit the market in 2006. The drive will offer 200 gigabytes of capacity with a transfer rate of 20 megabytes per second. A single disc inserted into the drive could hold "almost 100 million pages of text, 200,000 photos, over 1500 hours of audio, or 14 hours of high-definition video," according to the InPhase announcement.

UK: BRISTOL
Paul Messenger

Now in its 17th year, the annual Bristol Sound & Vision show, run by leading British retail chains Audio Excellence and Audio T, is one of the best-established events on the February calendar. Exhibitors like the slick organization, and visitors invariably arrive in considerable numbers to fill the rooms and clog the corridors, though the loss of some of the larger demo rooms this year was a cause for some regret.

Sound & Vision has become an index of the state of the British hi-fi scene, which in the last few years has shown pretty steady growth. This reflects a more robust economy of heavy consumer spending fueled by booming house prices, easy credit, and low interest rates. However, the last crest up slightly a few weeks before the show — the first such rise in years — and this was expected to somewhat damp consumer confidence.

That's exactly what happened at the show. Sales and attendance didn't match the records set in 2003 but were still on a par with 2002, and the particularly strong Friday numbers indicated that take-the-day-off enthusiasts were out in force. Spending patterns had shifted slightly compared to last year, toward less expensive items, with accessories doing particularly well; helped by its new top-of-the-line Signature cables, the Chord Company actually doubled its year-on sales.

Two rather different events caught some attention. First was the launch of The Tannoy Story, a fascinating book very different from the glossy collectable volume that celebrated the Quad brand last fall. The more understated Tannoy book is a rich and remarkably detailed history that focuses on the company's early years, beginning in the 1920s, when sound reproduction was a pioneer business with few established rules. Author Julian Alderton, and his father before him, were lifelong neighbors and friends of Tannoy founder Guy R. Fountain and his son, Michael, and Alderton has spent 20 years intermittently gathering relevant material. The result is a frank and detailed history of this famous brand, full of revealing anecdotes that pull no punches about the eccentricities of British management practices.

Second, B&W bravely — and, many reckoned, successfully — eschewed the usual product demonstrations in favor of something akin to their Forty Part Motet (2001) art installation described in the December 2003 Stereophile (Vol.26 No.12, p.22). That system allocated each of 40 voices its own channel in an a cappella performance of Thomas Tallis' 16th-century choral work Spem in Alium. The Bristol demo reproduced a longer, much more varied 10-channel work, DivideByTen, specifically commissioned by B&W and written and programmed by Bob Burgher, Paul Ellis, and David Kelly.

The five-month gap since the UK's fall shows ensured the debuts of a number of new products at Sound & Vision. A regular feature of past Bristol shows has been a press conference at which industry technogians (!) gather to brief us on the latest technologies. It wasn't held this year, simply because it was felt there weren't enough innovations to warrant it. Those who'd visited the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas in January reckoned that the main area of technical progress was in corderless interconnection systems, which seems to have little relevance in the UK.

One room apparently was demon-
strating cordless hi-fi, although its door was locked when I arrived. Irish hi-fi entrepreneur Aonghus O'hEocha, best known for his strikingly shaped, chrome-plated O'hEocha speakers, was demonstrating a very interesting proprietary cordless speaker system based on military communications protocols. The D1-F4 speaker combines a chrome-plated floorstander, sitting on a plinth that houses an RF cordless signal receiver, an active filter, an amplifier, and a powerful lead-acid battery. The speaker needs no permanent connection — just a trickle-charge of the battery once a week. According to the press release, the D1-F4 uses "wireless technology based on ISM 2.4GHz band with AGC and AFS with back channel control capability"; interoperability with 2.4GHz wireless LANs is claimed.

How good the D1-F4 sounded I can't say, but there are obvious potential advantages of avoiding mains connection and other connecting wires, as well as the possible compromises of RF conversion. One who did get inside the room told me the system showed total immunity from mobile phone interference. It's also perhaps relevant that O'hEocha opted for analog rather than digital amplification for reasons of sound quality, despite digital's more efficient use of power.

A full-on selling show that mixes hi-fi and A/V won't suit every purist, and there wasn't room for some of the smallest brands. But the presence of more than 100 booths and rooms ensured that there was plenty of interest to be seen and heard.

Meridian's G-series components originally appeared last year, but Bristol provided the first chance to hear them in action. The very effective demo used an HDMI protocol link to maximize the processing performance.

Other new electronics seemed mostly about finding and filling niches in existing ranges. Chord Electronics' Mezzo 140 power amplifier brings plenty of muscle to Chord's very attractive Choral range, while Creek has added several items to its miniature OBH amplification components.

Cyrus showed their versatile new DACX, plus the flexible and capacious Cyruslink music file server. Arcam's attention was primarily focused on their powerful DiVA AVR300 71-channel receiver, though not to the exclusion of two-channel products. Naim demonstrated its first DVD-Video player, the DVD5, designed with future-proofing very much in mind, while Marantz's new SA17S1 SACD player can mix down multichannel SACDs to two channels.

One of the bigger surprises was discovering a tube amplifier and a turntable from well-established German brand T+A elektroakustik, alongside its regular solid-state and digital equipment [see this month's cover — Ed.]. Rega exhibits at few shows, but they'd saved up plenty for this one. There were two new turntables: the P5 (£695) replaces the P25, and the P7 (£1300) fills the slot between the P5 and the top-of-the-line P9. The P7 is notable for the clever way it retains much of the P9's performance — including a version of the P9's dramatic platter of white aluminum oxide and a new RB700 tonearm derived from the RB1000 — while costing less because of its simplified power supply and cleverly made platter. Rega's R9 loudspeaker is their most expensive yet (£2498/pair). This very slim four-driver affair includes both 25mm and 19mm tweeters, a side-mounted, line-loaded woofer, and a minimal crossover network. Also, a side-mounted bass driver, thus keeping its front profile nice and slim, Focal JMlab's delicious-looking new Diva Utopia performed well in several rooms.

PMC's 2004 offering is the pretty little GB1, a very compact floorstanding transmission-line design that's effectively a cross between PMC's miniature DB1 stand-mount and their FB1 floorstander. Naim's new floorstander is also very compact — the Ariva is the company's first 2½-way design.

Ruark has been rediscovering its roots. The speaker manufacturer's Heritage line revises three of the company's historic favorites: the Sabre stand-mount, the Talisman compact floorstander, and the large Crusader three-way. Acoustic Energy is replacing the Aesprites with a new series, Aelite: tapered speakers with curved sides. And Spendor has instituted substantial engineering changes to a number of models.

For sheer style, few can match Mission's new Elegante models. Super-slim and all-around curvaceous, with a multidriver/passive radiator array in the floorstanding model, this line is appropriately named. Style-watchers should also take note of Waterfall speakers,
Industry Update

Acoustic Energy Aelite models.

from the south of France, whose combinations of transparent glass enclosures and Triangle drivers promise serious performance and striking appearance.

Metal is an increasingly popular material for speaker enclosures. Wilson Benesch is using metal in combination with carbon-fiber composites (CFCs) in their new The Curve, which promises close to the performance of their top-of-the-line A.C.T. at two-thirds the price. Max Townshend's latest speakers are lovely chrome-plated dynamic-ribbon hybrids, their most interesting feature being an elaborate subsonic floor-decoupling system that uses industrial hydraulic engine mounts.

Accessories were everywhere, though more for looking at than listening to. An exception was Quadraspire, which introduced Perspex (acrylic) shelves, with and without central cutout, as an alternative to wood veneer, and was ably demonstrating the sonic improvements via an impressive Hot Tubes JD1 tubed amp.

Not hi-fi proper but innovative enough to merit the final mention, KEF showed their very stylish and clever KIT (for KEF Instant Theater) package, whose 4.1-channel sound system includes an intriguing pair of dynamic-NXT hybrid speakers. Two small, forward-firing Uni-Q drivers handle the front left and right channels. They're attached to the leading edges of two small NXT-type panels that sit edge-on to listeners to reproduce the surround channels by bouncing their output off the room's side and rear walls.

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Stereophile, May 2004
WorldRadioHistory
Andrew Dillon, of Austin, Texas, was all a-dither about the March issue and Musical Fidelity. He scolded us via e-mail: “Really, I hate to complain, but the number of reviews given to Musical Fidelity products is beyond a joke. Both Sam and Mikey are now reviewing the same product in the same issue—have mercy on us.”

Not that Mr. Dillon heard the M1 turntable. He couldn’t have, at the time the March issue was produced. So far as I know, Mikey and I had the only two samples in the US at that time, and neither of us invited Mr. Dillon over to hear.

But if Mr. Dillon had heard the turntable, he might have known what the fuss was all about—one of the most original new turntables in years, and with a brand-new SME tonearm. Important news.

Andrew Byer, of Fort Lauderdale, Florida, was less testy, but he was moved to e-mail us, too: “How about one issue that doesn’t review or mention any of the following brands: Musical Fidelity, Triangle, Theta, [Jeff] Rowland [Design Group], B&W, Krell, JMLab, Adcom, MartinLogan, Music Hall, Thiel, or Sonus Faber?”

Mr. Byer suggested an issue titled “Equipment from Manufacturers You Never Heard Of.” There used to be an entire magazine devoted to that. I forgot its name. Hmmm. How about an issue entitled “Equipment from Manufacturers You’ll Never Hear from Again”? Seems to me I’ve seen that magazine, too.

I’ve certainly seen enough such companies over the past 20 years. I try to give them a chance to fail before they appear in my column, not after. It’s not great when customers are left in the lurch.

A certain manufacturer of low-cost tube gear was briefly the rage a few years ago. Readers wrote in, asking me to review their stuff—it almost seemed like an orchestrated campaign. The company abruptly ceased operations. I’d seen it coming—and besides, I thought the build quality was only so-so.

Meanwhile, at www.AudioAsylum.com, some of the “inmates” (that’s what they call themselves) are going nuts. Every Musical Fidelity review in Stereophile sets them off, ranting… and, well, raving.

Some of the inmates seem sane, however. Take “Postal Grunt” (I assume he’s a mailman or other postal worker), who had this to say: “[Musical Fidelity] markets on a worldwide scale and submitting new products to Stereophile for review sounds like good marketing to me. If you were the owner or CEO of Musical Fidelity, wouldn’t you do the same? When other manufacturers provide Stereophile or TAS with interesting products, chances are they’ll be reviewed. … It seems to me that the problem is with other manufacturers and not with [Musical Fidelity] or Stereophile.”

I couldn’t have said it better myself, Mr. Grunt.

“Photoguy” concurred. He put things in focus: “[Musical Fidelity] just knows how to play the game. They make it and offer it right away for review. Simple, basic marketing for free. Any of the major high-line companies could do the same. What bothers me is the lack of product reviews of gear by small startups. These are the companies that should be nurtured.”

It’s not my role—or this magazine’s role—to nurture startups. I like to wait until companies have been in business for a while. I especially like it when companies have been in business for 10 or 20 years—like QuickSilver Audio, VPI, Balanced Audio Technology, and Magnum Dynalab, to name just four great companies who have done a great job of building quality products and taking care of customers.

Startups make me nervous. And inexperienced manufacturers can be a big pain in the butt (not always, of course): “Sorry. We have only one review sample and we haven’t decided whether to send it to Stereophile or TAS.”

One newly established distributor actually said that to me, in person. I told him to give his amp to TAS. Too bad. I’m sure I would have liked it, but I thought the distributor was an idiot. And a flake.

“Oh, Sam, can we see your column before it goes to press?”

Sure you can. Our editorial department will send you an advance copy so you can check it for inaccuracies.

“No, can you send us the column before you send it to John Atkinson?”

And you’ll ask me to kill it if you don’t like it? No thanks.

Sometimes small manufacturers find a way to kill a review anyway. They kill the product instead.

“Hi, Sam. We’ve decided to discontinue the product. Please put your review on hold and we’ll send you a new one.”

And what to do about a deadline looming just days away?

My late friend Lars loved to latch on to unknown manufacturers. All the better if no one else had heard of them, including me. Lars became their discoverer.

As for the stuff I chose for review, Lars was disdainful. Most of “my” stuff was well-known and not expensive enough to take seriously. Lars was very serious. He used to chide me for turning every occasion into a “yoke.” I loved to play tricks on him, like changing his speaker cables while he was in the kitchen fetching some beers. I miss him, as I do the late Harvey Rosenberg. Now he’d latch on to some pretty strange stuff—and bring it over to my house, too.

On the whole, I’m more comfortable reviewing—and recommending—stuff from long-established if not necessarily well-known companies. Like Musical Fidelity—in business for more than 20 years.

I wasn’t going to review another Musical Fidelity product so soon. I was going to wait till next month—ha!—to give the “inmates” time for their new medications to kick in. Then, I planned to take up the suggestion of inmate “Raceryguy,” who wrote:

“I think Stereophile should run at least two MF reviews a month until you (Asylum members) get all this anger out of your system! Think of it as therapy. :)

I don’t know if I can manage two Musical Fidelity reviews a month. But maybe if Mikey helps me…

Actually, I had two non-Musical Fidelity integrated amplifiers set for this month. One arrived on time and the other was supposed to arrive any
Sam's Musical Fidelity Product of the Month: the X-150 integrated amplifier.

Sam's Space

minute. Well, it did arrive—three days before deadline. I didn’t have time to unpack it, let alone listen.

Meanwhile, Antony Michaelson, Musical Fidelity’s founder, to the rescue. He hopped across the pond with his latest integrated amp, the X-150.

Musical Fidelity X-150 integrated amplifier

The X-150 replaces the original X series, the ones that looked vaguely like spaceships. (The A3.2 series stays in the line.) The X-150 is part of a new series of Musical Fidelity products, each of which will be built into a compact chassis measuring 8.5" wide by 3.8" high by 14" deep. That makes each model half the "standard" equipment width of 17"—two units can fit side by side where only one did before. They can also be stacked, to fit into a very narrow space. There’s a matching CD player, the X-RayV3, but I’m saving that for the month after next, in order to liven things up on the ward.

The X-CanV3 headphone amplifier that I reviewed in January used the same chassis. I didn’t notice at the time, but the X-CanV3, too, is "built in Taiwan." Is this the future? Antony said that the units are shipped from Taiwan to the UK, where they’re checked out before being sent to the US and elsewhere. (The X-RayV3 CD player is being assembled in the UK, at least for now.)

We’re likely to see more and more products from China. Here’s a decoder: ROC refers to Republic of China, aka Taiwan. PRC refers to People’s Republic of China: hammer and sickle, Marx and Lenin, Mao, G.E., and Wal-Mart. If something says “Built in ROC,” that might mean made in PRC and assembled in ROC...or made in PRC and merely QC’d in ROC. As one wag said the other day, “They can’t say anything in Taiwan anymore because they have to pay people a living wage.”

The X-150 goes for $1295, which is keenly competitive compared to the UK price of £1000, or $1459, as of this writing. (Actually, the UK price amounts to $1242 exclusive of the Value Added Tax.) Power is rated a “comfy” (Antony’s word) 80Wpc into 8 ohms and “about” 160Wpc into 4 ohms. The output stage uses two pairs of Sanken bipolar transistors per channel. “The amp delivers loads of power, lots of peak current, low output impedance, and has excellent stability,” Antony declared, noting that the driver stage is derived from his Tri-Vista series. Missing, though, is the Tri-Vista series’ choke-regulated power supply. As Antony explained, chokes are expensive and large. There was no room in the price, no room in the box.

“But there are a lot of little details that we have learned from our experience with chokes—the importance of an absolutely clean power supply, for instance. This relates to the PCB layout and the separate stages of isolation from the main power supply. We pay much more attention to that than we used to.

“The power supply of the X-150 has no effect on the signal path and is isolated from the driver circuit. The power supply has been carefully thought out and more importantly, laid out,” Antony said.

"Is layout so important?" I asked.

“Very much—right down to seemingly small details, such as the precise orientation of resistors, capacitors, and transistors,” said Antony. “The die area is very important,” he continued.

“The die area?”

“The die area refers to the actual semiconductor material within the output transistor as a whole. There are 10 pairs of dies per channel on the X-150.”

“I’m confused.”

“Let’s talk about pairs of transistors. If you’re asking for 75 or 80Wpc from two pairs of output transistors per channel, as is the case with the X-150, that’s like having 200W from four or five pairs of transistors. The number of dies, and the die area, have more effect as you go down in power. The damping factor is really excellent and the output impedance is very low. All these things add together to give that feeling of substance and presence.

“If you wanted to equivalently overspec a 200Wpc amplifier, four pairs of output transistors wouldn’t be enough. But two pairs of output transistors for an amplifier the size of the X-150 amounts to a huge output stage.

“The X-150 uses a proper dual-gang analog volume control. None of this inferior digital volume-control crap, which leads to serious noise-ratio problems at low volume levels.”

Antony’s right. Some inexpensive integrated amplifiers use an integrated chip to control volume and gain. This is a good way to make an amplifier or preamp sound unfocused and uninvolving. Such could not be said of the X-150.

The X-150 is a minimalist design with a moving-magnet-only phono stage as standard. In addition, there are three line-level inputs and tape and preamp outs. Not many inputs—but then there’s not a lot of room on the half-sized rear panel. The Preamp Out lets you add a forthcoming stereo power amp in the new series, in the event you want more power. If you really crave power, there will be a pair of monoblocks, too—rated at 200W into 8 ohms. The preamp out is also useful if you want to run powered subwoofers. There is a single pair of not-so-expensive speaker output terminals.

Drat! Curses on the European Community! They make manufacturers install inserts in their speaker jacks for “safety” reasons. (I can’t figure out what reasons those might be.) It’s difficult to pop out these plastic divots. If your fingernails don’t do the trick, you might have to make yourself a tool. Take a large paper clip, straighten it out, and then, using a pair of small pliers, form a hook about ¼" long on one end. Bend it at a right angle. Then wiggle this tool through the holes intended for speaker wire. Pop the plastic inserts. Bloody nuisance.

Antony delivered the amplifier himself—something more manufacturers should do. That way, they can explain their products at some length and help install them—far better than having UPS drop them off.

We listened in the living room, where I’d set up the new, very revealing Triangle Solis speakers. We used MF’s matching X-RayV3 CD player and their Tri-Vista 21 DAC. Later, I hooked up my Rega P25 turntable with Goldring G1042 moving-magnet cartridge. British ‘table, British cartridge, British electronics, Frog speakers. Antony approved.

It became apparent—even before Antony left—that this was a new breed of entry-level integrated for Musical Fidelity. I heard a distinct difference between the X-150 and, say, the A3.2CR
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Whereas the aforementioned separates gave me very quiet, very clean, very clear sound, I thought there was something slightly lean about the presentation—and I mentioned it when I reviewed them. The X-150 has all the clarity and exhibited no noise at all—except, of course, some noise in the phono stage. The background was stunningly silent. Moreover, the sound had a certain weight, more body than I remember with the A3.2CR combo. The leanness was gone, but not at the expense of resolution or speed.

The sound, with the Triangle Solis, was highly transparent, with great speed, definition, and detail. Bass was gratifyingly clean and quick. (The Solis is a stand-mounted speaker.)

Overall, I was more involved with the music than I am with most amplifiers. There was more for me to hear—a greater sense of immediacy than I would have expected from an integrated amp costing less than $2000. The only limitations are the modestly rated power and the total of just three line-level inputs. (Power was not a problem with the easy-to-drive Triangle speakers, which made a splendid match for the X-150.)

As for the phono stage, it's more than adequate if you have a modest turntable with a moving-magnet cartridge. A Rega 'table like the one we have in our living room would be a good choice, what with their excellent tonearms. For a really serious analog rig, you'd want a high-quality outboard phono stage such as Musical Fidelity's X-LPSV3, built into the same chassis as the X-150.

What the heck—at 14.3 lbs, the X-150 is fairly light, so I took both it and the X-RayV3 up to my main listening room to play on my reference Quad ESL-988 electrostatic loudspeakers.

Talk about speed and transparency—speakers don't get any clearer, cleaner, and quicker than Quads. The combination proved so excellent that I have to ask: Why spend more?

Ditto with the Opera Callas speakers, which were also doing time in my listening room. Their sweet and, yes, operatic, character came through. I especially liked the low end with the Callases—a special richness with piano recordings. This speaker is worth seeking out for audition, especially if you find that far too many speakers, voiced for audiophiles rather than music lovers, sound too clinical.

You could stop with the X-150 at $1295, knowing that you'd have to pay much more—maybe twice as much—to get significantly better sound. I'm not saying this is the best integrated amplifier out there for under $2000. I don't know. I do know that the X-150 is a contender. "Postal Grunt," over on the Asylum, said it best: "If anyone is so offended by the Musical Fidelity reviews in Stereofile, don't pluck your eyeballs out, just send me your MF gear and relieve yourself of the burden of ownership."

**Unison Research Unico Piccolo integrated amplifier**

Introduced two years ago, the original Unison Research Unico integrated amplifier struck the right chord. A hybrid amplifier with a tube driver stage and MOSFET solid-state output stage, the Unico sold for a song—$1295, or $1395 with phono stage. The dollar was strong, which was before America's first MBA president, George Walker Bush (or, as my wife, Marina, likes to say, George W. Boosh) got through with it. Deficits don't matter. Nor, apparently, does the value of our currency.

Boosh, shmoosh—now the dollar is down and the price of the original, or standard, Unico is up—to $1895 with phono stage, $1695 without. Not that many people in North America order the amp without phono. Strange. This is a product that appeals to those who still spin vinyl. And a nice phono stage it is—considering it's a mere card built into an integrated amp. The phono stage accommodates both moving-magnet and moving-coil cartridges, even those of very low output. Hey, I suggested you buy one while the dollar was strong. Even at the new prices, the Unico is a bargain.

A bigger bargain still was to be the small Unico—the Unico Piccolo. The idea was to drop the price, always nice. If the dollar were strong, the Unico P, as it's called, would likely sell for $1000. As it is, with George W. Boosh, the Unico P goes for $1295. But, to sweeten the deal, the phono stage is included as standard, at least in North America, making for a spread of $600 between the two versions, equipped with phono. (The unit comes factory-set for MM cartridges. Changing to MC involves throwing an internal switch.

Easy.) The phono stage is similar to, but not identical with, the one on the standard Unico.

The original radio-frequency remote has been replaced, in both the Unico and the Piccolo, by a more standard infrared remote. The RF remote was cool—it sent its volume-control signal through walls, much to the amazement of our dinner guests.

It's hard to tell the Unico P from the standard Unico—same size, same-style faceplate, and, at 26.5 lbs, just 5 lbs lighter. Like the Unico, the P has three line-level inputs and a tape loop. There is no preamp-out, which could be a limitation if you're running a powered subwoofer or two. However, there are two sets of very-high-quality speaker terminals for those into biwiring.

Differences, differences.

Protection circuitry is built in; if you want to defeat it, you're defeated. As in the standard Unico, there are two pairs of MOSFET output transistors per channel, but the juice is goosed to only 50W, rather than 80W as with the standard Unico. (Unico specifies "more than" 50W, but not into how many ohms.)

MOSFET output transistors sound more like tubes than bipolar transistors, Giovanni Sacchetti told me last summer. (He's the founder of Unison Research.) I have to concur. But bipolar devices seem to deliver tighter, more extended bass.

Il Professor Leopoldo Rossetto, Sacchetti's design partner, commented on the design: "The circuit topology of the Unico P can be split into two main stages: a first [tube] triode stage and a second solid-state stage employing bipolar transistors and power MOSFETs. Unlike the Unico, the Unico P employs a single triode tube for both channels." (It's a 12AU7, also known as the ECC82.)

If Professor sent me a white paper, but the translation wasn't so clear. Nor is my knowledge of engineering, for that matter. If I were one of his students, I'd likely flunk. The white paper did hint that there were sonic differences between the standard Unico and the Unico P.
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Fortunately, I still had the standard Unico. I set the two, one atop the other (allow for ventilation), warmed them both up, and listened. I used the Sony SC-D-XA777ES SACD player and Triangle Solis loudspeakers. The results were consistent, from disc to disc.

I preferred the standard Unico—more resolution, more extended frequency response, somewhat tighter bass. By contrast, the Unico P seemed darker, less resolving (and involving), and marginally less powerful.

Not that I didn’t like the Piccolo. Far from it. And with overbright, clinical-sounding loudspeakers made for audiophiles rather than music lovers, the P might be just the ticket in that a certain amount of treble cut seems built in. Ironically, the Unico P, with just one tube in the driver stage, sounded more “tubelike” than the standard Unico.

This is for you, not me, to decide. Have some fun at your Unison Research dealer. Compare the two, side by side. If you can, bring your own speakers.

The Unico P and the Musical Fidelity X-150 are exactly the same price, $1295. Remember, the Unico P’s phono stage can accommodate both MC and MM cartridges, while the X-150’s phono stage is MM only. The Unico P, like the standard Unico, uses MOSFET output devices; the X-150 uses bipolar.

The Unico P offers a kinder, gentler sound than the X-150. It’s touched by what Antony Michaelson himself called “the ineffable magic of tubes.” Or tube, in this case. I felt that the X-150 was superior in terms of resolution and this involvement. And it offered me tighter, more articulated bass.

The X-150 is the standard Unico, equipped with phono, was a closer contest in terms of resolution and subjective power. With its tubed line stage, the standard Unico does impart more warmth and body to the sound. But there is a $600 price spread—due, in part, perhaps, to “built in Taiwan” is “made in Italy.” There’s also the matter of styling. You may or may not want half-width components. I do love the standard Unico. As for the Unico P, that could be an excellent choice in less-resolving systems or in rooms that tend to brightness.

I’ll give Antony the last word (the inmates will love this): “The thing about the X-150 is that you can change speakers and it’s still there. You can still hear what it does.” Not that it does anything intrinsically.

The two Unico amps seem to be that way, too. They have their character, their sonic signature, their soul.

Vincent SV-121 integrated amplifier
Vincent is not Italian. He’s German.

Actually, he’s Chinese.

It’s a small world we live in, and eventually—maybe soon—most of the high-end audio products we buy, especially electronics, will be made in China. As in Red China. Ha ha. Hey, if it doesn’t give Wal-Mart pause... That faceplate on your brand-new, high-end “American” amplifier? In the case of one make, rumor has it that it came from China—and looks a heck of a lot better than the rather crude faceplates that same manufacturer once made here.

Vincent electronic gear is made for Vincent-Sintron, in Iffezheim, Germany, by Shengya, in China. You can check out some of Shengya’s own items at www.cattylink.com and other websites. They don’t sell Vincent, though. The models are proprietary.

I quote from one product description at cattylink.com: “Class A amplifying line, make up the shortcomings of the low speed and insufficient low-frequency old gallbladder machine; strong driving power, vivid sound, good timbre; strong low-frequency...”

You can make up such stuff.

The line-level, remote-controlled SV-121 integrated amp retails for $995. I received the technische Daten—oops, technical data—aus Deutschland. Power is rated at 50Wpc into 8 ohms or 80Wpc into 4 ohms from two pairs of Sanken bipolar output transistors per side, operating in class-A/B. There are five line-level inputs, one of them balanced. The amplifier itself is said to be “really balanced.”

There is a single pair of speaker output terminals per side. There are no preamp-out jacks and no tape loop. If you want to record to a cassette deck, you’ll have to go directly from your source. No big gain for most of us.

The finish—especially the faceplate—is quite nice. The Vincent SV-121 doesn’t look cheap. If it were made in Germany, it would probably sell for twice the price.

Ah, sound.

Quite nice, actually. The amplifier sounded more powerful than 50Wpc—more like 100Wpc. The bass had strong impact, the midrange was very smooth, the treble sweetly extended. What’s more, the sound did seem to be that way, too. They have their character, their sonic signature, their soul.

As with the Music Hall Mambo integrated I reviewed in March, also made in China, I did not hear the end result in resolution and detail. The Vincent was always pleasing—and it drove the Opera Quinta and Callas speakers very well in my listening room. I thought the sound lacked a certain level of immediacy, involvement, and high-frequency sparkle. I see that a Burr-Brown IC OPA2604 is used as a “preamp”—an integrated circuit is used for line-stage gain. That’s cost-effective, no doubt.

The Vincent SV-121 is musically pleasing. It sounds good, looks good, and is priced right.

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Do you want to see how they build Pro-ject turntables? It was Sumiko’s John Hunter, phoning me out of the blue. “Sure!” I’ve reviewed a few Pro-ject designs over the years, along with the Music Hall ‘tables, which are built in the same factory, and I’ve long wondered how one small company in the Czech Republic can manufacture such a wide array of products while making almost every part in-house. When Hunter added that the visit to Pro-ject would be bracketed by stops at Vicenza, Italy and Vienna, Austria to visit (respectively) Sonus Faber and Vienna Acoustics, I was ready to pack. Besides, between the lunacy of January’s Consumer Electronics Show and the assembly line of products arriving at and departing from my listening room, I needed a break. So I took a lunchday visit to the picturesque Michelangelo hotel, nestled in the hills surrounding Vicenza.

Unpacking my valise, I was thrilled to find a note from the Transportation Security Administration telling me that, in addition to being X-rayed—which I’m all for—my bag had been rifled through at Liberty International in a hunt for “prohibited items.”

Like what? Weapons of mass destruction an X-ray machine might miss? Calico cats? Gay marriage licenses? If they have the “courtesy” to tell you they’ve pawed through your stuff, don’t you think they should at least be considerate enough to tell you what “prohibited items” they’re looking for? Then again, maybe dropping the Fourth Amendment from the Constitution is the cost of securing our freedom.

John Hunter and I were met at the hotel that evening and taken out to dinner by Sonus’s Cesare Bevilacqua—a warm, dashing character who takes care of business at the company and is founder-designer Franco Serblin’s son-in-law. The simplest of meals is memorable in Italy. I can still taste the delicate, citrusy marinated prawns—as well as the rest of the meal, but I’ll spare you.

The next day we visited the new Sonus Faber factory, a gracious edifice of glass and metal end-capped by large, curving structures that resemble cross-sections of airplane wings. The architecture delivers the visual drama a Sonus Faber devotee would expect from the building in which his speakers are made.

The building’s interior is even more impressive—bright afternoon sunlight flooded a display of landmark Sonus products downstairs, and there was diffuse, natural light sufficiently bright for manufacturing upstairs. As you might expect, the building’s woodwork was exquisite, including dramatic floors and staircases of polished, narrow-stripe hardwood.

Serblin took me into his listening room to hear the new Stradivari loudspeaker ($40,000/pair), his final statement in the Homage series. I spent about an hour and a half listening while he and Hunter hatched out some new product plans I thought it inappropriate for me to overhear. Driven by a compact, 70Wpc David Berning ZH-270 tube amplifier (no output transformers, but not OTL), the Stradivari sounded delicate and detailed yet rich and tactile. I’m rarely drawn into lengthy stretches of serious listening in such circumstances, but this was one of those rare times when the music, and especially the sound, overcame the considerable distractions. I found myself inhabiting the mental “sweet spot” where time stands still and even the most difficult, unfamiliar music becomes immediately accessible.

After an unforgettable evening wandering around Venice—punctuated by dinner at Harry’s Bar (followed by a good night’s sleep)—it was off to Vienna, where we were met at the airport by Pro-ject president Heinz Lichtenegger—the high-strung dynamo of a Vienna-based audio distributor with a passion for analog and a name that’s the opposite of Arnold’s.

At the end of the 1980s, with analog on the wane, Lichtenegger began looking around for an inexpensive, well-made, good-sounding turntable that he could offer customers to keep them playing LPs in the age of CDs. By then, both Dual and Thorens were out of the low end of the market, except for really cheap ‘tables made of plastic.
At the suggestion of some friends he was visiting in the newly formed Czech Republic, Lichtenegger paid a visit to a factory that specialized in building turntables—probably for most of the Iron Curtain countries, who were late to the digital table. Being first isn’t always best.

Most of what Lichtenegger found in the old-fashioned facility were had copies of semi-automatic designs that had been popular in the West a decade earlier. However (the story goes), in a dark corner of the factory he found a simple little turntable—belt-driven, with a heavy platter — that looked as if it could. When he expressed interest in the ugly ducking, the factory managers, fresh from half a century of oppression, were incredulous.

Lichtenegger took the table home and, pleasantly surprised by its sound, began looking for ways to improve it. He proposed sapphire cones and hardened steel points for the arm bearing, a one-piece tonearm-headshell design in place of an attached one made of plastic, bronze bearing bushings and a Teflon thrust pad instead of a cheap ball, a precision-machined flat belt instead of a "rubber band," an MDF plinth, a felt mat, a more accurately machined and balanced platter, and copper arm tube wiring.

Thus was born the Pro-Ject 1. Built in a separate part of the factory by specially trained workers, the new, low-cost 'table's quality of fit’n’finish and surprisingly high sonic performance caught the eyes and ears of Europe’s hi-fi press. Good reviews led to strong sales throughout Europe, including in the UK, which, then as now, wasn’t hurting for competitively priced turntables.

Encouraged by that reception, the industrious Austrian expanded the Pro-Ject line of tables while improving and upgrading the various components used in their manufacture. Among the innovations were carbon fiber tonearms and a unique aluminum-alloy platter topped with a layer of baked-on vinyl made from recycled LPs. Pro-Ject also manufactures phono preamps and electronic speed controls, which are available as outboard products or built into certain turntable models. Tonearms of aluminum (9") and carbon fiber (9", 12") are available separately, as are glass platters.

**Pro-Ject makes an impressive array of products in one factory in rural Czech Republic.**

Pro-Ject's turntable line is varied and extensive. There's the Debut, the 1 Xpression, the 12, the 1.2 Comfort, the 2.9 Wood, the 2.9 Classic, the 6.9, the Perspective (the one I really like), and the RM 4, RM 6 SB, and RM 9. (The RM series is called “RPM” overseas. In deference to Immedia’s RPM line, Sumiko uses “RM” in the US.) Add some special models tailored for specific markets, and the tables built to Music Hall’s specs for sale exclusively in the US, and Pro-Ject makes an impressive array of products in one factory in rural Litovel. One could argue that the Pro-Ject line—flat belt and crowned aluminum pulley here, O-ring acrylic grooved platter there, MDF here, acrylic there — lacks consistency. One did.

**But first, some wine...**

We drove from the Vienna airport north through the Austrian wine country, on our way to a hotel where we spent the night before driving the last three hours to Litovel. Lichtenegger had made arrangements for us to enjoy a wine-tasting at the Taubenschuss winery in Pöysdorf, where we drank more than we tasted, and ate more local cheeses and hams than we should have—but the difference between what we were served at Taubenschuss and what's available at the local deli is roughly equivalent to the difference between a burger at Mickey D's and one at New York's 21 Club. We ate while the eating was good, and it was good. When it comes to vino, I'm no Bob Reina, but I found the white wines suitably complex and finely finished. When at last I was finished, I was pleasantly plastered and ready for nappy-nap.

Next morning we set off for isolated Litovel, which was as drab as you might picture it under a winter sky, though I was told it's now far more colorful and cheery than it was a decade ago. The original factory, a short distance down the road from the new, was described to me as a forbidding, Soviet-style 1920s affair, painted dull municipal green inside, complete with enormous portraits of Lenin and, I think, Stalin — left hanging, I guess, as a reminder of what used to be.

The new factory is a modern, seven-story building dedicated to building turntables — an incredible 50,000 last year — using a mix of modern CNC machine tools from Japan and Korea, and vintage but still serviceable gear dating back to the Soviet era. The tour began in a contemporarily furnished meeting room where we met the plant's manager, Jiri Kroutl, and Jiri Mencl, a burly factory veteran from the communist days, who implements the designs and oversees the manufacturing process. Walking past stacks of boxed turntables, we entered a well-lit factory space...
containing, in various states of assembly, more turntables than I’ve ever seen in one place. Everything at Pro-Ject is hand-assembled, and virtually every part of a Pro-Ject ‘table that you can see — tonearms, platters, plinths, dustcovers, arm rests, tonearm cables, drive motors — is made in-house. The exception is the arm ball bearing, which comes from Switzerland.

What impressed me most about the operation was that even the least expensive model, the Debut Mk.2 (at $299), got a full regimen of inspection and performance testing. Allowing unit-to-unit variability is one area where money can be saved when manufacturing budget gear. Conversely, when you buy premium-priced stuff, one thing you’re paying for is consistency. But any Pro-Ject you buy, from the least to the most expensive, receives the same degree of attention, and isn’t boxed until it has met its published specifications. That’s an admirable achievement, given the prices and the sheer volume of ‘tables produced at Litovel.

The Debut, available in a variety of “now” colors, piqued my curiosity. This plug-and-play model comes complete with Ortofon OM 5E moving-magnet cartridge, and uses a stamped steel platter so it can’t be used with a moving-coil cartridge. I’m curious to hear it— first, right out of the box, and then with, say, a Shure V-15VxMR (which costs as much as the ‘table and supplied cartridge combined). Despite its price, the Debut’s drive system includes an AC synchronous motor of which Pro-Ject is very proud, a crowned dual-pulley of aluminum, and a flat, precision-ground drive belt. The Debut is also available with a built-in phono preamp and pushbutton electronic speed control.

During the tour, I was given a defense of the integral pressed headshell, of which I’d been somewhat skeptical in reviews. It just seems too thin to not resonate at a nasty frequency when excited, but I was told that Pro-Ject feels that the rigidity of the integral headshell trumps its lightness in terms of energy transfer. For now, the carbon-fiber arm-tubes require separate headshells, but I was told that soon there would be a one-piece carbon-fiber arm-tube with integral headshell — probably something similar to what Wilson-Bensch does. The folks at Pro-Ject also made special mention of the AC synchronous motor they build. They think it’s better than any motor found in some other turntables priced well above Pro-Ject’s comparable models.

I watched one poor woman who sat at a jig, bending and shaping those bent, looped rods that hold the monofilament for the antiskate weight on Pro-Ject turntables one at a time. Not that she considered herself poor — after all, she’s got a genuine manufacturing job of the sort we used to have here in the US. I watched another woman inserting pivot pin after pivot pin into the Debut’s armrest assembly. Another inserted wiring harness after wiring harness through hollow arm-tubes.

When you look at a finished turntable, it’s difficult to appreciate the amount of labor that goes into its assembly. Watching the pieces being sub-assembled and then, finally, assembled into a final product drove home both how much work there is in putting a ‘table together, and just how many parts a single turntable contains. How any of these turntables can be manufactured, boxed, shipped, exported, distributed, and then sold at retail for as little as they sell for — especially the Debut — is difficult to fathom.

At one point during the visit, I was shown a new limited-edition, gold-plated Pro-Ject Phono Box preamplifier. “It’s to celebrate the sale of our 100,000th Phono Box,” Lichtenegger announced proudly. There’s no arguing with that kind of success.

I came away from my afternoon at the Pro-Ject factory mightily impressed by what I’d seen. Everyone I met there, and everyone I watched at work, was clearly dedicated to producing quality products. And the decision-makers were just as clearly dedicated to making continual upgrades to every facet of manufacturing and production.

Not that there aren’t a few unusual quirks at Pro-Ject. Despite all of the company’s manufacturing expertise, getting them to put the decimal point on the counterweight scale seems all but impossible. Now, and as far back as I can remember, if you buy a Pro-Ject ‘table, its scale will read “10,” “15,” and “20” when it should read “1.0,” “1.5,” “2.0,” etc. When I brought that up at Litovel, people there got a faraway look in their eyes, as if I was asking the impossible from a factory that seems to do just that every day. Oh, well.

Back to Vienna
The long ride back to Vienna consumed the rest of the day. We arrived at night at a glittering, modern city reminiscent of Boston but that seemed to peel back the time the closer we got to its core. By the time we reached the Ringstrasse district, we were in Mozart’s Vienna. We pulled into the Palais Schwarzenberg hotel, once home to Prince Charles Schwarzenberg, who whopped Napoleon. I guess he deserved to live in style. For two evenings, I did too.

Next day we visited Vienna Acoustics, where I met designer Peter Gansterer and his significant other, company president Renate Köbert, and Gansterer’s sister, Maria. We sat around a table in their office laughing for an hour (something about blood spurting from my wrist to a coat—mind’s bite — don’t ask), had lunch (Wiener Schnitzel), and then I left to visit Christian Bierbaumer’s Blue Danube Records in Tullne, about 45 minutes outside of Vienna. I’ve yet to hear a Vienna Acoustics loudspeaker, but they certainly look serious. Having met their designer, I get the
Invisibly the room fills. You close your eyes.
Like a wall, a full orchestra is formed before you.
It transports you — to the Carnegie Hall, to La Scala,
into another time, to another world. Experience the power of music.
feeling — just a feeling — that they'll sound at least as good as they look.1

Blue Danube was something of a disappointment. Lots of records, and many fine ones, especially classical — but not what I'd call a premium collection overall. The rock selection was decent, but there was nothing of note in the jazz section. Nor was it the classical watering hole that the UK's Gramex was in its heyday. Still, I came away with a few good LPs, including an early-'70s UK EMI boxed set of Klemperer's cycle of Beethoven's symphonies. I also got a chance to inspect Blue Danube's extremely well-built vacuum record-cleaning machine. It's come a long way from the one I wrote about and pictured, after having spied it at the Frankfurt Hi-End Audio Show a few years ago. Someone should import this quiet, versatile, ultra-compact unit. Then another heavy meal, a good night's sleep, and back to America.

Here's what I learned from my trip: The Sonus Faber Stradivari Homage is among the most seductive-sounding loudspeakers I've ever heard. The Project factory turns out products of even higher quality than I'd originally suspected, and we can expect even better turntables from them in the future. The folks behind Vienna Acoustics are awfully nice; I'd like to review some of their speakers. I watched an importer at work, consulting with companies whose products he sells, trying to make sure they understand his customers' needs. I've read the bellyaching online about "middleman" importers who simply add a link of price increases to the distribution chain — but the bellyachers are the same folks who buy gray-market goods and then, when something goes wrong, contact the American importer for service.

It was clear from watching John Hunter and Heinz Lichtenegger at work — and seeing the amount of inventory Lichtenegger buys and stocks in his warehouse, and knowing what Sumiko's inventory is like — that overseas manufacturers take into account distributor feedback when they develop new products, and that importer-distributors play an important role in the production-distribution feedback loop critical to the industry's continued health and growth worldwide. Complaining about the added cost of this link is like complaining about the considerable amount you pay for the fortified boxes in which your favorite components are shipped. It would be nice if you didn't have to pay for the box, but how else can the product be safely shipped from the factory to your home?

All the Nonsense that's Fit to Print
My ongoing war with the Circuits section of the New York Times continues. They keep publishing "advice" on how to transfer LPs to CDs while neglecting to tell readers to clean the records first. I continue to send them e-mails about it. Recently, when they published a stupid story on the subject, I sent the Circuits editor the following (condensed to make room). I hope you enjoy it.

The Sonus Faber Stradivari Homage is among the most seductive-sounding loudspeakers I've ever heard.

"Dear Circuits Editor:
"Flash!!! Want to see more clearly through your eyeglasses? A new computer program and an optical sensor that goes over your glasses can actually filter out the dirt and grime that coats the lenses over time! It costs about 300 dollars and requires you to locate the dirt on a digital rendering of the lens appearing on your computer screen and then go over each fleck with your mouse to erase them. It takes about a half hour to 'clean' both lenses digitally. And then, the dirt will seem to be gone! It's a digital miracle!
"You may ask, 'Why not clean the glasses with a lint-free cloth and some lens cleaner? Takes a few seconds, costs a few cents.' But obviously you wouldn't ask that question, since no one at Circuits writing about transferring LPs to CDs ever mentions cleaning the record before doing the transfer!!!!!!
"Just two weeks ago, I sent this to your Q&A guy:
"'Dear Mr. Biersdorfer:
"'I believe we've had this discussion before, but here it is again. The best way to eliminate "hissing and popping" from vinyl when transferring to CD is to clean the record first instead of running it through some music-destroying filter. Filters and crackle-and-pop programs should be used only as a last resort. The best advice to give someone about transferring vinyl is to start with clean records, and be sure your turntable is properly set up and has a good and clean stylus. Without that, it's a worthless endeavor.

' I realize this procedure is in the dreaded analog domain, but it is worth mentioning anyway. I can send you hours' or days' worth of LP-to-CD transfers that were done without any filters or crackle-removing computer programs, and you will hear nary a pop or a click or a hiss or anything other than "perfect sound forever" because the records were played back properly. ...I would be happy to transfer any LP of your choice for you using a clean record with no filters or computer programs to demonstrate this to you.

"Happy holidays,
"Michael Fremer
"senior contributing editor, Stereophile
"'PS: If you'd like some info on cleaning records and playing them back properly, I'd be happy to supply it for the benefit of your readers.'"

"Did I get a response? No! ... I have beat you guys over the head with this for the past few years every time there's a story like this, or a question answered about transferring vinyl to CD, but for some reason you're not interested in giving your readers the correct information, which is: Before you begin transferring your records, you should (all together, digital geeks!) clean them.

"Then, unless they're tossed, you won't need to dick around with music-destroying filtering programs. Clean records won't have 'crackles and hisses,' and writer Roy Furchgott's contention that 'crackles and noise' are what gives analog its 'warmth' is stupid.

"No one who prefers listening to vinyl...likes listening to pops and clicks and noise any more than people who prefer eating fresh food to frozen think rot and mold are what gives fresh food its good taste, but guess what? If you... clean the records before playing you usually won't hear pops, crackles, and hisses.'

"I know, I'm just an angry adolescent pest weirdo writer. But when you're nice and get ignored and you keep offering good, useful information and you continually are ignored, and you keep reading the same wrong bullshit in the New York Times, and you actually care that the readers get good, useful information, which is something you guys clearly do not, guess what? You get angry and you begin writing in caps..."

Michael Fremer
senior contributing editor, Stereophile
writer, "Analog Corner" column
“As I was saying before I was interrupt-ed...” —Jack Paar, 1918–2004

Lots of amplifiers come through these doors, and most of them have one thing in common: They’re heavier than the boxes meant to contain them. A lot heavier. In fact, at least half the cartons I see in this line of work couldn’t last more than two or three trips before giving way to their weighty contents — rather like the seats of some audiophiles’ dungarees.

By contrast, a DNM 3C preamplifier weighs nine times less than the simple yet nicely made wooden crate that contains it—and which, as I observed in last month’s column, is meant to be returned to the new owner’s DNM dealer, from whence it will return to its factory in Switzerland, to be used all over again. (But, as an American, I advise DNM to offer a deposit refund, lest we start to see their amplifier crates littering US road-sides along with all those Mountain Dew bottles and empty Skoal tins.)

As you also know from last month’s “Listening,” literally everything in the 3C that isn’t meant to conduct electricity is made of plastic. For that reason, and because the 3C is not one whit larger than a domestic stereo preamplifier needs to be, most adults could easily lift this product and its crate in one hand. Which I did now and then, to show off. A complete DNM system—everything between the source at one end and the loudspeakers at the other—can be contained in two of those small wooden crates.

Actually, there’s a bit more to it than that, as I recently discovered when DNM’s American distributor1 sent me a system to try: A third, smaller carton contained a neat-looking Wonpro outlet strip (modified and sold by Eichmann as an “eXpress Power Strip” and imported by Audiophile Systems Ltd.). DNM encourages users to plug their entire system into one AC strip, to keep the electrical grounds for all the components at the same potential. (The difference in series resistance between a home’s ground and neutral runs creates the possibility of a slight, and slightly different, voltage at the ground contact of each AC outlet.) I shouldn’t have been surprised that DNM’s Denis Morecroft, a pioneer in the application of star grounding to domestic audio, would advise such a thing. Nor should I have been shocked to see that the Wonpro contained solid-core wire and smallish metal contacts — and was otherwise plastic, through and through.

I installed the Wonpro strip in my listening room, then opened up wood-crate No.1. Nestled inside the styrene foam partitions were the 3C preamp and its separate power supply (a $3495 package), along with all the necessary DNM interconnects and a solid-core AC cable. Like Naim Audio, that other company that stresses proper connection impedances and grounding schemes, DNM uses five-pin DIN sockets for all signal inputs and outputs. Unlike Naim, DNM keeps output signals and DC voltages separate from one another, rather than routing them alongside one another in a single umbilical. Also unlike Naim, DNM’s DINs have plastic locking collars rather than the standard metal ones.

Two solid-core interconnect cables supplied with my review sample were terminated with a male DIN at one end and a pair of RCA plugs at the other, for line-level source components. A DIN-to-RCA socket adapter, also fashioned from DNM solid-core cable, allowed me to connect my Naim Aro tonearm’s signal cable directly to the 3C’s moving-coil phono input. Of course, a real DNM owner would most likely reterminate his or her tonearm cable with a DIN plug, thus avoiding the need for such an adapter.

There are three power-supply sockets on the back of the DNM 3C, each addressing a different portion of the preamp’s gain, buffering, and equalization circuitry. (The 20-pin sockets divide down even further between different DC applications, as they do between the left and right channels.) The entry-level Primus supply—a fairly straightforward thing comprising a toroidal transformer, four diodes, two slit-foil smoothing caps, and two voltage regulators — has only a single DC output cable, and its three 20-pin plugs are connected in series. With DNM’s more sophisticated power supplies, available as extra-cost options, each socket gets its own individual cable.

and supply circuitry. My loaner was equipped with the Primus, and although previous experiences with other brands (i.e., Naim) would lead me to expect audibly better performance with higher-cost power-supply options, I can’t say for sure till I’ve tried.

**DNM PA35 power amplifier**

With the DNM 3C set up on its own Mana Reference Stand and the Primus power supply sitting on the hardwood floor underneath, I turned my attention to crate No.2. That one contained the DNM PA35 23Wpc power amplifier ($4695), plus its own outboard power supply and solid-core AC cable.

The PA35 is twice as heavy as the 3C preamp, yet still exponentially lighter than most other power amps. Like the 3C, the PA35 is built into a smoked-Plexiglas case about the size of a table radio. Heatsinks protrude some distance from the front — as much to minimize the deleterious effects of eddy currents as to maximize cooling efficiency — and the rear panel is taken up with input and output sockets. The former are DINs, the latter a series of gold-plated contacts meant to take 2mm pins only, with built-in provisions for triwiring. (The DNM website suggests that owners of single-wired systems can improve their amp’s output by desoldering the contacts for bi- and triwiring. I didn’t try that with my single-wired Quad or Lowthers, mostly because I don’t like screwing around with a soldering iron inside things that don’t belong to me.)

Only a portion of the amplifier’s power supply is housed externally: The diodes, regulators, and a pair of T-Network reservoir caps are fitted to a separate board inside the amp itself, while the chunky toroidal transformer lives outside, connected to the amp with a three-pin XLR connector. When I pried open the external box to see what I could see, the most noticeable thing was a big sticker on the tranim with the word “Passed.” Now, unless there’s a roughly equal chance of opening one of these things and seeing the word “failed,” the English major in me must criticize DNM for redundancy. Denis, meet Tim. Tim, meet Denis. [**Baffled readers should read ADS Ear 890 review in April, p.173 — Ed.**]

Setup was straightforward and mostly driven by common sense: I kept transistors away from low-level signals, made sure cables crossed one another at right angles, and so forth. Except for that amp-to-transformer run, all of DNM’s cabling is light and flexible. It’s attractive, too, with its color combination of clear, red, and a shade of blue that can be described only as French. Except for the two (non-acrylic) plastic boxes for the remote power supplies, which are borderline, the quality of manufacturing and assembly is extremely high.

The preamp’s motherboard, with its precisely shaped traces and clever star ground routing, really has to be seen to be appreciated. Ditto the power amp’s carefully layered 3D boards and neat row of ceramic heatsink interfaces. Every position of every part has been carefully thought out, and every solder joint has been made with great precision. Signal traces are sized for the job they’re asked to do — nothing is larger or smaller than it needs to be — and all connectors are selected for engineering rather than jewelry values, which is all but unheard of in this industry. Yes, the DNM amp and preamp are small, light, and look unusual, but they also exude a deadly seriousness. DNM gear is Playhouse 90 or I, Claudius in a land where most everything else is Bozo’s Big Top.

Where did they get all those cool acrylic screws?”

**Music from both channels?**

With my Quad ESL-989s warmed up and waiting, I switched on the two power supplies, preamp first. I knew from reading DNM’s literature that the preamp is meant to be completely dark when music is playing, and that was so. (Activating Mute illuminates that button, as well as a circle of LEDs directly beneath the central ground point on the motherboard — a lovely touch.) I also expected that the amplifier’s heatsinks would warm up fairly quickly, then cool down a bit once things had stabilized, and that, too, was so.

But I expected to hear music out of both channels, and that was not so. After performing that most basic of hi-fi system tests — swapping the interconnects left for right, then listening for whether the problem moved or stayed in the same channel — I narrowed the fault to the preamp, and went on a loose-board hunt. I found two. (Apart from the motherboard, a DNM preamp that’s configured for phono use will have at least six plug-in boards, with a great many gold-plated pins.) I gently re-seated everything, then settled back for a trouble-free listen.

Things I liked least: The DNM system had a heroically smooth yet precise sound that was beguiling on most music but wasn’t a perfect fit for everything. I loved Joan Baez, Doc Watson, Enzo’s brilliant, early solo albums (such as *Here Come the Warne Jets*, a perennial Mikey fave), Purcell, Scarlett, Schitz, all of Beethoven’s and Schubert’s and Brahms’s music (even the symphonies), and a great deal more. But Russian music? Very early Boxy? The Replacements? The DNM rig was never quite as big and coarse and melodramatic as I wanted it to be. But I’m open to the suggestion that power-supply upgrades could improve this aspect, especially since those are the sorts of things that, in my experience, have improved in response to power-supply upgrades in similar systems.

Also, I found that the DNM system was less capable of shrugging off nonmusical noises — record surface noise, in particular, but also tape hiss and soprano Emma Kirkby: (Joke. Sort of.) Those things were a shade more noticeable, more difficult to overlook, compared with other systems, albeit not by a huge margin.

The positive side: The DNM system played notes and beats so well I’m almost embarrassed to write about it — like devoting a whole paragraph to the notion that cows enjoy eating grass. But I’ll say it anyway: No gear in my experience is better at communicating pitches, pitch relationships, rhythm, momentum, and flow. The DNM system also sounded different from virtually everything else I’ve heard in my home.

Does Denis Morecroft’s amp sound like a single-ended triode? Not really, in
From the soul of Roger Sanders comes the ultimate expression of Innersound’s audio art. Introducing a new series of loudspeakers that redefines what is possible. The Kya and Kachina Reference loudspeakers are housed in a form-follows-function enclosure that merge the best of dynamic and electrostatic technology. We invite you to listen to a new level of performance that transcends all that came before them.
spite of DNM's having blazed a trail that, in some ways, runs parallel to that technology. Distortion or not, SETs have a pleasing way of pulling solo instruments and voices a bit forward, spatially and musically. SETs also tend to be smooth — the decidedly non-musical adjective liquid is perfectly appropriate, I think — and, except for the bottom octave or two, they tend to have good rhythm and flow.

The DNM electronics had superb rhythm and flow, and their presentation was certainly smooth — but in a different way. They were clean, clean, clean. And quiet — dead quiet. And while they imbued real music with real textures, there were no other textures to be heard. Their spectral balance was superb, being neither bright nor dull. Don't let the skinny wires scare you: The amplifiers had plenty of deep, fast, impactful bass when called for.

Listening to orchestral music, I was delighted at how different brass instruments sounded more different from one another than I was used to hearing. The French horn was more like its live self — not just because the DNM gear seemed less colored, but also because every aspect of the instrument's character was thrown into starker-than-usual relief against a quieter-than-average background. By this same token, tubas, Wagner tubas, euphoniums, and other horns whose ranges overlapped to at least some extent were all more distinct. Trombones were trombonier.

Yet as good as the DNM products were at reproducing sounds, I kept coming back to their strengths at reproducing music. I've never heard their better when it came to sorting out different lines in orchestral music — while playing those lines with accurate pitch and believable flow, and while still holding the whole together (what I think of as poise in orchestral music, if not in orchestral sound). That rightly famous Scherenzaade with Fritz Reiner and the CSO (LP, RCA LSC-2446) is a model of orchestral precision, and the DNM gear honored that aspect as has nothing else I've heard. Lines were taut and musically clear and unambiguous. And this was accomplished in a manner utterly lacking in harshness or brightness. If you want an amplification system that, above all, can put across every nuance of the composer's and performer's ideas, this may be it.

Big Star's "Ballad of El Goodo," from Big Star (LP, Ardent ADS-2803), sounded no less crisp through the DNMs than anything else I've tried, but it was delectably crisp and not at all fuzzy — more like hearing a really good open-reel copy of the recording. I found myself thinking. The hi-hat was more rhythmically insistent through the DNM gear, as were the many well-picked, trebly guitar lines. Most impressive of all, the DNM gear was more silent in the spaces where, at any given moment, nothing much was happening. This is hard to explain, but toward the beginning of "El Goodo," when most of the music is happening in the right channel, drummer Jody Stephens enters with a roll that's panned from the left — which is to say, the "quiet" channel. Through the DNM system, the roll came as more of a surprise.

Don't let the skinny wires scare you:
The amplifiers had plenty of deep, fast, impactful bass when called for.

In fact, prior to the drums' entrance, I was close to wondering if the left channel had gone dead for some reason.

In so many ways, the DNM system just sounded different. The presentation was, as observed, clean and smooth. It was also precise and detailed without being fussy. And stereo imaging was fine, especially in the lateral plane, where images were pleasantly distinct from one another and convincingly whole. (For whatever reason, other electronics create a greater sense of spatial depth than did the DNMs.)

The matter of power

Then there's the matter of output power. For the past several weeks I've been remodeling my main music room (12' by 19'), and I've been doing most of my listening in our large guest room, which measures a whopping 21' wide by 32' long — schlepping a rudimentary, partial system into the smaller, unfinished room only occasionally, to check my conclusions. Even in the larger setting, the 23Wpc DNM amp drove my insensitive Quads to satisfying levels, without a single instance of mushiness, bad scale, spatial blur, or fuzz (let alone low stool, seat cramps, or shortness of pants).

DNM describes the PA3S as their best amp (it isn't their most powerful: that would be their entry-level model, the 40Wpc PA3), and while they and I agree that the PA3S sounds more powerful than its specs would lead one to believe, the company recommends it for use primarily with speakers of high efficiency and sensitivity. Enter my Lowther PM6a Medallion horns, whose 15 ohm nominal impedance didn't matter so much in this one instance, but whose +100dB sensitivity certainly did.

As configured, the DNM system had almost too much gain for my Lowthers — I seldom turned the volume knobs beyond 2 or 3, even in that very large room — but it seemed quite happy with them in every other respect. The Lowthers' bass, such as it is, was exceptionally well controlled, and the sound had fine presence overall. The combination did nothing to mitigate the Lowthers' notorious lower-treble rasp, however: not that I expected any such thing, but hope springs eternal...

The bottom line: One needn't feel confined to horns or other ultra-efficient speakers when building a system around the PA3S. If the amp can do well with Quads, I see no reason to expect less than fine results with high-quality speakers of medium to high efficiency, such as ProAc, Spendor, Totems, Meadowlarks, Alons, and the like.

Some random observations:

I love the preamplifier's dual-volume-knob approach to balance adjustments, and the skirted knobs appeal to the retrophile in me. But I wish it had a mono switch. On the other hand, I was happy it has a switch that determines the tape loop's signal output: In one position, the Tape Out socket gets a normal tape feed, which is unaffected by the volume control. In the other position, the output from the line amp goes to the socket, for use with subwoofers and other accessories that can deal with higher signal voltages.

On a related note, the Mute button requires too much effort. Not that I'm a weakening or anything, but with a preamp this light, pushing a too-stiff switch often means pushing the whole darn thing off the shelf, unless you hold it still with the other hand. In my case, that other hand quite often has something else in it (and no, I'm not referring to my draft card).

DNM is missing the boat by not offering these in different colors — like contemporary Apple computers. I mean, why not?

Speaking of cosmetics, the logo is well past its sell-by date.

Although the DNM amp sounded good from the moment it was powered up, it improved significantly over the
Introducing the new reference amplifier series from Innersound. By incorporating Roger Sanders' latest circuit innovation, Dynamic Power Reserve, the DPR Reference amplifier creates a musical experience that redefines what can be expected. Regardless of what loudspeaker stands in front of it, the sound is at once, both powerful and pure. The sculptured chassis is an integral part of the technology and forms the essence of what lies beneath: an amplifier of uncompromising performance and enduring value.
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It's Your Sound
next half hour — and continued to improve as I left it switched on for several days in a row. In particular, its sense of scale got better over time: Once the system came into its own, bigger music was more convincing.

Wonderful Stuff
I didn't try the DNM preamplifier with any non-DNM amplifiers—or the other way around, for that matter—but I did try the DNM solid-core speaker cables and one set of solid-core interconnects with some of my tube preamps and amps. What wonderful stuff! Both combined a clear, colorful, and softly detailed sonic presentation with apparently perfect freedom from distortions of the musical message: Music remained interesting—which may sound like a dull and obvious thing to say until you've heard what a mess certain very complex cables make of notes and beats.

And while my situation may not be relevant to yours — my house is tucked way away from everything, in a very rural setting — I should also mention that DNM’s unshielded interconnect wire gave way to no audible interference, even when used to connect my moving-coil step-up transformer to the input of my preamp. Nor was DNM’s own tonearm-to-preamp jumper wire apparently susceptible to noise.

And God knows the price is right: A 1m interconnect pair, terminated with Eichmann’s superb (and, evidently, Morecroft-inspired) Bullet Plugs at both ends, carries a retail price of $125. The speaker cable is $5/foot. Our favorite Chinese takeout place charges more than that for extra moo-shu pancakes. I kid you not.

I tried two different moving-coil cartridges with the 3C preamp and its integral phono section: a Tubaphon TU3 and a ZYX R-1000 Airy S (reviewed elsewhere in this issue). Both did well — which is to say, both sounded as nice as I would have expected, being neither overly bright nor overly damped. As it turned out, the load impedance of the DNM's moving-coil input was 1k ohm, with an input sensitivity of 0.7mV.

Compatibility is hardly the issue, of course: I daresay most prospective DNM owners will come not from the ranks of the restless hobbyist, but rather from the music and sound enthusiast who desires, or at least wouldn't mind, a ticket off the audiophile merry-go-round. I don't mean to overdo the comparison, but, like Naim Audio’s, DNM's is something of a biodome approach: Everything you need is right here, and while we don't forbid you from leaving the grounds, neither do we encourage it. Some hobbyists may be put off by that; a shame, because although the DNM system sounded different from most other gear, it did so in a way that I think would satisfy a great many music lovers on a great many counts.

You should try to hear this stuff. I think it's brilliant at getting music across — the gears you hear are from the portion of my brain that's plotting out my retirement system, as we speak — and it will open your ears a bit, not to mention your eyes. At the very least, unless you live next door to a radio transmitter or taxi dispatcher, you should try the DNM cables at once, almost regardless of your present system. Just be prepared to unlearn what you already know.

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DNM gear is brilliant at getting the music across.
N ovelist Walker Percy (1916–1990) was an unusually acute observer of the effects—for good and ill—of modernity on traditional societies and the people who live in them. A Southerner and an adult convert to Catholicism, Percy was indeed a "Southern writer." But he was a Southern writer who owed more to Camus, Sartre, and Pascal than to Faulkner. Although he studied philosophy, Percy's undergraduate degree was in chemistry. He went on to become a doctor, but his medical career in New York was cut short early on by an infection he contracted, probably while performing an autopsy. He returned to the South to convalesce, and there turned his attention to writing.

In his novels and other writings, Percy grappled with the difficulty of separating the accidents of personality from the essence of personhood. Above all, he chronicled the struggles of flawed people trying to act decently and remain faithful in an imperfect and hurtful world. Percy illuminated the distinction between being a wanderer and being a wayfarer. For him, there had to be more to life than dividing one's time between being a producer and being a consumer. Percy's lost, loss-suffering, and alienated characters search for a more authentic existence than what is offered by postmodern capitalism: a lifetime of often meaningless work.

Therefore, while I was pleasantly surprised, I was by no means shocked, recently, to learn that, toward the end of his life, when Walker Percy spoke enthusiastically about his "favorite American philosopher," he was referring to Bruce Springsteen.

Now, please go back and re-read from the beginning. Thank you. Doesn't it now make perfect sense? Everything that I said about Percy's novels can also be said about Springsteen's songs.


I have been musing on Bruce Springsteen quite a bit in recent months.

Many years ago—I think it was 1974—I heard Springsteen and the E Street Band in a small auditorium at Brown University. By "small" I mean that the traditional, flat-floored, raised-stage, proscenium-arched hall, the daytime site of Professor Beiser's Political Science 1 lectures, probably could not have held more than 1000 people, including the balcony. In that hall I also heard Fairport Convention, Leo Kottke, Billy Cobham, and Leon Redbone, as well as many classical concerts. (Large concerts were held in the hockey arena; there I heard Yes, J. Geils, and Procol Harum.)

As I listened to Springsteen, who at the time was unknown to me (and almost everybody else), I remember being impressed that he was doing a very workmanlike job of "borrowing" equally from Bob Dylan and Van Morrison. (Dylan I found and still find pretentious, tedious, and, as a singer, annoying; but Morrison was and is an idol of mine.)

The one detail that most stuck in my mind was that the piano player was playing a grand piano with the lid removed, and there was a clear acrylic barrier about a foot high running the length of the piano's strings at about the Middle C point. About a foot beyond the hammers, a pair of microphones was clamped to the barrier, one hanging down on either side.

When the keyboard player (in retrospect, it would appear that it must have been Roy Bittan) played a run, the sound traveled across the stage, the PA towers being stage left and stage right, and the concert obviously being mixed in stereo.

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The Old Grey Whistle Test

What set me off retracing my steps was sitting with my kids and providing my own additional commentary on the music-documentary video The Old Grey Whistle Test (DVD, BBC Video E1812). But as I delved deeper, I slowly came to understand that there were more fundamental reasons why this was a good time to reappraise and give thanks for Springsteen’s career.

The title The Old Grey Whistle Test calls out for explanation. Apparently, back in the days when most American popular music was written on New York’s Tin Pan Alley, music-business executives would ask older doormen or delivery workers in to listen to the writer play through a new song. If the “old greys” could whistle back the tune after a few hearings, that song had passed “The Old Grey Whistle Test.”

Thirty-three years ago, when the BBC was instituting a weekly live rock-music television broadcast, The Old Grey Whistle Test must have seemed like a good name for it. (A note to younger readers: Things were like that back then. Dadaism was often mistaken for profundity, and delusions of grandeur were given adolescent free rein.)

The Old Grey Whistle Test DVD makes for rather fascinating viewing and listening, though I’m not sure how many repeat viewings it has in it. While it is something out of the ordinary to watch a video all the way through six or eight times, I recall an RIAA statistic from years back saying that the average record got played 50 times. While one might think that a music-documentary video would split that difference, I find that this one has not, perhaps because most of the performances are prefaced by a talking-head segment in which OGWT presenters in varying stages of decrepitude offer their two cents’ worth as to the cosmic significance of what we are about to see. Whether you should purchase OGWT probably depends on the intensity of your interest in the subject matter, and whether you can instead borrow it from the library or rent it. You can always buy it and, if you tire of it, donate it to your local public library.

OGWT is fascinating primarily for two reasons. First, with very few exceptions, all the performances were taped in OGWT’s very small studio space, which provides a level playing field and minimizes the amount of help the performers can get from technology. These are anti-music-video music videos. Some of the performances manage quite well in adapting their playing to the circumstances, others less well. In any event, seeing them play live and unaided by even rudimentary technology is a refreshing change. Perhaps it owes something to the simplicity of the hookups, but the recorded sound on most of the tracks is not at all bad.

Second, many of the performers were captured at the outset of their careers. For this reason, many of them who are still with us (Elton John, Sting, Bono, and Emmylou Harris, for examples) look ridiculously young. More to the point, some of the performances (Sting and Bono, take bows) are lame-o to the omega point. One would never predict their later careers from these particular 15 minutes of fame.

The performers on OGWT divide up roughly between British acts getting their first big mass-media exposure in their home market, and US acts being introduced to the British public. My overall observation is that there is a very marked divide in the quality of the music and musicianship as you pass from the 1970s and the early 1980s on one side, and the bulk of the 1980s on the other. Part of this I assume is from a “selection effect,” or several such effects.

It is entirely possible that there were better performances (or performances) in the archives, for which the producers were not able to negotiate licenses for their inclusion on a DVD. Case in point: Why no Elvis Costello? Baffling. In similar fashion, perhaps it is the case that some artists who appeared on OGWT on their way up declined invitations to return after their careers were established, so all that is left is the comparatively unpolished first effort.

But my impression remains that the earlier performances are in every way the better ones. Bill Withers is soulful. Emmylou Harris is lightheartedly ironic. Bonnie Raitt is quietly compelling. In artistic terms, Tom Waits’ “Tom Waits’s Blues” towers over all the other performances. If all I knew about popular music of the past 30 years had come from this DVD, I’d want to say that Tom Waits is a genuine artist, Bruce Springsteen is a clever and boyishly enthusiastic journeyman, Bonnie Raitt has potential, half of the rest are passable entertainers, and the other half should seek training for other jobs.

There are two exceptions to OGWT’s in-studio-only rule. The first is John Lennon, apparently filmed in New York, singing “Stand By Me.” The sound is very poor. Lennon’s singing is no better than you would expect in a karaoke bar in a town where the public schools do not have any money for teaching music.

The other exception is a concert video of Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band playing “Rosalita.” I gather what happened is that The Old Grey Whistle Test was going to broadcast an interview with Springsteen (which is included among the DVD’s bonus features), and, for whatever reason, he could not or would not perform in their studio. So they broadcast (and then archived) concert footage, which I believe had been shot in Phoenix, Arizona. Interestingly enough, while the same basic “Rosalita” footage did appear on the older videocassette compilation of Springsteen’s music videos, the OGWT version has the brief instrumental introduction, which the Springsteen music-video compilations (both VHS and DVD) omit, and the
“Why I’m Eating Crow...”

Come on, tell the truth. Don’t you hate it when you find out you were way wrong about something? And you’d argued how you knew you were right?

OK, I admit it. I missed this one. But first, although I’m not making excuses, here’s my side of the story...

I held them back...

Business had been going great. Lots of music lovers were switching to Avantgarde Hornspeakers. So I didn’t want to rock the boat. Meanwhile...

Holger Fromme, Managing Director of Avantgarde Acoustic, kept telling me about their newest project—a huge pair of BASSHORNs. Not only were these BASSHORNs large, they’d be costly to produce.

Holger was making irrational claims too—120 dB at 20 Hz with almost no distortion! Well, as we say down south, I didn’t just fall off the turnip truck...

Hey, I KNEW no one would buy them

Finally deciding to go along with Holger, we brought the BASSHORNs into the U.S., first at Bob Visintainer’s Avantgarde Music & Cinema in NYC, then at our place. Now, we’d see who was right.

At this point, I had to admit that lots of music lovers were checking them out. Way more than I expected. Not long after that, we unveiled them at CES. And, wouldn’t you know it—folks started buying them! Sometimes two or three pairs at a time!

Bad publicity

Already eating massive amounts of crow, I made a huge mistake by going to the HE 2003 in San Francisco, and demoing the TRIO 3.0S and BASSHORNs.

When you’re back-ordered for months, the last thing you want is more fuel on the fire. So imagine how I felt when Robert Harley wrote in the August/September 2003 TAS:

“This over-the-top system was staggering in its resolution, dynamics and musical expression. [At the end of two demos] both times the audience of about 25 people spontaneously burst into applause. In all my years of attending hi fi shows, I’ve never seen an audience react that way to a demo...Bravo!”

You might as well pick on me too.

Go ahead. Hear the Avantgarde BASSHORNs, with TRIOS or the exciting new SOLOS. You’ll probably want to buy a pair too. If you already have a very high performance loudspeaker, why not take it to the next level by adding the BASSHORN subwoofers?

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Hey, want some sautéed crow? I’ve got plenty...

Best regards,

Jim Smith

Jim Smith

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OGWT version has the band-member introductions, which are edited out of the "official" versions.

Springsteen Videos

Although "Rosalita" is a great, energetic song and an important part of Springsteen's body of work, I wanted my kids to see the "Thunder Road" performance video, as that was the song that first convinced me that Springsteen was entirely out of the ordinary as a lyricist. I dutifully went out and bought Springsteen's two-DVD *The Complete Video Anthology: 1978-2000* (Columbia Music Video C2D 49010), and I am glad I did. Highly recommended.3

However, if you are totally new to Springsteen or know only his more recent work, in my opinion the best place to start is with his first three records: *Greetings from Ashbury Park, N.J.; The Wild, the Innocent and the E Street Shuffle*, and *Born to Run* (which includes "Thunder Road"). You can probably pick up the CDs used for not much, and the vinyl for not much at all. The vinyl sounds richer than the digital transfers.

In "Thunder Road," after first imploring Mary, the girl on the porch, to "Show a little faith, there's magic in the night," Springsteen's character tells her:

You can hide beneath your covers
And study your pain
Make crosses from your lovers
Throw roses in the rain
Waste your summer praying in vain
For a savior to rise from these streets
Well now I'm no hero
That's understood
All the redemption I can offer, girl
Is beneath this dirty hood

This is remarkably dense and multilayered writing for a rock song. "Oohh, baby, baby" it is not. In a few lines, at least to my ears, Springsteen alludes to Saints Thérèse of Liseux, John of the Cross, Teresa of Ávila, and Francis of Assisi, while confronting the eternally vexing question of the relationship (or disconnect) between human intimacy and divine transcendence.

Perhaps the writing is a bit overwrought. But then again, some people do experience moments when whether the person whom they desire can make a reciprocal gesture to bridge the space between them seems more than a matter of mere life and death; it is a matter of eternal destiny.

It should not then be too much of a shock to discover that another song on the Springsteen video anthology is entitled "Leap of Faith." Quick, name another rock song that owes its title to Danish theologian and philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855).4

Kierkegaard's notion of a "leap of faith" was more than the idea that the transcendent was not accessible to human reason — that you could not get from here to the ultimate "there" by taking one logical step at a time. There were at least two other important components. First, the state from which one was leaping was the state of anxiety that comes from the limitless possibilities inherent in human freedom. Second, leaving behind the anxiety can be accomplished only by leaping: one has at least temporarily to lose contact with one's groundings, and leave one's previous state completely behind. Faith invites, but itself requires an act of faith to accept the invitation.

For these and many other reasons, Kierkegaard is often regarded as the originator of modern psychology. Some even credit him as the forerunner of all modern thought — not only philosophical existentialism, but modern physics as well. In his magisterial book *The Making of the Atomic Bomb*, Richard Rhodes puts forward a compelling case that Kierkegaard's thought had a decisive impact on Niels Bohr's contributions to the development of quantum physics.

Am I supposing that Bruce Springsteen sits around his farmhouse and pages through nearly impenetrable theological speculation by a neurotic 19th-century Dane? Don't be absurd. But Kierkegaard did focus his attention, as few thinkers yet had, on the philosophical implications of the gritty particularity of daily modern life (what Kierkegaard called "everydayness"). Kierkegaard was the first to put his finger on the pervasiveness of anxiety and dread in modern life. And Bruce Springsteen did say this: "When I started in music, I thought, 'My job is pretty simple. I search for the human things in myself, and I turn them into notes and words, and then in some fashion, I help people hold on to their own humanity.'"

The characters in Springsteen's songs are aware of their failings, yet they continue to seek redemption, despite the fact that at times their quest seems doomed to fail. At least they take a stand.

Bruce Springsteen's America

I wish I could give a more enthusiastic recommendation of Robert Coles' book *Bruce Springsteen's America: The People Listening, a Poet Singing*, which is the source of the Walker Percy anecdote. The bulk of the book in fact is not by Coles at all, but consists of transcribed stream-of-consciousness narratives by people from various walks of life, in which they reflect on the impact of Springsteen's songs on their emotional lives.

Coles is a psychiatrist associated with Harvard Medical School and a well-regarded thinker on social issues, but his only contributions are the Foreword and the Afterword. These are good enough, but the first-person narratives are of varying degrees of insightfulness, and some of them are just plain tough sledding. The book is worth a flip-through — or taking out of the library — and there are some gems in it, but you needn't buy it unless you must have everything that pertains to Springsteen.

On the subject of America, however, I was quite impressed by remarks reportedly made by Springsteen last summer at a stadium concert at New Jersey's Meadowlands, responding to concerns fans had raised about his song "Land of Hope and Dreams":

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3 Trivia buffs take note: The adorable, wide-eyed young woman Bruce pulls onto the stage from the front row in the "Dancing in the Dark" video is Courteney Cox, in her acting debut.

4 Hunter S. Thompson's memoir *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, of course, owes its title to Kierkegaard's work *Fear and Trembling*. But you already knew that.
"People come to my shows with many different kinds of political beliefs; I like that, we welcome all. There have been a lot of questions raised recently about the forthrightness of our government. This playing with the truth has been a part of both the Republican and Democratic administrations in the past and it is always wrong, never more so than when real lives are at stake. The question of whether we were misled into the war in Iraq isn’t a liberal or conservative or Republican or Democratic question, it’s an American one. Protecting the democracy that we ask our sons and daughters to die for is our responsibility and our trust. Demanding accountability from our leaders is our job as citizens. It’s the American way. So may it be that the truth will out."

To Mr. Springsteen and his band: Thanks for the words, thanks for the music, and thanks for the love.

Has anyone else said anything on the subject with as much common sense, as little rancor, and more room for common ground? Not as far as I know.

We are in a crisis over the legitimacy of our institutions, and the integrity of those who lead them. Take your pick—anything from the 2000 election, the reasons for invading Iraq, Enron/WorldCom/NYSE, the child-abuse crisis in the Catholic Church, even the Super Bowl halftime show. People feel that they have been let down.

It was only in mulling over this crisis in our society that the reasons finally came to me why, 30 years after he started his career, Bruce Springsteen is more important, and to more people, than ever. He has kept his integrity. He does not misbehave in public. He has not sold out and become a corporate shill. He still puzzles over the large questions of life the way most of us still do, in humility and hope. He still writes songs that connect with people in a uniquely powerful way, because he still thinks that his job is to help people to hold on to their humanity.

And so, to Mr. Springsteen and his band: Thanks for the words, thanks for the music, and thanks for the love. We know it will not let us down.

Comments? jmrcds@jmrcds.com

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- Wes Phillips, Stereophile
September 2002

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... **incredibly simple** The world of audio/video cables has long been famous for hype and mystique ... and sometimes for profound and important variations in performance. Into this clutter of both reason and irrationality, AudioQuest introduces a remarkably simple solution to a universally acknowledged problem.

In addition to insulating and protecting a conductor, insulation is also a “dielectric.” While insulating ability is defined by how well insulation can block current, a dielectric is defined by its “permittivity” and “permeability.” These parameters define how much the dielectric material will slow down a signal. Insulation causes “propagation delay” which is measured as a percentage of the speed of light, and it causes “phase shift.”

If all of a signal were slowed down exactly the same amount, the integrity of the signal (and what we hear) would be unaffected. However, when the molecules of an insulating material are electrically unorganized, the time delay caused by the insulation is different for every frequency and different for every signal level. A nearly infinite number of nonlinear phase shifts corrupt the signal’s information content.

This problem of time delay cannot be completely prevented, but the damage it causes can be dramatically reduced. In much the same way that a magnetic field causes a compass to point in a certain direction, the AQ Dielectric-Bias System (patent pending) creates a fixed stable field which electrostatically organizes (polarizes) the insulation. Once organized, the insulation no longer causes multiple nonlinear time delays. Sound appears from a surprisingly black background with much better preserved clarity and dynamic contrast.

The reason your equipment and your cables sound better when you leave the power turned on, or after playing music for a while, is because you are partially biasing the dielectric material present throughout every component. In contrast, AQ’s Dielectric-Bias System (DBS) puts a continuous DC voltage potential (DC bias) between a DBS-only conductor in the cable’s center and an outer shield-like conductor. This keeps a cable’s insulation fully polarized all the time, nothing no level of signal can come close to accomplishing.

The 12V hardware-store batteries used in the AQ DBS packs will last for years because they are only used to maintain an electric field; there is no closed circuit, no drain on the batteries. A test button and LED allow for the occasional battery check.

The technicalities are complicated, but the DBS solution is remarkably simple and ... **incredibly effective.**
As noted in last month’s installment of “Music in the Round,” there are so many new multichannel hardware goodies to talk about that we need this bonus appearance of the column just to keep up. Nor do I expect the rush of gear to stop—I’ve just returned from CES in Las Vegas, where there was lots of new multichannel hardware and software that I will report on in June, including a luscious all-tube analog multichannel preamp. This month I report on a universal disc player, a comparison of Sony’s top-of-the-line SCD-XA9000ES multichannel SACD player with its respected predecessor, and a multichannel preamp that’s almost too good a deal.

**Marantz DV8400 universal player**

Unlike the behemoth players from Sony and Meridian, the Marantz DV8400 ($1695) is relatively small, but at more than 17 lbs it’s hardly lightweight. Its size and simplicity of operation make it seem more similar to the Linn Unidisk 1.1 that I reviewed last December. The front-panel controls are large, round, and few in number: the basic transport controls and a power/standby switch. The disc tray is central, above a bright, discreet display panel and its associated dimmer button and indicator.

The display indicates tracks and timing, format type, sample rate (for high-rate DVDs), functional mode (including Down Mix), and the number of channels in operation. The latter, however, tells you only what the DV8400 is set up for; not whether there is actually a signal on any given channel. Thus, the indicator shows all 5.1 channels going even when playing Pentatone RQR discs, which have only four channels. Also, despite its clarity and brightness, the DV8400’s display is not large enough for me to see from my listening seat. Fortunately, most of the DV8400’s complexities are accessible via an onscreen display (OSD) navigable with the excellent remote control. Marantz uses different sizes and shapes for the buttons and groups them logically so that they’re easy to locate when you have a particular command in mind.

The rear panel is also deceptively simple for such a capable machine. Video outs include component, DVI, composite, and S-video. Analog audio outs include eight jacks for six channels, manual’s emphasis on DVD settings, despite their official naming of the unit as a “Super Audio CD/DVD Player.” Often, it was unclear whether a given setting applied to media other than DVD without attending to color-coding on the OSD.

The DV8400 had no trouble reading and playing any disc I popped in. It took a few seconds to determine a disc’s format, but no longer than did a Sony SCD-XA777ES, which handles only CDs and SACDs. The time taken seemed to be the same for all formats, and independent of the format of the preceding disc. With the default set for multichannel, I couldn’t switch to two-channel operation (or vice versa) without entering the OSD, which can be done on the fly.

The sound with all formats was just fine. Playing “Red Book” CDs, the DV8400 was a capable performer. Playing “Red Book” CDs, the DV8400 was a capable performer offering balanced sound, extended frequency range, and good soundstage imaging and depth. If any criticism could be raised of the DV8400’s CD performance is its price, it might be that the Marantz lacked a little in dynamics, sounding a bit laid-back. When I fed its digital output to a top-notch DAC such as the Orpheus, I could hear things jump alive—but without such a direct comparison, it was more than good on its own, and plenty so for the money. In fact, it was usually easier to listen to than the Sony XA777ES, which offers a more warts-and-all revelation.

The DV8400’s SACD performance was surprisingly similar to its CD sound: clear, detailed, and spacious, but again somewhat laid-back. This served it well, as it contributed to the overall spaciousness of the sound and seemed less affected by room acoustics than players offering a closer perspective. Turning to the latest delight from Mari Kodama—the second piano concertos of Chopin and Loewe, with Kent Nagano and the Russian National Orchestra (Pentatone PTC 5186 026)—I could hear all the glitter and detail,
Music in the Round

along with the sound of the empty hall. (Am I the only one who hears the thematic similarity between the opening of Chopin’s first movement and that of Loewe’s second movement? What a great pairing!) But when I played the disc in the Sony XA777ES, during the last movement of the Loewe I was distracted by all the cracks from the chairs and floorboards. Sure, I could hear them with the Marantz as well, but I could more easily ignore it and enjoy the music. Which is more accurate? Dunno, but I could find other examples that favored the Sony’s bolder presentation.

The playback of DVD-Audio was where the DV8400 really shone. Since the departure of the Meridian Reference player from my multichannel system, I’ve been using mostly the old Technics DVD-A10 for DVD-V and DVD-A. I missed the Meridian’s ability to throw a wide soundstage not anchored to the speakers. The Marantz could bring it back, as demonstrated in spades by the exciting ARTS-Music DVD-As—my remarks last month about the Wagner disc were based primarily on the Marantz’s contribution.

Equally delectable although less splashy is Handel’s Messiah, with Diego Fasolis conducting soprano Lynne Dawson, mezzo-soprano Guillemette Laurens, tenor Charles Daniels, bass Antonio Abete, and I Barrochisti and the Swiss Radio Chorus (ARTS 45007-6). Taped in 5.1 channels at 24-bits/96kHz during a live performance and presented on a single disc without additional EQ and minimal processing, this release finally gives us a multichannel Messiah of stature. (The packaging says there’s a two-channel hi-rez track as well, but I couldn’t find it.) All performers are quite excellent, although my ear finds it hard to adapt to Abete’s accent. The sound is open and airy in the best sense, and throughout the entire performance there is a consistent transparency and stability in which every voice sounds true. The Marantz was absolutely outstanding in delivering all this. The Linn did not, and the venerable Technics DVD-A10 failed to recreate the sense of place, with voices, particularly of the chorus, popping here and there.

Over the months I had the Marantz DV8400, it never failed to do well. Other players may at times have been a little more revealing or engrossing, but they were not universal, and/or cost much more than $1695. As much as I like the Linn Unidisk 11, I think I like the much less expensive Marantz even more—it seems to share much of Linn’s functional style at a price that won’t make your eyes cross. The Marantz may not be the Linn’s equal in any given function (except in its remote, which is superior to the Linn’s), but it comes pretty close in sound.

Sony vs Sony

True to his word, after he reviewed the new Sony SCD-XA9000ES multichannel SACD player last December, John Atkinson sent it to me for a head-to-head comparison with its predecessor, the SCD-XA777ES. Their control layouts are almost identical, but the XA777ES had a flat black front panel while the XA9000ES has a beveled silver faceplate, which makes the latter seem much bulkier than it is. Still, the actual control differences are few. The new unit replaces the Stereo/MCH switch and a switch for iLink selection, and the placement of the buttons on the beveled surface makes them marginally easier to use.

Save for the new iLink jack, the XA9000ES’s rear panel is also almost identical to the XA777ES’s, but user-interface differences lurk just below the surface. First, because the XA9000ES has no LEDs to indicate whether the player is in stereo or multichannel mode or playing an SACD or a CD, this information has been transferred to the model’s LCD display, where the relevant labels are illuminated in characters that are too small to be seen from my listening position. (The LEDs on the XA777ES are distinct at the same distance.) Second, the XA9000ES’s two-channel and multichannel output jacks are always active with all media, as long as the iLink is not in operation. So you can use the two-channel jacks for stereo sources, taking advantage of the triple paralleled (Tri-Powered D/A) DACs, and as your front L/R channels with multichannel sources. On the XA777ES, they were not simultaneously active and required eight analog interconnects (and two sets of preamplifier-processor inputs) for stereo and multichannel operations. Third—and this is of significance only for multichannel listening—the XA9000ES adds speaker-distance compensation, which the XA777ES lacked.

In neither machine can the bass-management facility be used in the two-channel direct or multichannel direct modes, but the XA9000ES’s distance compensation does operate in these modes. This means that you can bypass the signal-processing used for the crossover, bass redirection, and channel amplitude balance, but still adjust for a listening position at unequal distances from the speakers. In addition, the Tri-Powered D/A mode is available only in two-channel direct mode.

I connected both Sonys to the two multichannel inputs of the McIntosh C45 preamplifier via identical Harmonic Technology multichannel cable sets and found that the players had identical output levels to within 0.5dB (using Rives Audio’s test tone CD). In addition, as the two Sonys came with identical remote controls, it was easy to perform rapid A/B comparisons using duplicate discs: Load both trays, push Play on one of the Sony remotes, and toggle between the players with the McIntosh remote.

The results, too, are easy to describe. With regular CDs using the regular stereo or the Tri-Powered D/A output, I could not reliably distinguish between the two Sonys. At times, I could convince myself that the XA9000ES was ever so slightly smoother at the top end and microscopically tighter in the bass, but I could distinguish between them only with rapid A/B switching. The Tri-Power D/A mode was smoother with both players, but of course, the XA9000ES’s reconfigured connections made this simpler to invoke. Moreover, switching in the optional filter made, as JA found, a palpable improvement that further distances the new player from the old.

I relied on the Chesky, DMP, and Telarc SACDs that I have in duplicate. The test results in stereo were the same.
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as for CD. On the famous “Ubi Caritas,” performed by Gaudeamus (DMP SACD-16), there was a bit more space around the voices through the XA9000ES, although the balance was about the same. Occasionally, there were other moments when the XA9000ES seemed a little airier and more spacious, as with the breaths between the heartbeats on Chesky’s silly but spectacular Dr. Chesky’s Magnificent, Fabulous, Absurd and Insane Musical 5.1 Surround Show (Chesky SACD273)—but, again, this was discernible only with A/B switching. Both machines sounded open and dynamic, with taut, powerful bass, even playing the 20Hz heartbeats.

It was only with multichannel SACDs that I found that the XA9000ES had a consistent advantage, and it was an unfair one. The XA777ES lacks speaker-distance compensation, which the XA9000ES can implement even without other bass-management functions (MCH-Direct). When I set the XA9000ES for equal speaker distances in a system with small disparities (±1) in speaker distance, the two players were only subtly and, in my view, inconsequentially different.

But when I trimmed the distance settings, something magic happened. The center image became more solid, and the more laterally placed instruments were less tied to the L/R front speakers. This was quite apparent with Salvatore Accardo’s violin at the front of the Orchestra da Camera Italiana in a wonderful set of Astor Piazzolla tangos (Obbligato, Fone 0195SACD, www.fone.it). The instrument had greater body and sweetness, and was more easily distinguished from the accompanying strings. More significant, and quite noticeable on the first two cuts of Telarc’s SACD Sampler 1 (SACD-60006)—Monty Alexander’s “Moanin’” and Jason Miles’ “Badia”—the tendency for side and rear instruments to jump from front to rear, depending on the position of my head, was substantially reduced. The result was a greatly improved illusion of a seamless, stable acoustic environment.

Overall, this little enhancement in image stability was enough to set the XA9000ES apart from every other multichannel SACD player—including the Marantz 8400 and the Linn Unidisk 1.1—in terms of overall multichannel enjoyment. The Marantz, which does offer distance correction and bass management, is simply not as dynamic or as resolving as the Sony, while the slightly drier Linn lacks any individual channel management, instead relying on external components or a perfect speaker configuration. Yeah, right.

Everything I said about the SCD-XA777ES in my review in the January 2002 Stereophile (www.stereophile.com/digitalsourcereviews/491) was equaled or slightly bettered by the SCD-XA9000ES, and the new model is an advance on its predecessor in both appearance and operation. As JA concluded in his December 2003 review (www.stereophile.com/digitalsourcereviews/1203sony), after comparing it to competitors going for as much as eight times its $3000 price, the “SCD-XA9000ES is still among the better SACD players I have heard.” And, I will add, it’s a superb CD player. For all that, it’s well-priced.

If you already have an SCD-XA777ES, is it worth trading up to an SCD-XA9000ES? Probably not, unless one of its two significant additions is important to you. With common domestic constraints on multichannel speaker placement, the ability to compensate for unequal speaker distances will be very welcome; for me, it’s the dealmaker. The value of the iLink digital connection remains to be determined, as it depends on this standard being used in other components. I had nothing to connect it to, but hope to soon find out if iLink will open up new possibilities in audio-signal processing unconstrained by player hardware.

Audio Refinement Pre5

Yet another multichannel preamplifier? Nah. Just as the McIntosh C45 that I wrote about last month is dressed up to look and work like a traditional stereo preamp while accommodating two multichannel inputs, the Audio Refinement Pre5 is a true two-channel stereo preamp with a concealed multichannel capability. Apparently, Audio Refinement, the value-priced line from YBA, took a simple stereo preamp package and added four more decks to the input selector and volume control (but not to the monitor switch). They then adorned the rear with a few extra jacks to handle the ins and outs.

That’s it. What they have achieved for $995 is a very attractive package.

You either love the Pre5’s sleek but Spartan design or you don’t. I do, and for that reason found its operation obvious and uncomplicated. The front panel has input-selector and volume knobs. Between them are five LEDs that indicate the inputs. The knobs are flanked by two pushbuttons: Power on the left, Tape Monitor on the right, each with its own small LED. On the back are stereo outputs for main amp and tape deck and stereo inputs for CD, Tuner, Tape, and Aux 1 and 2, as well as a power input socket, power switch, and fuse post. Power control jacks for associated power amps are provided. The remote control ($50) is optional.

The Pre5’s small but rigid chassis sits stably on three isolation feet. Inside, the power transformer is suspended to reduce vibrations; outside, the construction is of nonmagnetic materials. So far, nothing to divulge to the inquisitive that this is anything but a tidy stereo preamp.

All is revealed, however, by the presence of what Audio Refinement calls a DVD input and a DVD output. Of course, one can (and I did) plug a universal player into it. These arrays of six RCA jacks each could be used as an additional stereo input in the absence of a multichannel source. Also, the front L/R outputs parallel the main outputs, so that the Pre5 can do double duty. This wiring arrangement permits the Pre5 to run a stereo power amp and a multichannel power amp simultaneously or alternatively, as needed. It’s a neat arrangement for those who wish to keep some separation between these operations, employing a fine audiophile amp and speakers for stereo and a more HT-oriented setup for multichannel.

Hookup is almost nostalgic: multiple stereo inputs labeled with tradi-

1 If you hit the Pre5’s Monitor button while listening to a multichannel source, only the eight L/R channels are switched to the stereo tape inputs, and the remaining channels are not muted. While a multichannel tape loop was not promised, I had been using the Monitor button as a mute and was surprised when only two channels behaved as I expected. This only underscores the very stereo nature of this device.
tional names, and no setups or displays. The lack of a standard remote control is hard to accept today but that is amendable at some extra cost. Operation is uncomplicated. Turn the Pre5 on, wait a few seconds for it to stabilize, pick your input, and set the volume. If the source is stereo, it comes out that way. If it's multichannel, you get that. A no-brainer.

The sound was decidedly punchy and impressive but untrinting — sort of like putting a lively tube preamp into the system. The Pre5 added an excitement to the sound that often made me want to dance. (Those who know me will be stunned.) Bass had heft and definition, the midrange was nicely balanced and detailed, and the highs were even and open. I missed a little detail in the upper end compared with other multichannel preamps, but the difference was tiny and my ears readily adapted. Nonetheless, the Pre5 was not so good a match for the Adcom GFA-7805 power amp, with which it shares that limitation, as it was a complement to the Bel Canto eVo6 or Bryston 9B-THX amps. With those amps, James Taylor was clearly front and center, although surrounded by his group, on the SACD reissue of Dad Loves His Work (Columbia CH 90750). His voice was full, with its characteristic raspy edge, and the instruments had presence and impact.

Like the McIntosh C45, the Pre5 lacks any interchannel level trimming; that job must be performed elsewhere. With the channels trimmed in the Marantz 8400 and bass-managed by the Outlaw ICBM, the Pre5 made an easy and excellent intermediary between its two- and multichannel functions. At its asking price of $995, it's a bargain as a stereo preamp. Throw in the multichannel input/output and it's hard to even think about comparing it with the Bel Canto, McCormack, or McIntosh units, which are all much bigger and more costly. For the money, all of those offer a bit more transparency and air, with the right sources and amps, than did the Pre5. With all its blandishments, the C45 is functionally similar, but the Pre5 had a warmer, somewhat less forward sound. It matted well with most of my speaker-amp setups and made hunting for the discontinued Sony TA-P9000ES multichannel preamp unnecessary.

The Pre5 is an incomparable value for those wishing to make a gentle transition from two channels to more.
Gilmore introduced two striking planar-dipole speakers, the Model 2 ($19,950/pair) and Model 3 ($14,950/pair), both featuring flat-diaphragm woofers and a ribbon tweeter in a Corian baffle. Driven by Atma-Sphere MA-1 amplifiers via Silver Audio cabling, the Model 2s featured tremendous bass response, revealed by the ultimate test—Abe Laboriel playing electric and acoustic bass guitar (see p.4). But Abe and the speakers were overshadowed by Gilmore's model, Linda O'Neil!

Pathos' new Inpol® (about $9000) integrated amplifier combines a tube front-end with solid-state muscle. A nice touch is the way a casting of the Italian manufacturer's logo has been used to form the heatsinks.
Miyiyad Electronics has returned to the US, courtesy of Kevro. The UK company's MX-series amplifier ($2295–$4495), designed by veteran engineer Chris Evans (Arcam, NAD), is configurable with from one to seven modules, each offering one 150W channel or two 80Wpc channels.

Stereovox's new balanced interconnects feature the first new XLR connector to have been designed in decades.


Below: Isophon's three-way Cortina loudspeaker ($5400/pair) features a seven-layer, aluminum-clad, sand-filled enclosure and an 8th-order crossover.

Below: The mighty Wurlitzer name returns, courtesy of Gibson Guitars' Audio division. The Digital Jukebox combines an 80GB music server with a graphical playlist interface and Klipsch-sourced speakers and subwoofer. The remote doubles as a portable MP3 player, using an SD card to store music files.

Alón by Acarian's Proteus speaker system ($45,000/pair) showed immense power and remarkable dynamic authority on Joe Morello's drums from Dave Brubeck's 1982 Live at Carnegie Hall LP, coupled with Precision VIII turntable, Miyabi cartridge, Triplanar tonearm, Conrad-Johnson's ART II line stage, Antique Sound Laboratory's Hurricane tube monoblocks, and Pranawire cabling.

The mighty Wurlitzer name returns, courtesy of Gibson Guitars' Audio division. The Digital Jukebox combines an 80GB music server with a graphical playlist interface and Klipsch-sourced speakers and subwoofer. The remote doubles as a portable MP3 player, using an SD card to store music files.
It was 1998 and the band Grant Lee Buffalo had just completed Jubilee, the record that was going to break them big and make them stars.

Over the course of their previous three albums the band and its serious and seriously talented songwriter, Grant-Lee Phillips, had established a reputation for creating a musical universe almost unto themselves. If music fans weren't always able to connect with the band's mix of buoyant guitar pop and sepia songcraft genius, writers were literally tripping over adjectives like "cinematic" and "ethereal," trying to express their critics' wonder. Check this quote:

"Ever-progressive, Grant Lee Buffalo created a timeless identity with four carefully crafted albums that were truly alternative — akin to Rubber Soul as seen through the eyes of a Tom Waits-ian sonic scavenger." — Rolling Stone, 3/16/2000

Unfortunately, 1998, the year of the Buffalo, was also when the music business was just beginning to pitch headlong into the abyss in which it still finds itself. Upper management, not the most stable stratum of a record label at any time, was beginning to experience the revolving-door instability that continues to this day. Lawyers and accountants had become firmly entrenched, taking over the running of the business from people who knew music — or, in the common parlance, "had ears."

As the Internet grew, radio became less important to breaking artists and selling records. Consequently, radio began running scared and tightening playlists, a development that made the airwaves less adventurous and less interesting. In short, it was a tough time to break a record. But Jubilee wasn't just any record. Filled with power-pop songs like "APB" and what remains Phillips' catchiest single, "Truly, Truly," it stood a better chance than most of breaking through and becoming both a critical and a financial hit.

"The feeling in the air was that [Jubilee] was a make-or-break kind of record," Phillips says from behind black, thick-framed glasses one morning in the empty bar of a midtown Manhattan hotel.
filling on a personal level," Phillips says. "You also hope it clicks with the general public. It's a difficult thing to attain, and those that do, I don't know how they do it.

"Having said all that, there are only a small number of songs that I'm apt to play off that album, which to me is the best gauge as to how I feel about it."

Jubilee was the beginning of change for both label and band. As Warner Bros. Records began a long spell of shuffling executives and uncertainty that continues to this day (as I wrote this, the label was in the process of being sold by Time Warner to a group of investors led by Edgar Bronfman, Jr.), Phillips and drummer Joey Peters decided to split (original bassist-pianist-producer Paul Kimble had left after 1996's Copperopolis). Saying now that their "personalities had suffered enough hardship for a while," Phillips says the part parted amicably but, it now seems, irrevocably.

While he continued writing songs, Phillips began playing again—as he had during virtually all the time he'd been with Grant Lee Buffalo—at Largo, the Los Angeles club made famous by the steady gigs of such singer-songwriters as Aimee Mann, Elliott Smith, and Phillips' friend and frequent collaborator, the great guitarist-producer Jon Brion (Fiona Apple, Rufus Wainwright). After collaborating with Brion on his mostly acoustic, self-released solo debut, Ladies' Love Oracle (now distributed by Rounder), Phillips signed with Zoe/Rounder and released Mobilize. Consisting almost entirely of himself on nearly every instrument you can name, and Carmen Rizzo (who co-produced, with Phillips) programming the drum machine, Mobilize is Phillips' usual mix of power pop ("Beautiful Dreamers," "Spring Released") and more somber, darker-hued numbers ("Mobilize," "April Chimes"). In these songs, his emotional veer from the giddy to the ominous.

"It was a chance to prove to myself that there was life beyond all that I had breathed into Grant Lee Buffalo," he now says. "And perhaps it could be a life that had a totally different spin, especially in the way I wrote the songs. I really wanted to break my own mold and start anew. I wanted a rest from Grant Lee Buffalo—dealing with all the emotions that come with something that feels broken."

Altering the way he wrote the songs that appear on Mobilize was not so much the arduous task of entirely changing his songwriting methods, as it was more a natural process that came from and informed the records he loved.

"My favorite records are the ones that, by fluke, became a success—Bowie's Hunky Dory, or a Pixies album. They were left-of-center records that somehow tugged the center toward them."

In his own work, Phillips can tick off the GLB catalog he still connects with: none from the band's debut Fuzzy (1993), a song or two from Copperopolis and a clutch from Mirror Joe Moon (1994), including "Rock of Ages" and "Honey Don't Think." An excellent survey of his GLB period, Storm Hymnal (Slash/Rhino) which includes a second disc of rarities, was released in March 2004.

"The quicker they were written and the quicker they were recorded, the more lasting
the effect on me. Go from the gut, shoot from the hip, most of it is there in the first go, as opposed to going at it piece by piece and over-thinking it.

"The payoff for me is when it's intimate, it's intense, it can be spirited, passionate, but most importantly, it has to be in the moment. And for me the process involved in making an album like Jubilee or Copperopolis or Mobilize, if the process becomes too daunting, then the moment, that spark, is removed from the equation. I've come to realize so late in my career that that's really what it's about for me as a fan and as a record-maker.

"There's this great line from the Neil Young book Shakey, 'The more you think the more you stink.' My philosophy is, take the time you'd put into thinking and just live, and take notes every so often.

With these newfound principles firmly in mind, Phillips began work on his latest, Virginia Creeper, which was released in February 2004. Recorded in an incredible three and a half days, the album has a creaky, old-timey feel mixed with Phillips' trademark sense of pop melody. Part of the creak comes from Greg Leisz, easily the preeminent dobro, pedal steel, and all-around string player in alt-rock circles, who adds his distinct voice to the album. Eric Gorfain's inquisitive, unobtrusive violin also appears on more than half the tunes. Instead of guitar rave-ups that conjure ghosts of the dB's and other power-poppers, Virginia Creeper adds a string quartet on one tune, "Far End of the Night." Only in "Wish I Knew" do memories return of the sweat that Grant Lee Buffalo could work up when motivated.

Another reason the album feels so handcrafted, more a folk album than something from an alt-rock auteur, is the way it was recorded. Almost all of it was recorded live, with all of the players involved on the floor of the studio at the same time.

Virginia Creeper was also recorded without a click track, direct to tape, without the use of computers. As is customary with Phillips' albums, Jon Brion dropped by, this time to play a ukulele. "He can play anything under the sun," Phillips says, "but it was nice that his offering to the album was like an exclamation point: small, but distinct and impactful." So far, Virginia Creeper has made a positive impact on a career that is still rebuilding from the dissolution of Grant Lee Buffalo.

"Someone made an interesting observation the other day that Mobilize, which was made with Carmen Rizzo programming and me playing everything else, has a surface sheen as though it was a throbbing pop band, whereas this album actually is an ensemble of musicians. But it has more of a personal one-on-one intensity that's more like a solo album than the previous one."

Perhaps the aspect of Virginia Creeper that most connects it to Phillips' past is his continued fascination with all subjects Americana. Carnivals, sweet and sour freak shows that have always been evocative for Phillips, appear here in two songs. He closes the album with a tender cover of "Hickory Wind," the signature song of that most American of tragic rock figures, Gram Parsons. At this time in US history, with 9/11 and a preemptive war, it's an interesting time for a songwriter as intelligent as Phillips to be writing about such American icons as "Calamity Jane," who's "Drunk on the blood" and "washed in the tears of revolution, babe" and who's advised to "pin all your sins/on your man of sorrow/then/stroll through the crowd/with a black mantilla friend/while they're whisperin' like locusts in the grain."

"Americana has been a frequent motif throughout the Grant Lee Buffalo albums. It's probably something that's inherent in my personality—the love of character and the search for stories. Also, having an interest in history and having looked upon our history with the understanding that history is always being conveyed by the victors. I'm part native American, both sides of my family, primarily Creek and Cherokee. So that being the case, I was naturally always wanting to know all sides of the story, wanting to peek behind the veil of whatever truth is being sold to us. It's also probably an inroad to questioning my own sense of self.

"When I wake up and go to my day, I'm not apt to turn on pop radio. I'm more likely to reach for the Sun Records anthology, or maybe it's Bessie Smith, or maybe it's Elliott Smith. But it's my taste, and the things that keep me alive differ from that which is in the mainstream. I guess I finally hit that certain age where I feel privileged enough to embrace my own tastes and obsessions. I think that comes with turning 40: you say to yourself, 'Certainly, at least metaphysically speaking, I've earned a company parking space in this wide universe by now.'"
that sounds really great—what are you listening to?"
my wife hollered to me from her home office, adjacent to my listening room.
"Do you mean the music or the sound?"
"Both!" she shot back.
I hit the Mute button on the T+A V10's remote control, got up from my chair, and walked to her door. "It's
either Shins' second LP, Chutes Too Narrow [Sub Pop SP625]. Great pop/rock tunes, don'tcha think? Kinda like Todd Rundgren's best early stuff, only better. The amplifier's the new T+A²
Before I could utter another syllable, out it came from her: "Tits and ass!"
When T+A was formed 25 years ago, in Germany, I'm sure that its founders had no idea that their innocent initials had a second, salacious meaning in America.

**T+A**
When I first attended the High End Show in Frankfurt in the late 1990s, I was amazed and impressed by Germany's indigenous audio industry—so many relatively large and well-established companies I'd never heard of, and that were not imported to the US. T+A had one of the larger exhibits at the show, crammed with everything from sophisticated floor-standing loudspeakers (including one with an electrostatic tweeter powered by a built-in vacuum tube) to CD players, preamplifiers, power amplifiers, integrated amplifiers, and even surround-sound processors and "lifestyle" systems.

**Best of both worlds**
If part of T+A's plan was to wow the visual and tactile senses, they've succeeded big time. The V10 strikes me as the kind of industrial design that ends up in a museum. Its combination of compact symmetry, proportions, textures, and materials is exceptional for a piece of audio gear—stunning without being gaudy, dramatic and appealing without calling attention to itself. And it uses tubes.

T+A didn't use tubes in the V10 for novelty's sake. Because part of the anniversary line's mission was to show off the company's technical prowess, T+A sought new ways of implementing the older technology.

Is there anything genuinely new under the audio sun? For the most part, industry cynics say "No," claiming that most new amplifier designs merely rehash well-worn circuits. T+A developed a new circuit for the V10 that it calls the SPPP, for "Single Push-Pull." T+A's surprising claim of 80Wpc RMS with 18Hz-100kHz bandwidth at less than 0.5% harmonic distortion gives you a clue that something interesting might be going on under that blue acrylic top plate.¹

The V10 uses a pair of Svetlana's new EL509/11 power pentode tubes for each channel's output, two EC99 double triodes in the driver-phase-splitter section, and two ECL82 (6BM8) triode-pentodes in the input stage. All of these tubes are mounted in the mesh towers on the top of the amplifier. The preamp section uses a pair of long-plate ECC83 (12AX7) tubes, these mounted horizontally inside the chassis.

The tubes are hand-picked for close tolerances, with optimum performance maintained via microprocessor-based monitoring of operating parameters recorded using a "form of dynamic counter." T+A claims that a set of tubes should last between 3000 and 5000 hours. Microprocessor control allows for "soft start" of tube heating and power supply voltages, plus overload protection, temperature control, and an easy-to-use bias-monitoring system that lets you know when adjustment is needed. All operating information, including

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¹ Even more surprising is that the V10's power supplies are symmetrical, as is familiar from solid-state design, with the output point held at DC ground by feedback. No DC current flows through the transformer, therefore. The V10's output transformers are toroidal types, and there is no negative feedback taken from the transformers' secondary windings.

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**Description:** Tubed integrated amplifier with four line-level inputs and one tape loop. Tube complement: four EL509/II pentodes, two EC99 double triodes, two ECL82 (6BM8) triode-pentodes, two ECC83 (12AX7) dual-triodes. Output power: 80Wpc into 4 or 8 ohms (19dBW). Frequency response: 8Hz-100kHz, -3dB. Total harmonic distortion: <0.08% at 1W, <0.5% at full modulation. IM distortion: <0.03% (no conditions stated). Input sensitivity (for full power): 250mV. Input impedance: 20k ohms. Signal/noise ratio: >100dB (no reference given).

**Dimensions:** 17.4" (440mm) W by 7" (180mm) H by 15" (390mm) D. Net weight: 57.2 lbs (25kg).

**Serial number of unit reviewed:** 1403.00230.

**Price:** $8000. Approximate number of dealers: 20. Warranty: 3 years parts & labor.

**Manufacturer:** T+A elektroakustik GmbH & Co. KG, Planckstrasse 11, 32052 Herford, Germany. Tel: (49) 05221-76760. Web: www.ta.elek
T+A V10 integrated amplifier
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1993
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1995
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2001
Micro Purl & TQ2 interconnects. US Patent 6,218,562

2002
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remaining tube life, can be accessed via the front panel’s LCD display.

In order for the V10 to be approved by UL, instructions on how to adjust a tube’s bias are not included in the manual. Nor did the owner’s manual tell the owner what to do when a bias adjustment is necessary. I found this mystifying. When I questioned importer Stirling Trayle about this, he told me that bias-adjustment instructions would be made available in the future. During the review period, I received a PDF file outlining the simple procedure. Bias is adjusted via potentiometers accessible from the underside of the chassis, using the LCD screen’s bias info graphic. No voltmeter is needed, and the entire operation should take but a few minutes.

The V10’s anti-resonance chassis-within-chassis construction features an inner steel cradle that rests on shock absorbers, and an outer shell of aluminum and acrylic. A cooling fan is vented to the chassis bottom; if it ever came on, I didn’t hear it.

Another goal of the design team was to make the V10 visually attractive. That they’ve achieved. The V10 is a gorgeous hunk of kit.

**Ins and Outs**

Although the layout of the V10’s rear panel is clean and relatively spacious, the panel is recessed under the acrylic top plate — I found it difficult to insert cables terminated with spade lugs into the angled plastic channels of the central binding posts. (Banana plugs would make an easier connection.) Between the speaker terminals is an impedance switch that lets you choose between 4 and 8 ohm output transformer taps. The left rear chassis has four pairs of gold-plated RCA jack inputs, with an additional RCA input in the tape loop. Also on the rear panel: a 1/4” phone-plug headphone jack, a T+A “Rlink” jack for system control, and an IEC AC jack with On/Off switch.

The front panel includes the LCD screen, a series of control buttons below it, and two knobs: one for volume, the other for turn-on and source selection. In the latter’s Off position, some current still flows to certain internal components, but the amp can’t be switched on via the remote control. For that, you have to switch to the standby (STBY)

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**Measurements**

It proved a little tricky to arrange the optimal grounding between the T+A V10 and my Audio Precision test gear. However, I eventually succeeded in eliminating a residual low-level hum, and left the amplifier driving a 1kHz sweepline into 8 ohms for an hour at 30W, to get everything warmed up. I checked the bias after that period using the front-panel LCD screen. The left channel was one notch below maximum bias, the right channel smack dab in the middle of the recommended range, which the manual suggested was optimal. However, the left channel featured more than twice the distortion of the right, suggesting that a tube had got damaged in shipping. (Two power tubes had worked themselves loose when I unpacked the amplifier. I therefore continued by measuring the right channel alone.

The voltage gain with the volume control wide open was a high 43.6dB from the 8 ohm output transformer tap, 41dB from the 4 ohm tap. The amplifier preserved absolute polarity, and the input impedance was approximately 12k ohms across the band. The output impedance was usefully low for a tube design, at 0.75 ohm in the bass and midrange from the 4 ohm output, this increasing slightly to 0.95 ohm at 20kHz. The figures for the 8 ohm tap were still quite low, at 1.2 and 1.75 ohms, respectively.

With this lowish source impedance, there will be only moderate frequency-response modification due to the interaction with the loudspeaker’s modulus of impedance. The top trace in fig.1, for example, was taken with the V10’s 4 ohm tap driving our simulated two-way loudspeaker (see www.stereophile.com/reference/60); the variations in response were around ±0.5dB. What is more interesting in this graph is that the amplifier’s small-signal bandwidth depends on the load impedance. Into 8 ohms (top trace above 20kHz), the 3dB-down point lies at around 150kHz, which is extraordinary for a tube design (though some very slight peaking is evident at 50kHz). Into 4 ohms, the ultrasonic output drops to a still astonishing −3dB at 120kHz, but into 2 ohms, the response is now down 3dB at 52kHz, −0.6dB at 20kHz. The bandwidth also decreases at the other end of the spectrum, though not to anything like the same degree. Even into 2 ohms, the T+A amplifier is flat down to 30Hz, −1dB at 13.5kHz. The bandwidth was more curtailed from the 8 ohm tap (not shown), with the ultrasonic response measuring −3dB at 100kHz into 8 ohms and at 30kHz into 2 ohms.

As a result of its commendably wide bandwidth, the V10’s reproduction of 10kHz (fig.2) and 1kHz (not shown) squarewaves was excellent, though with just a hint of some overshoot, which was dependent on the load impedance. (The higher the load impedance, the greater the overshoot.) Channel separation (not shown) was excellent in the midband, though the usual capacitive coupling reduced the figure to 50dB at 20kHz. The T+A’s
position, from which you can select Heat (switches on the tube heaters but not the high voltage), then HV (activates the high voltage and makes the amplifier operational).

The six buttons below the LCD screen are for Tape Monitor, Speakers On/Off, Headphone jack On/Off, Bias (higher idle current for lower harmonic distortion, but lower power—good for low-level listening), Info (displays information about tube life and bias), and Balance.

**Tube or not Tube**
The V10's claimed 80Wpc was more than enough to drive the efficient Wilson Audio Specialties WATT/Puppy 7 speakers to high SPLs without strain or anything approaching audible clipping. Going from Musical Fidelity's solid-state kW, which put out at 1800Wpc, meant that the presentation was going to be very different, of course—but it wasn't that different. The biggest immediate difference was one of scale. The V10 provided a warm, intimate presentation—no fireside chat is arena rock.

I'm not trying to say that, driven by the Musical Fidelity kW, the WATT/Puppy sounded like stacks of JBL PA monitors. Rather, the width and breadth of the V10's presentation was less expansive but equally well-proportioned, and its tonal balance was warmer and more liquid in the midband, and perhaps slightly more recessed in the lower presence region.

The V10 sounded somewhat brash compared to, say, the Pass Labs X-160 monoblocks, which I reviewed last November, in part due to a tonal spike right where vocal sibilants reside. This wasn't a hashly or spitty sound, nor did it make the T+A amplifier sound granary—it was just a slight but noticeable narrow-Q peak more clearly audible on sibilants than at any other time. It gave the amp a lively, percussive snap.

If you like your tube amps warm and "tubey," the V10 isn't for you—though its midrange proved to be everything a tube amp should be.

When I met JA and Stirling Trayle at the local T+A dealer, Innovative Audio in New York City, to get a technical briefing from Lothar Wiemann, T+A's Director of Development, the V10 was driving the store's pair of Wilson WATT/Puppies. I immediately heard that same particular character. It remained present throughout the review period, but of course, the car adjusts over time—especially because it was relatively innocuous, narrowband, and had the effect of adding a touch of excitement to most material without calling much attention to itself. Was I hearing a sonic characteristic of the amplifier, or of the interaction of the V10 and the WATT/Puppies?

Toward the end of the audition period, Audio Physics's imposing, powered-

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**Measurements**

unweighted signal/noise ratio, taken with the input short-circuited but the volume control at its maximum, was good rather than great at 62.3dB ref. 1W into 8 ohm, 8 ohm tap (10Hz-500kHz measurement band-

![Fig.3 T+A V10, 8 ohm tap, distortion (%) vs 1kHz continuous output power into (from bottom to top at 1W): 16 ohms, 8 ohms, 4 ohms, 2 ohms.](image)

![Fig.4 T+A V10, 4 ohm tap, distortion (%) vs 1kHz continuous output power into (from bottom to top at 1W): 16 ohms, 8 ohms, 4 ohms, 2 ohms.](image)

![Fig.5 T+A V10, 4 ohm tap, THD+N (%) vs frequency from bottom to top: 2.83V into 16 ohms, 8 ohms, 4 ohms, 2 ohms.](image)

![Fig.6 T+A V10, 8 ohm tap, 1kHz waveform at 1W into 8 ohms (top), 0.15% THD+N; distortion and noise waveform with fundamental notchted out (bottom, not to scale).](image)

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While this is not anything like the level typical of single-ended tube amplifiers, it does point to the tradeoff incurred by the designers' decision to use minimal loop negative feedback.

However, these graphs also reveal that the V10 is a very linear design at low powers, especially into high impedances. Into 16 ohms from the 4 ohm tap, for example, the amplifier offers just 0.038% THD+N at 150mW, which is the level the amplifier will be cruising at much of the time with real music. Note also from these graphs that reducing the load impedance increases the overall level of THD. This can also be seen in fig.5, which plots the THD+N percentage against frequency at 2.83V.
subwoofer-based Kronos loudspeakers arrived. I immediately hooked them up to the V10. Though I hadn’t heard the Kronoses before and so had no sonic reference for them, they also sounded somewhat “crisp” in the same sibilant area that the WATTs had. I was curious to hear what the Kronoses would sound like driven by the MF kWs, which I got to experience when the V10 went back to Stereophile to be measured and photographed.

Driven by the kWs, the Kronoses exhibited a slightly more refined presence region than with the V10, along with a slightly more aggressive midrange that was not as liquid but was still well-balanced. I conclude that this distinctive sound in the sibilance region—which affected cymbals and other percussion—was a sonic characteristic of the T+A V10, and not some interaction, impedance-driven or otherwise, of the WATT/Puppy and the V10.

The V10’s overall top-end performance was fast, clean, grain-free, transparent, and not at all glassy or hard. Its high-frequency and transient performance was not at all “tube-like,” which I intend as a compliment. The better tube amps I’ve heard don’t sound warm, soft, and rolled-off on top, but neither are they as fast and “snappy” as the best solid-state amps.

Once the V10 had settled into my system and brain, I found its bottom-end performance more than satisfying with all genres of music. Timpani had enough thwack and definition to make them believable on good recordings, both tonally and physically. Well-recorded acoustic bass, such as Ray Brown’s on his Solar Energy (LP; Pure Audiophile PA-002; SACD—DAI), Groovenote GV1015-3) had both the depth of expression and richness a good tube amp can deliver, and the nimble transient performance offered by accomplished solid-state designs—with the accent on the former.

I’ve been playing this superb-sounding recording, especially the LP edition, quite a bit through the kWs; when I listened for the first time via the V10, I noted a bit more warmth in the midbass than I’d become accustomed to, which was not surprising. I also heard that slight crispness already mentioned. It gave Gerrick King’s cymbals a bit of a kick, but not to the point where they sizzled unnaturally; nor did the upper end of Gene Harris’s piano sound hard or brittle.

Though the V10’s bass performance lacked the kWs’ focus and tight punch, there was still plenty of drive, and enough extension to avoid rhythmic flabbiness. A bit of extension traded for texture and definition is a choice that many audiophiles are more than willing to make.

I found the V10’s rendering of good
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symphonic recordings particularly satisfying. While overseas recently, I picked up a 1970 edition of Otto Klemperer and the Philharmonia Orchestra’s late-1950s cycle of the Beethoven symphonies (LP, EMI SLS 788). I’d gotten the CD edition in California a few months before. The LPs have a transparency and a silkiness that cludge the CDs, though the latter are good digital transfers of a series of recordings that can sound a bit congested and distant when the orchestra plays f. The V10’s rendering of the “Eroica” was richly satisfying, massed strings sounding woody and silky, with realistic bite, and not at all hard or congealed. Woodwinds and brass exhibited a rich, realistic harmonic structure without excess warmth or softness.

At a press lunch the other day, someone at the table said that imaging exists only on recordings — that it doesn’t exist when you’re attending a concert in a hall. I’ve heard that argument before, and I don’t agree. Just last night I heard Lorin Maazel conduct a powerful, focused, dramatic rendition of Holst’s The Planets, and from the center of Avery Fisher Hall’s Row 25 I could easily hear where soloists sat, both when I could see them (as when the concertmaster took a solo) and when I couldn’t (as when brass players in the back were featured). Spatial cues, caused in part by timbral changes due to reflections, allowed me to hear depth within the orchestral picture. I hear and “see” those same things at home. My monthly visit to Avery Fisher is always a sonic wakeup call.

The V10’s presentation of individual images in space was solid, three-dimensional, and convincing. While its overall soundstaging was reasonably expansive, it wasn’t up to the performance of my reference Musical Fidelity kWks, which cost more than four times as much and deliver twenty times as much power. No big surprise. Nor should it surprise that the 80Wpc V10 couldn’t deliver dynamics and punch on the same scale as the big kWs, though the T+A’s dynamics were well-scaled and hardly what I’d call “meek.” Because of the V10’s impressively low subjective noise floor, its resolution of microdynamics and low-level detail were outstanding. For an all-tube integrated amp — for any integrated amp — the V10 was a remarkably silent partner in the musical chain.

Different products under review bring out different mixes of music, and I found myself pulling out some reference recordings I haven’t played in a long while. The V10 did a great job with small ensembles in large spaces, as I found when I played Classic Records’ 45rpm boxed set of the Weavers’ Reunion at Carnegie Hall — 1963. The Weavers’ well-focused voices had a rich, creamy foundation with plenty of body and a smooth transition to the vocal cords and throat, creating a believable picture of the musicians arrayed across the stage. Guitars had satisfying wood and silky/crisp string texture. Back-stage reflections were somewhat restricted, and the sense of Carnegie Hall’s acoustic was compacted, but the overall rendering was still effective on a more intimate scale.

On that recording and many others, the V10’s characteristic “etch” that I’d noted before was difficult to pick out. Yet when I auditioned the new edition of Ian and Sylvia’s Four Strong Winds (LP, Vanguard/Cisco VSD-2149) — a brighter-sounding, more closely mimicked studio recording than the Weavers set — I could hear that “etch” more easily. But that doesn’t mean it was something to be concerned about.

Overall, the T+A V10 combined the midband liquidity of a good tube amp with the low noise, low distortion, and extension at the frequency extremes of a good solid-state model — a neat trick. My musical month with the V10 was not as bombastic as I’m used to, but it was just as pleasurable, and certainly sweeter.

Conclusion

Unbeatable eye candy, compact, quiet, and sonically well-balanced, T+A’s V10 integrated amp is smartly designed and well-executed. It was straightforward and easy to use, and is the kind of tube-based product that the non-tube-oriented audiophile or “lifestyle” customer should not hesitate to consider. The V10 offers a superb balance of positive qualities, including the rich, liquid midband of a good tube amp and satisfying extension at the frequency extremes. Yes, you’ll get more extension and iron-fisted control on bottom from a solid-state design, but not a good tube amp’s textural nuances.

A power output of 80Wpc is barely enough for the kind of listening I do, but should suffice for many listeners and with many speakers. The V10 is no wimpy-sounding amp. I once wrote that reviewing a tube amp is like pulling your pants down in public: You listen, you like, you write — and then you find that the amp doesn’t come close to meeting its published specifications. The V10’s specs, particularly in terms of bandwidth, signal/noise ratio, and distortion, are amazingly good. I hope the review sample measures up to them.

I see the V10 as a great product for space-challenged apartment dwellers (who can’t play their systems loud anyway; that headphone jack is a nice convenience), as the centerpiece of a second system, or even as a great way for a neophyte to get into tube-based audio systems without worrying about the care and feeding of tubes. As to whether or not it’s worth spending $8000 for an 80Wpc integrated amplifier, only you and your pocketbook have the answer.

Getting back to that guitar-driven Shins album, which is not exactly an audiophile classic: The V10 delivered it smartly, with good drive in the bass, crisp attack on the drums, and plenty of ring to the guitars. In other words, the V10 reproduced all genres of music credibly. I had a great time listening to the T+A and luxuriating in the images produced by the amplifier — and by its name!
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ZYX R-1000 Airy S phono cartridge

My wife and I have this ongoing riff: We try to make each other laugh by sharing examples of words we've looked at too quickly and misread — mistaking offered for overfed, bagel for kegel, that sort of thing. All very subtle and dry and Garrison Keillor. You can hear the belly laughs from there, can't you?

I mention this because of the mistake I made when I first opened the shipping carton from Bertrand Audio and saw this cartridge's packaging, which is prominently adorned with the words airy sound. I misread that as hairy sound, and, without waiting for correction, my brain tried to determine what such a thing might mean. It could not.

The packaging for the ZYX R-1000 Airy S also suggested, in similarly large print, that the cartridge had been cryogenically treated. (ZYX is the name of the company; R-1000 refers to this series of cartridges in their product line, and Airy S is the name of the specific model reviewed.) Working together, my brain and the Internet had an easier time determining what that means.

I used Google to do a search on the words cryogenically treated. The first 10 things that came up were:

1) vacuum tubes
2) guns
3) scientific research
4) trumpets
5) trumpets again
6) automobile parts
7) more automobile parts
8) musical instruments (in general)
9) baseball bats (but not baseball players)
10) coal-mining equipment

(That last one was a link to another Primedia publication, Coal Age. Small world.)

It's interesting that the No.1 response to a search based on a technology that most Americans have at least heard of has to do with perfectionist audio: Perhaps we're on our way to being demarginalized. With the possible exception of the scientific researchers (those guys give me the creeps), we also appear to be in very good company.

Hisayoshi Nakatsuka of ZYX Corporation suggests that cryogenically treating contributes to his product's clear, pure, dynamic sound.

Move over, Mrs. Paul

I've also learned that cryogenic treatment, as it pertains to metals, is a process in which an object is cooled to some temperature below -300°F, at which point impurities are "precipitated out." Small complex carbides vanish, the martensites drive out the austenites (sounds biblical, and not just because both rhyme with smiles), and, all in all, the metal under treatment becomes purer, smoother, and less open in its grain structure.

A great many obvious, unambiguous, and irreversible real-world improvements have been reported as a result of these microscopic changes. Drill bits become sharper and stay sharper longer. Bearing components become smoother and less subject to wear. Conductors become more conductive (could it help Previn's Mahler, I wonder?), magnets more magnetic. One very credible study showed that cryogenically treated brake rotors and other automotive components last up to 400% longer than untreated parts. (Some professional race-car drivers say their entire drivetrains are cryogenically treated, and that's how they like it. On the other hand, these same drivers have been known to suggest that they use Skoal smokeless tobacco products and drink Mountain Dew. I'll leave it to you whether there's a little credibility problem there or not.)

All of which brings us back to the Hairy: This is the first product I've reviewed that contains cryogenically treated parts (that I know of). Specifically, the parts treated are the terminal pins, rear yoke, front yoke, pole piece, coils, and armature. Hisayoshi Nakatsuka, president of ZYX Corporation of Japan, suggests that cryogenically treating those parts contributes to his product's clear, pure, dynamic sound.

Other aspects of this cartridge interest me as well. The coils are drawn from silver wire that is of unusual purity even before being cryogenically treated. For long life and linear action, a very pure elastomer has been chosen for the damper — an area of research in which Mr. Nakatsuka has specialized since the mid-1980s, when he developed the Alpha Genesis series of cartridges for Monster Cable. The Airy S uses a very small (3μm by 6μm) Micro-Ridge stylus for improved noise and wear characteristics.

The thing I find most intriguing of all—especially in light of my recent experiences with Denis Morecroft and his DNM electronics (see “Listening” on p.41 of this issue, and in April 2003)—is the fact that the ZYX R-1000 Airy S is housed in a clear acrylic body, to prevent eddy currents from interfering with its output signal.

I’ll highlight those of the Airy’s specs that have the greatest bearing on component matching. The fact that the motor is somewhat more compliant in the horizontal plane than in the vertical is not all that unusual—Decca cartridges, which have always intrigued me, take this disparity to an extreme. It does, however, seem to mitigate against the use of an air-bearing or other “mechanical” linear-tracking arm, which would prefer the opposite. The distance between the Airy’s stylus tip and the centerline of its mounting bolts is such that the correct overhang is easy to achieve in the non-adjustable Naim Aro tonearm—or at least it was on my Linn LP12 with the standard Naim-sourced Aro armboard. The Airy’s lowish coil impedance should be kept in mind by anyone whose moving-coil step-up transformer offers a choice of different primaries. And the fact that the Airy weighs only 5gm may pose a practical and sonic challenge when trying to mount and balance it in a tonearm that expects something heavier.

Listening

This time our, my performance observations are even more context-specific than usual.

First, you should know that I had the Airy S cartridge in my system twice as long—an unconscionable six months—as I usually keep review samples. In doing so, I tried the importer’s patience, which I regret.

I not only kept the Airy S longer than usual, I used it with a greater number and greater variety of associated components than usual. I installed it in three tonearms: my usual Naim Aro, a Linn Ekos, and a Rega RB300, using a full complement of Wally Tools to set it up in the latter two arms. I used three different turntables: two Linn LP12s and a Rega Planar 3. I ran the Airy S direct into three different active phono preamps: the unearthingly quiet Linn Linto; the EAR 324, which is even more extraordinary, albeit in different ways; and the MC input of the Naim 32.5. I used it with every combination possible of two different moving-coil step-up transformers—the Audio Note AN-S2 and the Tamura TKS-83—in concert with the phono stages of four different “full-function” preamplifiers: my own Fi, plus Audio Note’s M2 Phono and M3 Phono, and Cary’s SLP-98P. Beyond all that, I used every pair of speakers I own (both of ‘em), each of the three amps I own (Fi 2A3 Stereo, Audio Note Kit One, Naim 110), plus everything else that came in the door not so suddenly since summer.

Having tried all that, I feel pretty confident in suggesting that the ZYX R-1000 Airy S is the most tonally neutral moving-coil cartridge I’ve ever heard. In fact, the way I found myself thinking of the Airy S after a couple of months—by which time it should have been on its way back to New Hampshire—was that it sounded like a Shure V15 Type whatever, except it was more dramatic and involving than

our friend from Evanston ever was.

Some of you will say, Stop there: This is the thing I want. That’s fine. As I think I’ve made abundantly clear over the past few months, the choice of precisely which sonic attributes to weigh most heavily is your choice alone—and, in fact, if tonal/timbral neutrality is the most important thing to you, you’re in fine company, if nothing else.

But a genuinely neutral domestic audio component of any sort is one of the most difficult things in the world to write about or even describe. I could kill a thousand words—slowly, painfully—giving you examples of how the ZYX didn’t sound bright, didn’t sound lumpy, whatever. That would get very old very fast. It would be easier on both of us if you take my word.

There are records in my collection I’ve owned and loved for more than 30 years, and after enjoying them on virtually countless combinations of different components, I’ve formulated a pretty good idea of what they sound like. In every instance, the ZYX sounded precisely like the sound of those records, nothing more, nothing less.

Barkeep? Tota1 the hill, please, I’m leaving early. I hear some of you thinking those very words.

In a perfect world, I’d indulge myself by describing cartridges only in musical terms. But there’s more to them than that. Take, for example, moving-coil cartridges’ notorious propensity to ring, which makes some of them sound in the trebles the way an uncontrolled amp sounds in the bass: boomy—except it’s the brightness that booms, not the bass, if you see what I mean. That’s a quality I can’t describe in a manner reserved for a conductor or a pianist. (“Maestro Previn had trouble letting go of the highs this evening. He also hummed and scratched a little.”)

That said, I’m happy to tell you that the ZYX Airy S exhibited nothing in the way of treble ringing. Used in my Naim Aro, Rega RB300, and Linn Ekos arms (the latter two fall squarely into the medium-mass camp, the former seeming somewhat lighter), the Airy was also free from the sorts of bass exaggerations associated with poor component matching or a poorly designed suspension. It also tracked well, as gauged both by the Hi-Fi News & Record Review Test Record and through normal listening.

As for listening for pleasure, and despite the fact that I kept the Airy S longer than usual and played and enjoyed literally hundreds of LPs with it, I came to realize that everything I need to

Associated Equipment

Analog sources: Linn LP12 turntable with Naim Armageddon power supply, Naim Aro tonearm; Linn LP12 turntable with Linn Linga power supply, Linn Ekos tonearm; Rega Planar 3 turntable with Rega RB-300 tonearm; Tubaphon TU3, Lyra Helikon Mono, Miyabi 47, Supex 900 Super, Rega Elays phono cartridges.

Digital source: Sony SCD-777ES SACD player.

Preamplification: Audio Note AN-S2, Tamura L2-D step-up transformers; Linn Linto, EAR 324 pre-preamps; Fi, Audio Note M2 Phono Balanced & M3 Phono Balanced, Cary SLP98, Naim NAC32.5, DNM 3-C Primus preamplifiers.

Power amplifiers: Fi 2A3 Stereo, Audio Note Kit One, Naim NAP110, EAR 890, DNM PA3 Delta S.

Loudspeakers: Quad ESL-989, Lowther PM6As in modified Medallion horns.

Cables: Interconnect: Audio Note AN-Vx, DNM solid-core, home-made. Speaker: Nordost Valhalla, DNM solid-core, Audio Note AN-Sx. AC: JPS Labs Digital (SACD player), all others stock.

Accessories: Mana stands (Linn turntables & their power supplies, SACD player, pre-preamps, preamps), Rega wall shelf (Rega turntable); Loracraft PRC3 record cleaner; Wally Tools. — Art Dudley

Stereophile, May 2004
tell you about the Airy's sound can be done with the aid of one good record: the Academy of St. Martin-in-the-Fields and the Choir of King’s College, Cambridge, performing Vivaldi's Gloria and the Pergolesi Magnificat under the direction of David Wilcocks (Argo ZRG 505). This ca-1966 LP combines lovely, clear sound with magnificent performances, notwithstanding such matters of taste and artistic judgment as diction, ensemble shape, the sharpness of certain lines, etc., and confronts a phono cartridge with a variety of sonic challenges. More important, the Vivaldi in particular is brilliant, timeless music; the component that fails to make that plain is a failure through and through. The Airy S was no failure.

The “Domine Deus”— “Agnus Dei” portion of the Gloria has the great mezzo-soprano Janet Baker in good voice, accompanied by organ and solo cello along with the full choral group and choir. It’s a model challenge — for the singer's pitch, tone, and diction, for the sense of line and flow (especially in the organ part), and for the cello to keep its musical poise and spatial perspective during the choral and orchestral parts. The Airy was a virtually ideal performer in every one of these respects.

In the “Domine Deus”— “Recelestis,” the Airy reproduced the sound of soprano Elizabeth Vaughan with the right scale, and the sonic image of her voice had a good sense of wholeness, as well as crisply precise and stable placement on the stage: I’ve simply never heard better. Similarly, as the different sections of the choir came and went in the “Propitius magnus gloria,” their positions on the stage were signaled as realistically as possible in the context of hi-fi (which is to say, “fake-real,” because the live experience doesn’t sound anything like that, spatially — but a very precise and convincing sort of “fake-real” indeed).

Throughout the piece, but especially in the “Et in terra pax hominibus” — harmonically the most remarkable movement, I think — different voices track one another, note for note, over the course of a measure or two: The violins double the sopranos, the reed organ doubles the string basses, and so forth. The Airy was clear enough to let me hear and identify all the musical sounds at all times. Further, it gave those string basses real weight, force, and timbral richness, without slowing the tempo of their playing. And as to rhythmic performance, the Airy followed the many subtle ritardandos in the performance — again, especially in this movement — in a musically convincing and involving way.

Even the ZYX’s fine tracking was apparent, in the joyous “Cum sancto spiritu” that concludes the piece. That’s where the sopranos really belted it out.

What the ZYX lacked most notably was some of the texture I get from this and other recordings using different cartridges. It also lacked something in the way of nuance — not detail per se, but the ability to present detail with the right dynamic and temporal shadings, in a manner that makes the final result sound as if actual people, rather than machines, had something to do with it.

The Airy S was very dynamic overall, yet something about it prevented me from getting a full sense of force or effort or, again, humanness in the singing and playing. The cello obbligato had more of a sense of being coaxed by human hands when I played the record with a borrowed Tubaphon TU3 (a cartridge of similar output and compliance that I mounted, as I did the ZYX, in its own, separate Naim Aro armtube for easy comparison). The occasional clicking of organ keys was audible with both cartridges, but, listening with the Tubaphon, those sounds and the notes they occasioned combined to create a slightly more organic and, ultimately, involving feel. A very subtle shortcoming, but one that signaled its presence with a great variety of records, not just this one.

Conclusions
I enjoyed my time with the ZYX R-1000 Airy S. I was able to get from it what I needed, even if I had to lean forward a little, mentally, to do so. No big deal. And I respect the opinion of anyone who suggests that the texture and nuance I missed are in fact distortions, and that I’m better off without them. Older audiophiles in particular, having lived through a time when gross, fuzzy distortion was the bugaboo du jour, will surely revere such smoothness — and the Airy S was nothing if not smooth.

It was anything but hairy. Now, as much as it pains me to leave the subject of audio, howsoever briefly, I must: In these uncertain economic times, even the comfortable must spend their discretionary money wisely. And $2995 is a lot of money. You can buy a front-loading washer and dryer and an extra-large gas range for that kind of money. Just off the top of my head.

There are phono cartridges that suit my tastes in music and sound better to me than the Airy S, and while one of them costs even more (the $4000 Miyabi 47), at least two of them cost significantly less (the $1850 Ortofon Jubilee, the $2000 Lyra Helikon SL). For me, then, the ZYX Airy S would not be a superior value in terms of performance.

For a listener with different priorities, however — especially the person who above all wants smooth, clean sound from LPs, while still maintaining a good level of musical involvement — the ZYX looks even better, an impression from which the cartridge's value from a technological point of view does not detract.

A very respectable thing, then: The ZYX R-1000 Airy S didn't quite speak to my soul, but yours may perk up on first listen.

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**The Airy gave string basses real weight, force, and timbral richness.**

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**ZYX R-1000 Airy S**

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Without having intended to, I seem to have collected several “statement” products. I've already reported on the Weiss Medea and Theta Digital Generation VIII digital-to-analog converters. I saw and expressed interest in the Nagra DAC at the 2002 Consumer Electronics Show, when prototypes of it were shown along with a forthcoming multichannel version, the Nagra Digital Audio Processor (DAP). The two units are based on the same chassis and interface, the DAP including additional modules and processing.

Why would anyone think about spending $10,000 or more for a DAC to play standard “Red Book” 16-bit/44.1kHz CDs? Assuming that you (or I) even have the bucks to consider such a move, the high-end parade has now moved on to the high-resolution SACD and DVD-Audio formats. Beyond that, PCs and the Internet will soon be offering such formats as Intel's High Definition Audio, which can handle 32-bit/192kHz multichannel sound. “Red Book” CDs were never “perfect sound forever”!

But that's not the issue. The reason I still update my phono system is that I want to hear the great music I’ve amassed on LPs that I could not bear to replace, especially at the considerable expense, with CDs. I've also got thousands of CDs—even if all those master tapes from which they were made were to be remastered and/or remixed and re-issued on a hi-rez multichannel format, I ain't throwing 'em away. That library is part of my life's work; I just want to continue to hear it as well as I can.

Fortunately, all the cutting-edge, new-format players, including my new PC, have digital outputs, and there's a slew of high-quality DACs to take that signal and run with it. So there will always be a need for a really good DAC, even if, in the future, it has more than two channels or, dare I say it, lives in the loudspeaker!

Nagra's DAC

Like all Nagra products, the DAC has at least one foot in the world of professional audio, as reflected in its user interface and displays. The DAC has a module on the left of the front panel and another, smaller one to its right. The entire right half of the front is a blank panel covering real estate set aside for the additional components used in the DAP. The leftmost module is the main control section, which includes the power switch, input selector (left and right arrowhead buttons), master volume control (in 0.5dB steps via up and down arrowheads), switches for Mute and Escape, a multilane LCD display, and function keys.

The other module, called the “front panel” in the handbook, bears left- and right-channel modulometers that are similar in action to Nagra's traditional analog modulometers, though here they're in the form of two stacks of LEDs. These indicate analog output or digital input. The cross of LEDs on the right side of that panel reflects the trim

**Description:** Two-channel digital/analog converter with remote control. Digital section: 5 digital inputs (3 S/PDIF RCA, 1 TosLink, 1 AES/EBU). Sampling rates: 32–96kHz. Analog input section: 1 stereo, RCA or XLR, (digitized at 24 bits/48kHz). Analog input impedance: 100k ohms. Analog frequency response: 20Hz–20kHz, ±0.5dB. Analog output section: XLR or RCA. Nominal output impedance: 50 ohms. Maximum output level: 775mV, 1.5V, 2V, 3.1V, 6.2V (selectable). Digital input frequency response: 10Hz–25kHz, ±0.5dB. THD: <0.02%. Crosstalk: >80dB.

**Dimensions:** 16 ½" (430mm) W by 4 ½" (110mm) H by 15 ½" (390mm) D.

**Net weight:** 15 lbs (6.8kg).

**Price:** $12,000. Approximate number of dealers: 20.

**Manufacturer:** Nagravision SA, Kudelski Group, Route de Genève 22, CH-1033, Cheseaux, Switzerland. Tel: (41) (0)21-732-0101. Fax: (41) (0)21-732-0100. Web: www.nagrawco.com. US distributor: Audiophile Systems & ASL, 8709 Castle Park Drive, Indianapolis, IN 46256. Tel: (317) 849-5880. Fax: (317) 841-4107. Web: www.aslgroup.com.
of level and L/R balance, which are set with the array of arrowhead buttons below the cross.

The DAC's manual contains many pages of instructions for renaming the inputs, adjusting display brightness, contrast, backlighting, and response to ambient light, storing trim and modulometer settings, and setting channel polarity. In addition, three sets of instructions can be stored to use under different conditions.

The average home user will need little of this, but a professional schlepping a DAC from studio to concert hall to club might find its programming and memory functions quite convenient.

The business end of the DAC is its rear panel. There are three coaxial S/PDIF data inputs, one AES/EBU, one TosLink, and one labeled only "NAGRA DIGITAL IN." The first five accept signals sampled up to 96kHz. In addition, there are pairs of XLR (selectable as balanced or unbalanced) and RCA analog inputs, but only one pair can be used at a time; apparently, they share input circuitry. The analog input signal is not routed directly to the outputs as analog bypasses or operated on by an analog volume control, but are digitized by an onboard ADC running at 24/48. While I understand that this might permit the DAC's stablemate, the multichannel DAP, to apply DSP to these signals, it seems hard to justify for the two-channel DAC. What can possibly be gained from digitizing and re-converting analog signals?

Finally, there are XLR and RCA output jacks for each of the DAP's 7.1 channels, although, as with the analog input, you can't use XLR and RCA simultaneously, and in the two-channel DAC, only the front-channel jacks are hooked up. In addition, you can select output level and the "0dB" setting on the modulometer with a pair of jumpers on the DAC PCB. A power connector, fuse, ground post, and RS-232 connector complete the rear-panel array.

**Measurements**

It has become increasingly difficult for me to explore the ultimate performance envelopes of such digital components as this Nagra, the Benchmark DAC1 that I review this month, and the Weiss and Theta processors that Kal Rubinson reviewed recently. The A/D converters in my measurements gear are all 16-bit devices - albeit very good ones - so while I can accurately characterize the technical behavior of the products we review with CD data, there is more "handwaving" involved when it comes to longer word lengths than I would like. With that caution in mind, let's proceed with an examination of how Nagra's first standalone DAC behaved with digital data on the test bench.

The levels of the balanced outputs varied with the setting of the internal jumpers. With no jumpers, the output at 1kHz was 6.7V RMS, a little higher than the specified 6.2V. With the jumpers installed, the balanced output level measured 3.35V, 2.14V, 1.64V, and 875mV. The unbalanced levels were half the balanced, as expected. Neither output inverted signal polarity - the XLR is wired with pin 2 "hot" - and the source impedance was a low 56 ohms unbalanced and 113 ohms balanced. (Both figures include the series resistance of the 6' interconnect used.)

The Nagra DAC successfully locked to datastreams having sample rates from 32kHz to 96kHz. Fig.1 shows the unit's frequency response with normal CD data (top pair of traces) and with pre-emphasized data (bottom). No surprises here. With 96kHz-sampled data, the small droop in the top-octave response continued to 30kHz, with then a steeper rolloff reaching -5dB at 35kHz and -20dB at 40kHz (not shown). I very much doubt that this behavior will have any audible consequences, but I was nonetheless a bit surprised by the premature ultrasonic rolloff. Channel separation (not shown) was superb, at better than 120dB below 2kHz, and although it decreased at higher frequencies due to the usual capacitive coupling, it was still better than 102dB in either direction.

The top two pairs of traces in fig.2 show ⅛-octave spectral analyses of the Nagra's balanced output while it decoded 16- and 24-bit data representing a dithered 1kHz tone at ~90dBFS. The increase in bit depth drops the noise floor by around 17dB in the treble, implying almost 19-bit performance in this region. The improvement is less good at low frequencies, however. Even so, as shown by the bottom pair of traces in this graph, the Nagra can still resolve a dithered 24-bit tone at ~120dBFS.

The linearity error on a dithered 16-bit 500Hz tone (fig.3) is superbly low down to almost ~120dBFS, the increasing error below that level entirely due to the dither noise in the data. As a result of the nonexistent linearity error and the low noise, the
While all that may seem complex, installation and use of the Nagra DAC was a piece of cake. The remote control is the same model as comes with Nagra’s MPA integrated amplifier and PL-L preamplifier; one remote can control up to six Nagra components, as each device can be set to a unique ID number corresponding to one of six numbered buttons on the remote. In fact, the DAC is really two units: the main panel has an ID of 1, the front panel an ID of 2. Thus, with appropriate selection of ID, the remote can emulate the arrowhead buttons of both modules, which can then be operated from the remote in the same manner as if from the front panel.

For those curious about the technology involved in the DAC, Nagra says it uses an Analog Devices Sharc ADSP 21065L, although an illustration in the manual indicates that the Sharc is part of an Anagram Technologies 24/192 Adaptive Time Filter (www.anagramtech.com/tech/tech.html). There is one of these devices on each D/A board (the two-channel DAC has one board); it upsamples and minimizes jitter by separating the input and output clocks. (Anagram’s own Orpheus One DAC is based on this same module.) The D/A devices are AD1853, from AD, and the analog/digital chips are Burr-Brown PCM1804s. All incoming signals, including the 24/48 digitized analog input, are upsampled to 24 bits/192kHz.

Listening

The display of the DAC’s dancing modulator LEDs was fascinating, but its sound was better. Connected to any of the transports I had on hand and feeding the Classe CAM-350s monoblock

**Measurements**

The waveshape of an undithered 1kHz tone at -90.31dBFS is perfect (fig.4), with the data’s three DC voltage levels clearly defined. Increasing the word length to 24 bits gave a good sinewave shape, despite the absence of dither (fig.5). The Nagra offers vanishingly low distortion. Feeding it a 24-bit sinewave gave the output spectrum shown in fig.6. The THD figures (actual sum of the harmonics) were just 0.0005% (left, black trace) and 0.0006% (right, red), with the second harmonic the highest in level at -108.5dB and -105.1dB (left and right, respectively). The left-channel figures are at the level of the test gear’s residual. Dropping the load impedance to 600 ohms—something the Nagra will never see in real life—brought up the third harmonic to -80dB (0.01%), but this rise is academic. The Nagra’s performance when fed an equal mix of high-level, high-frequency tones was similarly superb (fig.7). Note, by the way, that the noise floor in figs.6 and 7 is due not to the Nagra but to the 16-bit A/D converter in the National Instruments PC card (see my introductory comments).

I used the Miller Audio Research Jitter Analyzer to test the Nagra’s susceptibility to word-clock jitter in conjunction with 16-bit data representing a high-level 11.025kHz tone, which had been overlaid a 229Hz squarewave at the LSB level. (Both tones are integer submultiples of the sample rate, meaning that anything else that appears in the analog output of the device under test will be due to problems of some kind.)

Driving the Nagra DAC with S/PDIF data from a PS Audio Lambda CD transport gave a measured jitter level of just 140 picoseconds peak-peak, which is superbly low, with almost all of that jitter data-related (red numeric markers). Changing the data source to my PC playing a WAV file and connected via a TosLink cable increased the jitter level to 333ps, with the increase due to low-frequency sidebands (not shown). While this is still very low in absolute terms, the difference between its electrical and optical perfor-
power amps and the Revel Ultima Studio loudspeakers, the Nagra conveyed a powerful, detailed sound, and distinguished itself by rendering a clearer, more solid representation of every program than did the inbuilt DACs of the players feeding it. In comparison with, say, the Sony SCD-XA777ES's analog output, the palpability of voices and instruments was enhanced and backgrounds seemed quieter and blacker. The Nagra was simply a quieter device that filtered nothing meaningful from the music.

The Nagra's frequency balance, whether running direct to the power amps or through a preamp, seemed ideal, conveying the same kind of "rightness" as did its compatriot, the Weiss Media. Human voices were not only harmonically correct, but often had a presence in the room that verged on the scary—from David Johansen and the Harry Smiths (SACD), Chesky SACD 1225) to Sera una Nocche (CD, M-A Recordings M052A) to Alison Krauss's Forget About It (SACD, Rounder 11661-0465-6). Fulgedabboudit, indeed! The Nagra took them all in stride, keeping each voice and instrument distinct in character and position as I graduated to more and more complex material, especially 24/96 signals from DADs and DVD-As.

The Nagra's soundstage was very deep, adequately wide, and grippingly immediate. Even though I sit a good 10'-12' back from the speakers, the DAC seemed to pull me in, producing a more nearfield perspective than I usually experience. I think a number of things might have contributed to this: first, the dead quietness of the background in relation to the dynamic musical presentation; second, the power and definition of the lower frequencies, which seemed

---

**Fig.7** Nagra DAC, unbalanced HF intermodulation spectrum, DC-25kHz, 19+20kHz at 0dBFS into 8k ohms (linear frequency scale).

**Fig.8** Nagra DAC, unbalanced output, high-resolution jitter spectrum of analog output signal (11.025kHz at -6dBFS, sampled at 44.1kHz with LSB toggled at 229kHz). Source: 24-bit WAV file sourced from a PC with RME DigI/9/8 Pro soundcard and a TosLink connection. Center frequency of trace, 11.025kHz; frequency range, ±3.5kHz.

**Fig.9** Nagra DAC, balanced analog input/output, frequency response at 1V into 100k ohms (right channel dashed, 0.5dB/vertical div.).
to directly couple the bass drivers to my ears; and third, the very clear, deep soundstage, which focused my attention on the central image.

Engineer Jerry Bruck's marvelous achievement in dealing with the acoustics of the Riverside Church is in his having gotten so much character, detail, and power from Glen Cortese and the Manhattan School of Music Symphony Orchestra and Chorus in their recording of Mahler's Symphony 3 (CD, Titanic Ti-252). These features had never been made so clear as through the Nagra. All in all, it was a very exciting and revealing experience.

The only fly I found in the ointment was Nagra's use of an A/D converter for the analog input. The reasons for this are apparent—the rest of the device is all-digital, and if this was the multichannel preamp-processor DAP, one would want to make use of its features with all inputs. Nonetheless, high-quality analog sources were just not as grain-free and open

when digitized and reconstructed as they were when I bypassed the Nagra altogether. It was more than acceptable for FM broadcasts, but I felt that the edges were smoothed when I fed it from my turntable and phono stage. Had Nagra included a digital output so that I could have used it to digitize LPs for storage on my PC's hard drive, I'd have been more than happy with it. The difference was noticeable only in A/B comparisons, but it was there.

The Nagra DAC's residence in my system overlapped only briefly with that of the Weiss Medea; I didn't have the opportunity to compare them after the Nagra had settled in and I had gotten a good feel for its character. Reading the notes I made for my review of the Medea (Stereophile, February 2003), I suspect that the two Swiss DACs share many sonic characteristics, among them a neutral harmonic balance, an extended and transparent treble, and taut, powerful bass. I further suspect that choosing between them might be a matter of features and application rather than sound quality. The Medea is a very fine multiple-input DAC; the Nagra adds volume and balance controls, along

**Measurements**

sured at 1kHz was a usefully high 62k ohms unbalanced, 124k ohms balanced. Feeding the Nagra's analog input a 1kHz sinewave at 62µV resulted in digital data at -90dBFS. Fig.10 shows a 1/2-octave spectral analysis of the Nagra's analog output under these conditions; at 4-5dB, the noise floor is only a little lower than that of the dithered CD data in fig.2, suggesting ADC resolution of around 17 bits.

At -6dBFS, the distortion level was a very low 0.0021%. However, this has increased to 0.01% at -1dBFS, with the spectrum (fig.11) having the third harmonic highest in level and some higher-order products becoming apparent. As with many A/D converters, the top couple of dB of dynamic range are best regarded as being for emergency use only. The Nagra's modulometer will be a big help in this regard.

While I share KR's feeling that a true analog pass-through input would be better than one that digitizes the signal, the Nagra DAC offers virtually state-of-the-art measured performance.

—John Atkinson

**Fig 10** Nagra DAC, balanced analog input/output. 1/2-octave spectrum of 1kHz tone at -90dBFS, with noise and spuriae (right channel dashed).

**Fig 11** Nagra DAC, balanced analog input/unbalanced output, spectrum of 1kHz sinewave, DC-1kHz, at -1dBFS into 8k ohms (linear frequency scale).
with a remote control so that it can function as a system controller in a (nearly) all-digital system. The Nagra also has an A/D stage for an analog input.

A more apt comparison is with the Theta Digital Generation VIII, which so enthralled me in March with its digital and analog performance. Put both in black boxes and feed them digital and analog inputs, and I'll bet you'd have no difficulty telling which is which. The Theta's two analog inputs, which never leave the analog domain, were audibly superior to the Nagra's digitization and reconversion, as good as it was. In addition, the sound each model offered from its digital inputs was complementary. The Nagra conveyed all the music and ambience with honesty, clarity, and power. The Nagra's sound was immediate, with a detailed and firmly deep soundstage, but one that was carefully defined by the left and right speaker positions. In some ways, it was an engineer's or mixer's ideal view of events: all elements were at hand. In direct comparison with the Theta's presentation, there was a sense of precise containment with the Nagra.

The Gen.VIII, on the other hand, was less gripping at the extreme bottom end, but equally detailed through the midrange and treble. Where the Theta scored was in its generously open soundstage, which made the detail, though still present, seem less overt.

Conclusions
Talk about an embarrassment of riches! The Nagra DAC joins the pantheon of truly superb D/A converters that can wrest the best from your associated equipment and extract more than ever from your CDs. Notable for its powerful dynamics and clarity, the Nagra probably will get you as close to the music as the mastering engineer was.

The configuration of the Nagra DAC also distinguishes it from other DACs. Not simply a D/A converter, the Nagra is also a fine digital system controller with remote control of all functions. Although it lacks a digital output, the inclusion of a high-quality 24-bit/48kHz A/D converter makes it backward-compatible and suitable for listening to analog sources. Professional construction, superior sound, ease of use, and a high degree of programmability make it a winner.
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The CD-303/200 is a stout, handsome unit with a thick front panel of black-anodized aluminum (silver is also available) and a beefy, epoxy-coated aluminum chassis. Even the remote control—a heavy aluminum unit with multi-function, backlit buttons—screams “Quality!” Curiously, however, the remote is clad in chrome plate, rather than brushed aluminum or anodized black to match the player. The coup de grace is the CD-303/200's transport mechanism, a Philips CDM12, which is good enough as is; Cary's addition of a thick, machined drawer warmed this metallurgist's heart.

The Cary is surprising—in a good way—in its abundance of features. Cary calls it a "CD transport/processor" because it has digital inputs and outputs, as well as both balanced and unbalanced analog outputs. Its output is either fixed, for running through a preamp, or variable, controlled in the analog domain with 64 discrete levels, for direct connection to a power amp. Switching between the two, or setting the maximum voltage output to one of two levels (3V or 6V for unbalanced, 6V or 12V for balanced), requires opening up the unit and moving jumpers on the DAC board. My unit came configured in the Low Gain and Variable Output settings, which worked just fine in my setup.

The CD-303/200 also features selectable upsampling. The digital signal from the transport is first passed through a Texas Instruments digital signal-processing (DSP) chip, in which the word length is automatically expanded to 24 bits via a proprietary Cary algorithm. The signal can then, at the user's discretion, be upsampled to 96kHz or not, prior to conversion. The DACs themselves are a pair of 24-bit/96kHz-capable Burr-Brown PCM1704u-K grade chips. The 303/200's digital inputs accept signals with sample rates of from 32kHz to 96kHz, and word lengths of 16, 20, or 24 bits. These datastreams are similarly routed through the DSP chip and word-length expansion, and can be upsampled or not, as the user chooses.

Why wouldn't someone want to upsample the signal? I did a number of listening tests with and without upsampling, and always preferred upsampling. There was better detail resolution and ambience retrieval, and smoother overall sound. The catch is that the 303/200 is also HDCD-compatible—a Pacific Microsonics PMD-200 digital filter/decoder chip is inserted between the DSP and decoder elements—and upsampling renders HDCD decoding inoperable. And yes, the HDCD discs I tried sounded better using HDCD. A neat, versatile solution.

But what Cary is really known for is their exquisite amp and preamps, so I asked what was magic about the CD-303/200's analog side. The reply was "Nothing really magic—just a good circuit and attention to detail in its execution. Board layout, parts quality and selection, mechanical and electrical isolation—attention was paid to all of them.”

The CD-303/200 is nicely executed, particularly given its price. It's dominated by the Phillips transport assembly, which is encased in a heavy steel channel bisecting the unit from front to back. On one side of the channel are the C-core transformer and two power-supply boards, one for the transport, one for the audio circuits. On the other side of the channel is the single DAC/analog output board. Everything is neatly laid out, and while the Cary isn't as chock-full of circuitry as laden with esoteric audio-
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phile parts as a Burmester or Classé Omega unit, it’s well-made — especially for the price. However, I found it impossible to read the small, crowded, blue display from across the room.

Use and Listening
Cary recommends that the CD-303/200 be broken in for 200 hours, so I began by letting it run continuously for a week before doing any listening. After that, there was the usual setting up and general tweaking of the system: experimenting with cables, installing Echo Busters room-treatment panels, choosing reference CDs and cleaning them. When I was satisfied that everything was just so, I sat down to listen seriously, and was immediately surprised — in a good way.

Some components stand out a bit, they differ from the norm in some subtle but fundamental way. The Wadia CD players stand out by virtue of their incredible temporal precision, which gives them an unusual, captivating immediacy. In the case of the Cary CD-303/200, what immediately jumped out was its taut, powerful sound. I began my listening with David Johansen’s Shaker (Chesky JD236), and noted that the presentation was immediate and very direct. Johansen’s voice hung right in my listening room, a solid, tightly focused presence sharply bounded and surrounded by unusually “black” silences.

Joe Beard’s For Real (AudioQuest AQ CD-1049) was next up, and reinforced my initial observations. My notes are full of comments like “super clean but really bally” and “very taut and precise, but with incredible slam.” Again I noticed the Cary’s unusual and captivating power, solidity, and impact, fuously scribbling “again, there’s that ‘solid images projecting out from a black background’ feel…like the images and notes are solid blocks of granite, standing out in sharp relief.”

Starting from the bottom, the Cary’s powerful sound began with the best low-bass performance I’ve heard from a CD player. It was powerful, with huge dynamic contrasts. It was also amazingly well-controlled, with notes starting and stopping on a dime. Nowhere was that impression of notes being distinct, solid entities more prevalent than at the very bottom. Bass drums were ominous and explosive, and timpani crescendos took my breath away.

The Cary’s bottom end also had superb pitch definition and detail. I often use Zubin Mehta and the LAPO’s reading of Holst’s The Planets (London/Classic C3CD 6734) as a test of these qualities, listening to see how well a component can reproduce the distinct characteristics of the different double basses in the section. Never have I heard the individual instruments portrayed as beautifully, or as distinctly, as with the Cary. Soft passages, or ominous, swirling underpinnings, or full-crest crescendos — all were outstanding, the basses steadfastly remaining a group of distinct instruments and players.

Moving up a bit, to the “warmth” region of the upper bass and lower midrange, the Cary’s performance was also quite good, but not quite as satisfying as in the lower registers. There were the same sorts of precision, detail, and dynamic contrasts as down low, but not quite as much weight, and not quite as rich a tonal palette. There’s a passage early in Antal Dorati and the LSO’s per-

Measurements
As supplied for review, the Cary player had a maximum output level of 5.94V from its balanced XLR jacks, 3V RMS from the unbalanced RCA jacks. The latter is 3.5dB higher than the CD standard’s 2V, a very audible difference in A/B comparisons. (All the measurements were taken with the volume control at its maximum.) Neither set of outputs inverted absolute polarity, and the source impedance was usefully low, at 99 ohms unbalanced and 198 ohms balanced. (Both figures remained the same across the audioband.) The CD-303/200’s error correction was superb, the player coping with gaps in the data spiral up to 2mm in length with only occasional glitches.

The CD-303’s S/PDIF input successfully locked to datastreams with sample rates ranging from 32kHz to 96kHz. The frequency response for CD playback was flat within the audioband for both sets of outputs and didn’t change when the upsampling was switched in. (Interestingly, when upsampling was switched in, the resultant 96kHz-sampled data was available at the CD-303’s digital output, with all 24 bits active.) The flat response is shown in fig.1. Also shown in this graph is the response with pre-emphasized CD data. The rising response means that, in common with a distressingly increasing number of modern players, the Cary doesn’t switch in the appropriate de-emphasis. As a reasonably large number of older CDs are pre-emphasized, these will sound thin and screechy on the CD-303. Channel separation (not shown) was excellent, at better than 110dB below 7kHz (R-L) and 20kHz (L-R).

Fig.2 shows 1/3-octave spectral analyses of the Cary’s output while it decoded dithered 16- and 24-bit data representing a 1kHz tone at ~90dBFS, both upsampled by the Cary to 24/96. The increase in bit depth dropped the noise floor by 11dB in the treble, implying D/A performance around the 18-bit level, which is good. There are no significant distortion harmonics apparent, though a small amount of 120Hz power-supply hum is evident in the

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Fig.1 Cary CD-303/200, CD frequency response at -12dBFS into 100k ohms, with de-emphasis (bottom) and without (top), the latter with Standard filter (top) and Optional filter (middle). (Right channel dashed, 0.5dB/vertical div.)

Fig.2 Cary CD-303/200, 1/3-octave spectrum of dithered 1kHz tone at ~90dBFS, with noise and spurious, 16-bit CD data (top) and 24-bit external data (bottom). (Right channel dashed.)
formance of Enesco’s Romanian Rhapsody No.2 (Mercury 434 326-2) where a line cascades down through the string sections, finally settling in the cellos. The cellos had all of the inner detail, dynamic nuance, and precision of the double basses in The Planets, but didn't seem to have the warmth and bloom — the dark, woody richness — that cellos usually do.

Playing other discs, such as Sherman Robertson’s Going Back Home (AudioQuest AQ CD-1050) or The Poll Winners (JVC JVCXR-0019-2), I noted that bass lines were inevitably sharper and more precise with the Cary, but — particularly near the top of the double bass's range — warmer and bouncier with other players. In the case of Ray Brown's performance on Poll Winners, the Cary didn't seem to have as much of the warm, woody resonance I've heard with some other players, sounding just a smidgen lean in comparison.

The Cary's power and precision carried up through the midrange as well. I noted that everything from trombones and French horns through trumpets and flutes was characterized by large, precise dynamic contrasts, outstanding edge definition, and solid, dense tonal colors. Again, there was that overriding feeling that the notes were solid, powerful entities standing out distinctly from their surroundings. Several minutes into Enesco’s Romanian Rhapsody, shortly after a soft passage in which woodwinds play off one another, there's a solo oboe line superimposed over low, humming violins. The way the oboe stood out in bold relief, immersed in the violins' swirl and the ambience of the hall yet totally distinct from them, was amazing. For me, that passage, perhaps more than any other, best displayed the Cary's unusual presence.

In “Don't Start Me Talking,” on Joe Beard's For Real, I swear I could see Jerry Portnoy's hands around his harmonica, his fingers cupping toward, then away from it. I must have listened to this track 10 times in a row. I just couldn’t get over that holographic imaging.

One nit I pick with the CD-303/200's midrange, particularly as it moved into the upper midrange and lower treble, was that its power and presence sometimes seemed almost too much — right on the edge of being too forward. With some discs, vocal transients seemed just a bit edgy, or the faintest hint of steel would creep into massed violin crescendos. There's a nice trumpet entrance about eight minutes into the Romanian Rhapsody that showed left channel. This is not high enough in level to be audible, however.

Of possibly more interest was the appearance of spectral components at 200Hz and 400Hz, the former high enough in level to break through the 16-bit noise floor. I thought at first that these were measurement spuriae, but as the respective levels of the noise in the left and right channels swapped over when I swapped leads, I must assume it is real. It can also be seen in the spectrum of the Cary’s output while it decoded 16-bit “digital black,” with the third harmonic at 600Hz and the fourth at 800Hz both visible above the noise floor (fig.3).

Fig.4 shows the CD-303/200's linearity error plotted with dithered CD data. It is negligible down to -110dBFS, which is excellent, confirming that the Cary's BB DAC chips have intrinsically better resolution than the CD medium's 16 bits. This can also be seen in figs.5 and 6, which show the CD-303’s reproduction of undithered data representing a 1kHz tone at exactly -90.31dBFS with 16- and 24-bit word lengths, respectively. The three voltage levels describing
off all of the Cary's presence and precision, but it seemed to have a balance that was tipped a bit too much toward its leading edge and contrast, without quite as much brassy warmth and richness as it should have.

I had no complaints at all about the Cary's top end, which sounded unfailingly clear and extended. Things like brushed cymbals seemed effervescent and airy; listening to David Johansen's Shaker, I noted that Keith Carlock's brushed snare work was fantastic. Like Keith Portnoy's harmonica, if to not quite the same degree, the brushed snare was almost holographic in its presence. I wonder if the Cary's incredible dynamic precision and power are related to its exemplary high-frequency performance.

When I sat back and listened to the whole picture, the CD-303/200 had a slightly unusual and captivating presence. Its overall tonal balance was a little on the cool side, due to a very slight lack of bloom in the warmth region and perhaps a slight emphasis in the upper midrange. Similarly, the Cary's spatial portrayal was a little bit more forward than that of some other players. It produced a very wide and tall soundstage, but not quite as deep as some others I've heard. Images were a little larger than with some other units, but more significant, they were incredibly dimensional, and very well-defined by their explosive dynamic contrasts, sharp edges, and solid inner detail.

The flip side of this superb image definition was that individual instruments and players weren't quite as coherent with the surrounding ambience as they could have been. In The Planets, the individual instruments, and even entire orchestral sections, while sounding great individually, never quite jelled into a single, coherent whole. Part of this was the fault of the fussed-up recording of course. The Cary's portrayal of the Romanian Rhapsody, a more realistic recording, was much more integrated, but still not quite as seamless as with the

Measurements

**Fig.7** Cary CD-303/200, spectrum of 1kHz sinewave, DC-1kHz, at 0dBFS into 8k ohms, CD data (linear frequency scale).

**Fig.8** Cary CD-303/200, HF intermodulation spectrum, DC-25kHz, 19+20kHz at 0dBFS into 8k ohms, CD data (linear frequency scale).
more expensive Simaudio and Burmester players I had on hand. 

All of these characteristics — tonal balance, spatial performance, definition and projection — could be shaded a bit one way or the other by cable matching. For example, the Monster Sigma Retro Gold interconnects have a lot of the same characteristics as the Cary, and seemed to reinforce it, redoubling its compelling power and presence but slightly accentuating its cool personality and forward nature. The Nirvana SX-Ltd., on the other hand, is tipped a bit the other way, toward depth, coherence, and warmth. To my ears, this interconnect seemed to result in a more balanced overall package, filling in a little upper-bass warmth, opening up the rear of the soundstage, and better integrating orchestral sections into a single, coherent whole.

The Cary’s strengths and personality could also be accentuated or toned down by mixing and matching associated gear. The Mark Levinson No.20.6 monoblocks, with their darker, warmer tonal balance and more liquid texture, counterbalanced the Cary to a degree, and both softened and warmed up the system’s presentation. Although I liked the tonal balance with the Levinsons, I preferred the VTL Ichiban monoblocks overall, because of the clarity and openness they contributed.

Overall, this is pretty good measured performance, though I was concerned by the lack of de-emphasis and the presence of high-order harmonics in the Cary’s output.

—John Atkinson

But do you really need a preamp?
The CD-303/200 features volume control, executed in the analog domain, so I did a substantial portion of my listening with it driving the VTL or Levinson monoblocks directly, via 6m lengths of balanced Wireworld Gold Eclipse II. My review sample came from the factory with its Low Gain setting selected, which provided a maximum output of 6V from the balanced outputs. With this setting, a normal listening level resulted in volume settings of “40–50” of the 64 increments available. When I ran the Cary through the VAC CPA1 preamp, which I set and use in Passive mode — i.e., as a zero-gain buffered line stage — the Cary was set at maximum voltage output.

Like many similarly equipped units — and unlike the Burmester 001, which was an unqualified success when run direct—the Cary run directly into power amps was a mixed bag. On the plus side, some of the quibbles I had with its performance through the VAC preamp were greatly mitigated. The upper-midrange edgesness was essentially gone — that trumpet in the Romanian Rhapsody was filled-in and brassy, for example. Soundstage depth improved, the perspective was less forward, and the overall sonic envelope was more coherent. Overall, the feel was smoother and more natural.

On the minus side, the CD-303/200’s captivating presence was a bit less so — the Cary sounded a lot more like other similarly priced players. It was still an excellent player, but a little of what made it so special was gone. The dynamic transients weren’t quite as large as before, a bit of the dynamic precision was missing, and the notes no longer had that incredible tauness and carved-from-granite solidity.

Although the CD-303/200 has a low output impedance and a substantial, well-regulated power supply, driving long cables and amplifiers can be tricky. I’ve had volume-capable CD players in the past that shone only when I used them with very short cables. Unfortunately, my current setup didn’t let me try that with the Cary. Your results may vary; overall, I preferred the CD-303/200 running through my VAC preamp.

Summing up
The Cary CD-303/200 was definitely a nice surprise. Not only does Cary make CD players, but, based on my experience of the CD-303/200, they make very good ones. Even more surprising
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was that this one is not merely very good—it also offers a slightly different, and arguably more compelling, personality than most other players out there. Its power and presence are arresting, and in some ways—reproduction of dynamic contrasts, inner detail, bottom-end performance—it’s as good as any player I’ve heard.

The Cary has a slightly cool tonal balance and a forward perspective that may or may not mesh with a particular system or a particular listener’s tastes, and I found that, in some instances, a bit of upper-midrange edginess crept in. These aspects of the CD-303/200’s personality weren’t overbearing, and could, as I found, be offset or balanced by cables and/or associated equipment. Nonetheless, they were there.

The bottom line: The Cary CD-303/200 is an excellent CD player. It is very well-built, and has a ton of intelligent features and capabilities. Overall, it’s a very good value at $3000. Before its arrival, my recommendations to anyone shopping for a CD player at around this price would have been the Wadia 301 and the GamuT CD-1. I’ve just added the Cary CD-303/200 to that list.

Associated Equipment

Analog source: VPI TNT Mk.VHR turntable-tonearm, Grado Statement Reference cartridge.
Digital sources: Simaudio Moon Eclipse, Burmester 001 CD players.
Preamplifier: VAC CPA1 Mk.III.
Power amplifiers: VTL Ichiban, Cary Levinson No.20.6 monoblocks.
Speakers: Thiel CS6.
Accessories: Finite Elemente Pagode equipment rack, Nordost ECO3, Disc Doctor, Diskolution CD cleaning/treatment fluids; MIT ZCenter power-conditioning & delivery system, AudioPrism NoiseSniffer AC line analyzer & QuietLine AC filters; VPI HW 16.5 record-cleaning machine & cleaning fluid, Zerostat 3 Mility, Zerodust Onzow, Lyra SPT stylus cleaners; Echo Busters room-treatment devices. — Brian Damkroger
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— Sam Tellig, Stereophile, Vol. 23 No. 9

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— Glass Audio Magazine
I love attending Stereophile's Home Entertainment shows. I get to check out the latest gear, hobnob with manufacturers and writer colleagues, hear some live music, and play a little jazz with John Atkinson, Zan Stewart, and Immedia's Allen Perkins. Unfortunately, work commitments at my day job meant I couldn't attend HE2003, in San Francisco, so I directed my team of Stereophile scouts to find me some hot new budget speakers. Robert Deutsch was quickest to respond, the week following the show: "Bob, you've got to check out these new speakers from Usher Audio in Taiwan! They have a number of models within your budget." One phone call later, and a $1000/pair of Compass X-719 bookshelf speakers was on its way to me.

Although Usher Audio Technology may not be a household name in the US, the company has been designing and manufacturing speakers and electronics in Taiwan for more than 30 years. Only since 2003 has Stan Tracht, of Thee High End of Dallas, Texas, made Usher designs widely available to US consumers. The Compass X-719 was jointly designed by Dr. Joseph D'Appolito (of the eponymous midrange-tweeter-midrange driver array, now chief engineer at Snell Acoustics) and Usher's Tsai Lien-Shui, and is manufactured in Usher's factory in Taipei.

Both the X-719's drive-units are sourced from Taiwan. The 1" tweeter uses a silk diaphragm, with a moderate viscosity magnetic fluid used in the voice-coil gap to dissipate heat and improve mechanical linearity. Usher claims that the tweeter is capable of reaching much lower in frequency than typical tweeters. The X-719 therefore features a lower crossover point than usual, 2kHz, which relieves the bass/midrange unit of the need to reproduce higher frequencies, which Usher claims results in superior definition. The crossover is a fourth-order acoustic design. The cast-aluminum-framed 7" woofer uses a paper cone filled with carbon fiber to increase stiffness and to damp rsonances. Reflex loading is provided by a 2"-diameter port on the cabinet rear. The woofer motor has a T-shaped pole-piece with a copper sleeve and shorting ring, and provides for a peak-peak "throw" of 12mm.

The biwirable X-719's substantial cabinet has thick walls of MDF and interlocking internal braces. Actually, "substantial" is an understatement. At 37 lbs each, the not unusually large X-719 is by far the heaviest bookshelf speaker I've ever reviewed — and by far the most attractive. The cabinets have rounded edges, and my review samples were finished in an attractive black-gloss, automotive-like lacquer, with elegantly finished side panels of dark, real wood.

To ensure consistency with my continuing series of reviews of budget speakers, I set the X-719s on my trusty Celestion Si stands, declining Usher's offer to supply their own $400/pair stands. After seeing a photo of Usher's RSW708 stand, however, I regretted my...
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I tested the X-719s with their grilles on and off. Although Usher recommends leaving the grilles off for the most uniform and flat frequency response, and despite the fact that I felt the X-719 sounded more transparent and detailed that way, I preferred listening with the grilles on, which provided the best integration of bass, midrange, and highs.

The differences, however, were subtle. I auditioned the Usher Compass X-719s using a wide range of vinyl, CD, and home-theater recordings. I was immediately struck by the speaker's natural, detailed midrange. Well-recorded female vocal soloists, such as Madeline Peyroux on Dreamland (CD, Atlantic 82946-2) and Aimee Mann on Bachelor No.2 or the Last Remains of the Dodo (CD, SuperEgo SE002), were vibrant and rich. On his Give It Up to Love (CD, JVC XRC0 0012-2), Mighty Sam McClain's voice was reproduced with the requisite deep, resonant growl.

The X-719's detailed and delicate rendition of well-recorded instruments with significant midrange energy, such as woodwinds, brass, and acoustic guitar, made the speaker a good match for classical chamber works such as George Crumb's Quest (LP, Bridge 9069), and small-group jazz recordings such as Jerome Harris' take on Duke Ellington's "The Mooche" (from Editor's Choice, Stereophile STPH016-2). With every classical and jazz recording I played, the X-719s "disappeared," all instruments emanating from a wide, deep soundstage.

Measurements
The Ushers arrived at my home rather the worse for wear, their single packing box and internal Styrofoam inserts not being up to the task of protecting the speakers from the ravages of UPS. A speaker this hefty needs to be individually packed, in my experience. Fortunately, most of the damage was cosmetic, and while the crossover's large air-cored inductor was hanging by its connecting leads in the less damaged of the pair (S/N B012830), the speaker did function correctly. All the measurements were therefore performed on this sample, with its grille off (the grille fittings had been snapped off in shipping).

The Compass X-719 is of average voltage sensitivity, at an estimated 87.5dB(V)/2.83V/m, which is within experimental error of the specified 88dB. Its impedance (fig.1) lies above 8 ohms throughout almost the entire bass and midrange, though it does drop to an average of 6 ohms in the treble. The speaker's high frequencies will definitely sound less lively with a tube amplifier having a high source impedance, as a result of the overall difference between the midrange and treble impedances. I would have classified the Usher as being very easy for an amplifier to drive, were it not for the combination of 5.4 ohms magnitude and -43° phase angle at 2.5kHz.

The slight wrinkle in the impedance traces at around 450Hz implies the existence of some kind of cabinet resonance. Examining the panels' vibrational behavior did indeed reveal a single strong mode present at 461Hz on the sidewalls (fig.2), though at this point it might well be high enough in frequency to "fall below the cracks" with concert-pitch music. (The higher the "Q" or "Quality Factor," of a resonance, the longer it needs to be simulated with exactly the right frequency to be fully excited.)

The saddle at 41Hz in the impedance-magnitude trace suggests that this is the tuning frequency of the 2"-diameter port on the rear panel. This is confirmed both by the sharp notch at 41Hz in the woofer's nearfield output and the broad peak in the port's response centered on the same frequency (fig.3). Two sharp peaks, at 350Hz and 780Hz, can be seen in the port's output above its passband, suggesting the presence of resonances at these frequencies. Suspiciously, there
I enjoyed the Compass X-719 most with piano recordings, regardless of genre. Bill Evans' ax on Live at the Village Vanguard (LP, Riverside RS 3006) was reproduced with all its warmth, detail, and subtle dynamic inflections intact. On the opposite side of the spectrum, Toru Takemitsu's Coroia: London Version (LP, Decca HEAD 4) uses a closely miked piano as a percussion instrument, with unusually wide variations of dynamics, from the subtle to the explosive, as well as considerable use of open space and air — the piece might as well be titled When Pianos Attack. The X-719's wide dynamic range enabled the piano on this challenging recording to bloom as in a live performance.

Higher in frequency, the X-719 took on a bit of a forward perspective. This was not brightness, harshness, or coloration but, with works that had significant high-frequency content, was equivalent to moving a few rows closer to the concert-hall stage. This perspective resulted in an attractively crisp presentation of percussion on classical and jazz works. Steve Nelson's vibraphone solo on "The Mooche" sounded vibrant and tactile, reminiscent of a live performance heard from a front table in a jazz club; and according to my listening notes, the marimba on Messiaen's Des Canyons Aux Etoiles (LP, Erato STV 70974-75) was "startlingly natural."

Although the Hammond B-3 organ on the Mighty Sam disc sounded realistic, during solos it seemed as if the instrument's 1' and 2' drawbars had been pulled open another notch. However, despite the more forward perspective, the X-719's high frequencies didn't sound as detailed or as delicately presented as its midrange, particularly with classical works. Moreover, when the speaker was pressed hard during highly modulated orchestral works, such as Elliot Carter's Double Concerto for Harpsichord and Two Chamber Orchestras (LP, Nonesuch H-71312) or the Messiaen track, strings, brass, and high-frequency percussion instruments tended to sound a bit steely and brash.

The X-719's bass performance was unlike that of any other speaker I've heard. With all recordings, the bass was forceful, forward, dramatic, and deep (JA's measurements will tell us just how deep). But in searching for a word to describe the bass, the only word I can think of is luxem. With every recording I used, I kept thinking of... Dolly Parton, Adrienne Barbeau, Kitten Natividad. That is: round, tight, well-defined, dramatic, warm, supple, but slightly larger than life. Scott La Faro's solos on the live Bill Evans recording bloomed with good definition, and although the bass presentation was rather

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**Measurements**

is a small suckout in the woofer's response at 350Hz.

The crossover between the woofer and the tweeter lies just below the specified 2kHz, with what appears to be a third-order slope to the tweeter's high-pass filter. The woofer's rolloff is more shallow, broken by peaks at 3kHz, 8kHz, and just above 10kHz. The tweeter's output is even in the bottom part of its passband, but there is a little too much on-axis energy around 10kHz. This boost is still apparent when the X-719's farfield output is averaged across a 30° horizontal window on the tweeter axis (fig.4). Together with the slight excess of energy

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![Fig.4 Usher Compass X-719, anechoic response on tweeter axis at 50°, averaged across 30° horizontal window and corrected for microphone response, with the complex sum of the nearfield woofer and port responses, taking into account acoustic phase and distance from the nominal farfield point, plotted below 300Hz.](image)

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![Fig.5 Usher Compass X-719, vertical response family at 50°, normalized to tweeter's response, differences in response 45°-15° above axis, reference response, differences in response 5°-45° below axis.](image)

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![Fig.6 Usher Compass X-719, lateral response family at 50°, normalized to tweeter's response, differences in response 90°-5° off-axis, reference response, differences in response 5°-90° off-axis.](image)

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round, there was no sense of coloration, overhang, or sluggishness.

When I played well-recorded electronic rock recordings at higher volumes, the Usher's bass performance was even more dramatic. On "Feel No Pain," from Sade's Love Deluxe (CD, Epic EK 53178), the portamento from the lower-register bass synth shook the room with extraordinary definition and with no trace of coloration, overhang, or strain. Recordings such as this demonstrated the X-719's seemingly limitless capabilities of high-level dynamics — by far the most impressive I've heard from a bookshelf speaker this size.

I decided to turn up the volume. The bass-synth blasts on "Electric Battle Weapon 6," from the Chemical Brothers' American EP (LP, Virgin/Astralwerks ASW 43338), are true lease-breakers. I cranked up the system to about 110dB. Walls were shaking. Floors were shaking.

In the two octaves below 10kHz, this will lead to the balance that Bob Reina described as "forward." I suspect the upper harmonics of instruments are being reproduced a little too hot in level, which he perceived as "forwardness" rather than as brightness per se.

As I said in my discussion of the Usher's impedance, this is something that will be ameliorated if a tube amplifier is used.

The suckout around 300Hz is apparent in this graph, but the bass is actually well-extended, even allowing for the usual boost that accompanies the nearfield measurement technique. BJR described the X-719's bass as being "buxom," but if anything, I would have thought the lows should have sounded tight as well as deep.

Fig. 4 was taken on the tweeter axis, and a suckout is apparent at the top of the woofer's passband. Fig. 5 shows that this suckout fills in 5-10° above the tweeter axis, which suggests low stands would be more appropriate than high. BJR's 24" stands, for example, place the Usher's tweeter 39° from the floor, which might explain Bob's finding the speaker's midrange to sound a bit laid-back. On the other hand, he may have been reacting to the lack of off-axis energy in the lateral plane at the top of the woofer's passband (fig.6). Note that the tweeter gets decidedly more directional above 6kHz, which in well-damped rooms will tend to work against the excess of on-axis energy in the same region.

However, this will make the low treble sound more prominent.

The X-719's step response (fig.7) indicates that both its drive-units are connected with the same, positive acoustic polarity. The waterfall plot (fig.8) shows a clean initial decay, though there is some delayed energy associated with the peaks in the woofer's out-of-band behavior.

Usher's Compass X-719 offers a lot of speaker for $1000/pair: it's well-made, well-finished, has high-quality parts, and its powerful, extended low frequencies are unusual in this price region. Still, its measured performance does reveal some anomalies.

—John Atkinson
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WorldRadioHistory

Stereophile, May 2004
Firebird Suite (LP, Mercury Living Presence SR 90226). The orchestra was portrayed as big, bright, dynamic, and vibrant across a wide, deep stage, not sounding for a minute as if I was playing a recording through bookshelf speakers. The bass-drum thwacks, although a tad larger than life and with a slight bit of overhang, shook the room with no trace of coloration or artificial resonance. However, during the densely orchestrated tuttis, the trumpets and upper-register trombones were a bit too forward and blatty, and the somewhat forward perspective of the Mercury Living Presence "sound" was quite apparent.

Do they compete?
I compared the Usher Compass X-719 ($1000/pair) with the NHT SB-3 ($600/pair), the Polk RT25i ($319/pair), and the Alón by Acarian Systems Petite ($1000/pair). (The last two models have been discontinued.)

The Polk RT25i impressed me with its dead-neutral midrange, sounding even more natural than the Usher, but without as much body as the Usher in the midrange. The Polk's high frequencies were even more extended and delicate than the Usher's. Although the Polk's mid- and upper bass were less colored than the Usher's, the Usher's low frequencies were far more extended, and the speaker trounced the Polk in its ability to provide high-level dynamic slam without compression or strain.

The NHT SB-3 sounded sweeter and more romantic than the Usher. Its vocal reproduction was as rich, but more delicate, and its high frequencies were more detailed. The NHT's low-level dynamic articulation seemed more continuous and involving than the Usher's, and its integration of midrange, highs, and bass was far more coherent.

Curiously, the Compass X-719 performed best with delicate, simple acoustic music and bombastic, electronic rock recordings.

However, the NHT's bass was not as bloomy or as forceful, and, at high levels, the SB-3 suffered from compression. Moreover, the NHT sounded more closed-down than the Usher, and like a much smaller speaker.

Finally, the Alón Petite was far superior to the Usher in overall neutrality, coherence, detail resolution, and delicacy across the frequency spectrum. The Usher's bass went far deeper, however, and the X-719 was much better than the Alón in terms of high-level dynamic articulation and sense of power without compression or strain.

Summing up
I enjoyed the time I spent listening to a wide range of program material through the Compass X-719s. Curiously, they performed best with delicate, simple acoustic music, such as solo piano recordings, and bombastic, electronic rock recordings. In addition, while its low-frequency character is more buxom than strictly accurate, the X-719's bass extension and high-level dynamic capability have set new benchmarks for a bookshelf speaker.

Whether or not the Usher Audio Technology Compass X-719 is right for you will depend on your musical tastes, listening biases, and associated equipment. In any event, the drop-dead-gorgeous Compass X-719 is a welcome addition to the American marketplace. I look forward to hearing other Usher speakers.

Associated Equipment

Analog sources: VPI TNT Mk.IV turntable, Immedia RPM tonearm, Koetsu Urushi MC phono cartridge; Rega Planar 3 turntable, Syring PU-3 tonearm, Clearaudio Virtuoso Wood, Aurum Beta 3 cartridges.

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

Preamplification: Vendetta Research SCP-2D phono stage, 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
Burmeister brings out the music for one and all!

From the first time I heard the Burmeister 969 transport, 970 DA Converter, 808 MK5 preamp and 911 MK3 power amps until last night when I retired to bed after listening for several hours, I was continuously struck by how much better it sounded than anything I have ever owned (This includes some staggeringly expensive SET handmade tube gear which I had for several years that now is gathering dust in my closet). But what do you expect for $130,000 worth of audio gear? Perfection of course! So I wondered, what would the Burmeister TOP- LINE sound like? Amazingly good, in fact!

When I played the 001 CD Player, 011 pre amp and 911 MK 3 or 956 MK power amps, I was surprised how close they came to the performance of the Reference System. Not that the difference wasn't profound. It was. But, I never felt I was out of the concert hall, only a little further back. Moving on to the BASIC LINE I was pleased by how little was lost.

The 006 CD Player, 935 pre amp and 956 Power amp held their own against their richer cousins and easily outclassed anything in the price range. But MONDO RONDO! I was amazed! The 992 CD Player and 991 Integrated Amp (the Rondo Line) took that Burmeister magic and moved it downstream into a price range where any one with taste could afford to buy it. Rondo, Basic, Top, or Reference Line; Burmeister brings out the music for one and all!
Shure E3c in-ear headphones

"A".h, I see what the problem is. Your ear canals are larger in diameter than normal."

Size does matter, I guess. I was talking to Shure staffers at their booth at Home Entertainment 2003 last June. I had always had a problem with such in-ear headphones as the industry-standard Etymotics, and was explaining that I was getting on no better with the review samples of Shure's then-new, $499 E5c in-ear cans. With what I now knew to be my wider-than-normal ear canals, I had not been able to get the supplied sleeves, foam or soft plastic, to seal properly. The result was sound that seriously lacked bass.

Shure then sent me some custom foam sleeves that fixed the problem. More important, they also sent me a pair of the E3c headphones they were introducing at the 2004 CES in January. While the '5s are a seriously good product, the low price of the '5s—just $179—tempted me to write instead about them. (An even lower-priced model, the E2c, costs $99, but the E3c was the one Shure describes in their literature as having "audiophile" aspirations.)

Inside the head

The Shures use a small earpiece with a protruding tube that fires sound right at the eardrum. A foam or soft-plastic sleeve fits around the tube and seals the ear canal. This both allows the minuscule drive-unit to pressurize the ear cavity, and provides good isolation from external sounds. The drive-unit employs a "balanced armature," which is said to have high efficiency and extended high frequencies. Each E3c is supplied with a Personal Fit Kit, which includes three sizes each of soft and softer plastic sleeves and one pair of yellow foam sleeves. (Refill packs in different sizes are available from Shure's website.) The 60" lead is a bit long for jogging, but an adjuster on the yoke allows it to be comfortably dressed. It is usefully flexible—it would otherwise pick up handling noise—and can be spooled for storage in a small nylon case.

Listening

My one-hour commute allowed me to get some serious auditioning done, using an Apple iPod playing both uncompressed AIFF files and 320kbps AAC files. The E3cs were plenty loud straight from the iPod, even on the subway, but I also used HeadRoom's new BigHead amplifier, hooked up to the iPod with its minijack-minijack cable. At home, I used iTunes running on my Apple PowerBook as a source, feeding the Shures from either the headphone jack of a Metric Halo MIO 2882 FireWire-connected D/A converter (with a ¼" adapter) or with the MIO's AES/EBU output feeding the Benchmark DAC1 (which I write about elsewhere in this issue).

Getting the E5cs to fit comfortably, with their stiff cable and over-the-ear insertion, had been tricky. But the '3cs were easy to fit and didn't feel intrusive. The big adjustment you must make with in-ear cans is to learn to reduce your body's sheer noisiness. With the foam sleeves providing effective isolation from external noise, the sounds of your own footsteps, transmitted through your spine, can become oppressive. And I got used to holding the cable yoke away from my chest lest it, too, communicate body noise.

Most important, you must get an air-tight seal or the E3c will have reduced bass. But when you do get a good seal, the low frequencies sound impressively full. The ¼-octave wobble tones on Stereophile's Editor's Choice CD (STPH016-2) extended in full measure down to the 40Hz band, with the 32Hz tone still audible. The E3cs rolled off rapidly below that frequency, meaning that kick drums sounded better defined, if not as weighty, as with my Sony MDR-7506 phones.

High frequencies were the E3c's strong suit. Not only was the treble naturally balanced, there was also a refreshing lack of the presence-region emphasis that leads to a "rattling" of massed voices through inexpensive headphones, such as the freebies that came with my iPod. Bitaural recordings—a 1980s BBC drama broadcast of She Stoops to Conquer, my excerpt from the 1992 Canadian Grand Prix on Stereophile's Test CD 3 (STPH006-2)—gave impressive out-of-head imaging.

I encountered one operational problem with the E3cs. Their sound-isolating properties were a boon on airplanes, even when the iPod's battery ran down. However, if I inserted them in my ears before takeoff, they would stop working when the plane reached its cruising altitude. It sounded as if the drive-unit had stuck, as turning up the volume resulted in a clipped sound. If I didn't insert the headphones until after the plane's cabin had depressurized, they worked fine. However, I then had to remove them when the plane began its descent.

Summing up

Shure's E3c headphones are comfortable, sound great, and are an excellent value at $179. The E3c is an ideal companion to Apple's iPod, which continues to impress nine months after I purchased it.

Description: Lightweight, sound-isolating, in-ear headphones, with foam or soft flex sleeves and ⅛", gold-plated 3.5mm stereo plug. Impedance (at 1kHz): 26 ohms. Sensitivity (at 1kHz): 115dB/mW. Supplied accessories: Personal Fit Kit with three sizes of flex and ultra-soft flex sleeves, one pair of foam sleeves; nylon carrying case.

Dimensions: Weight: 0.9oz (28gm). Cable length: 60" (1.52m).

Serial number of unit reviewed: N/A.


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Benchmark DAC1 D/A headphone amplifier

We generally restrict Stereophile's review coverage to conventional consumer products. But the reality is that many pro-audio components are equally at home in domestic living rooms and recording studios, so we do look out for promising pieces of pro gear. In his July 2003 "The Fifth Element" column, John Marks alerted Stereophile readers to an example, the Benchmark DAC1 D/A processor and headphone amplifier,1 which he rated highly: "Shazam! Gloriosky, even. All you need is a transport to feed the DAC1 a digital signal, a power amplifier, speakers, and a few bits of wire, and you have a stripped-down hot rod of a system that is ready to rock 'n' roll. Or Wagnerize, even."

I'll leave readers to check out JM's report for a description of the DAC1. What's important to note here is that it has three digital inputs—TosLink and coaxial S/PDIF, as well as AES/EBU on an XLR jack—and three sets of analog outputs: balanced on XLRs, unbalanced on RCA's, and a ¼" headphone jack. As a one-box solution to decoding digital audio wherever convenient, the DAC1 goes head to head with the Grace 901, which John and I wrote about in the March and August 2003 issues, respectively (both reviews are reprinted at www.stereophile.com/theifthelement/802). John decided that the $1495 Grace had a slight edge in sound quality, with a "slightly more luscious midrange and sweeter treble." But he suggested I give the Benchmark a listen. Belatedly, I did, only to immediately wish I had done so sooner.

I dove the DAC1 with a variety of digital sources, ranging from my reference Mark Levinson No.31.5 CD transport to uncompressed AIF audio data files played back on my Apple PowerBook via a Metric Halo Mobile IOS 2882 FireWire interface. Preamp was a Mark Levinson No.380, or the Halcro dm10 reviewed in the April issue by Paul Bolin; power amplifier was the daTZeel NHB-108; and speakers were Sonus Faber Cremonas.

In level-matched comparisons with my long-term reference DAC, the Mark Levinson No.30.6, using Illuminati Orchid AES/EBU digital datalinks, I found it surprisingly difficult to hear differences. But after a lot of listening — whether it was solo classical piano, such as the recent JVC XRCD re-release of Artur Rubinstein performing Chopin piano sonatas (JM-XR24008), or classic rock, such as our February "Recording of the Month," the Beatles' Let It Be... Naked (CD, Apple/Capitol CDP 5 95227 2) — the 30.6 had more low-frequency weight, slightly more dimensionality to its stereo imaging, and a smoother presentation, overall. Both Ringo's kick drum and Rubinstein's piano's left-hand register had more authority via the No.30.6, and I could better differentiate the direct sounds of the instruments and the surrounding ambience, whether that of the Manhattan Center in 1961 (Rubinstein) or the various reverber chambers (Beatles).

However, before you conclude that I'm dising the Benchmark, remember that, before being discontinued in 2003, the mighty Levinson cost $17,500, came in two chassis, and weighed more than 80 lbs. The Lilliputian DAC1 sells for a mere $975. Considered on its own merits as a D/A processor, the Benchmark punched way above its weight. Its grain-free presentation was accompanied by stable, well-defined soundstaging, and low frequencies that, if not as weighty as the Levinson's, were still full-balanced.

Against the CD-playback performance of Musical Fidelity's Tri-Vista SACD player ($6000), the Benchmark, driven by the MF's data output with the inexpensive Stereovox hdxv S/PDIF cable, performed credibly. It presented Ida Levin's solo violin on the Schulhoff sonata movement on Editor's Choice (STPH016-2) a little more forward in the soundstage than did the tubed Musical Fidelity, but the relationship between the instrument and the voluminous acoustic of Santa Fe's Loretto Chapel was still clearly defined. On tracks where the recorded reverberation was more subtle — the Beethoven piano sonata on Editor's Choice, for example — the DAC1 sounded slightly drier than the Tri-Vista, but still very convincing. And its low frequencies sounded definitely fatter.

To assess the DAC1 as a headphone amplifier, I fed its balanced analog output to the HeadRoom BlockHead ($3333) with 0.5mS of balanced Ayre interconnect, using single-ended Sennheiser HD 600 headphones for the Benchmark and balanced HD 600s for the HeadRoom. Level matching could be only approximate, of course, but I readily perceived the differences. The BlockHead sounded warmer, but with a more transparent window into the soundstage, on Cantus' "Danny Boy" (CD, Let Your Voice Be Heard, Cantus CTS 1201). The Benchmark had a more filigreed treble and a lighter overall balance, but with a slightly less well-defined upper bass. I used both headphone amplifiers while auditioning splices for my current recording project, Mozart's Clarinet Concerto. Both were equally adept at letting me know when a splice wouldn't work, for example, of a very slight difference in the background ambiances of the outgoing and incoming takes. The DAC1 will be an essential companion when I next record on location. I bought the review sample.

Measurements: As is my wont when I write "Follow-Ups" on components previously covered in one of Stereophile's columns, I performed a full set of measurements on the DAC1. The maximum output level from the balanced jacks was a high 12.33V and a little less from the headphone jack, which clipped with a 0dBFS signal with the volume control set to its maximum. The unbalanced jacks delivered a full-scale 3.1V. All the outputs preserved absolute polarity, and the source impedance was a low 60 ohms from the balanced jacks, less than 1 ohm from the headphone output. The unbalanced source impedance was on the high side at 1230 ohms, but this should pose no problem with normal preamps.

Fed CD data, the DAC1's frequency response was flat over almost the entire audio band, from all three sets of outputs, with a very slight droop in the top octave (fig.1, top pair of traces). This rolloff continued up to 40kHz with 96kHz data.

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1 The DAC1 costs $975 and can be purchased directly from www.benchmarxmedia.com; Benchmark Media Systems, Inc., 5925 Court Street Road, Syracuse, NY 13206-1707. Tel: (800) 262-4675. Fax: (315) 437-8119.
Follow-Up

Before beginning a steeper decline (fig.2), Fed pre-emphasized data, the response (fig.1, bottom traces) was actually flatter than with normal data. With the volume control in-circuit, the DAC1's channel matching was excellent with the control at its maximum, though it worsened to a 125dB/octave from 12:00. Channel separation (not shown) was better than 100dB below 2kHz, but worsened with increasing frequency at a 6dB/octave rate, due to the usual capacitive coupling, most probably at the volume control.

Despite its affordable price, the DAC1 offers extraordinary resolution. This can be seen in fig.3. The top pair of traces are a ½-octave spectral analysis of the Benchmark's balanced output while it was fed 16-bit data representing a dithered 1kHz tone at 90dBFS. No harmonic components can be seen, and the noise floor is basically that of the recorded dither. Extending the word length to 24 bits (middle traces) drops the noise floor by almost 20dB, suggesting that the DAC1's resolution approaches 20 bits, which is superb. Undoubtedly this was aided by the higher-than-normal output level, but even feeding the Benchmark a dithered 24-bit tone (-120dBFS gave a recognizable spectrum, with no harmonics apparent (fig.3, bottom traces). However, note the spectral components at 300Hz and 650Hz with this signal. Idle tones of some kind?

Correlating with this high dynamic range is a superbly low level of linearity error, even with 16-bit data (fig.4), while the DAC1's reproduction of an undithered 16-bit, 1kHz tone at exactly 90.31dBFS was essentially perfect, the three discrete voltage levels clearly defined and accompanied by excellent waveform symmetry (fig.5). Extending the word length to 24 bits gave an excellent sinewave shape (fig.6), even without dither.

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**Fig.1** Benchmark DAC1, balanced frequency response at -12dBFS into 10k ohms, with de-emphasis (bottom) and without (top), 44.1kHz sample rate (right channel dashed, 0.5dB/vertical div.)

**Fig.2** Benchmark DAC1, balanced frequency response at -12dBFS into 10k ohms, 96kHz sample rate (right channel dashed, 0.5dB/vertical div.)

**Fig.3** Benchmark DAC1, ½-octave spectrum of dithered 1kHz tone at -90dBFS, with noise and spuriae, 16-bit (top) and 24-bit data (middle); and at -12dB FS, 24-bit data (bottom). (Right channel dashed.)

**Fig.4** Benchmark DAC1, balanced departure from linearity, 16-bit CD data (2dB/vertical div, right channel dashed).

**Fig.5** Benchmark DAC1, waveform of undithered 1kHz sinewave at -90.31dBFS, 16-bit external data.

**Fig.6** Benchmark DAC1, waveform of undithered 1kHz sinewave at -90.31dBFS, 24-bit CD data.

**Fig.7** Benchmark DAC1, headphone output, spectrum of 1kHz sinewave, DC-1kHz, at 0dBFS into 8k ohms, CD data (linear frequency scale).
The Benchmark’s excellent digital performance was matched in the analog domain. Fig.7 shows a spectral analysis of the headphone output, outputting a full-scale 1kHz tone. With the exception of the second harmonic in the right channel at -106dB (0.0005%), the distortion components all lie at or below the analyzer’s background level. The same excellent story can be seen with intermodulation distortion (fig.8).

Finally, even when fed via a high-jitter TosLink connection from my PC, the DAC1’s rejection of word-clock jitter was excellent, with the 24-bit jitter level, assessed with the Miller Audio Research Analyzer, just 128.5 picoseconds peak–peak (fig.9). Data-related jitter was absent, and the highest-level pair of sidebands in this graph lie at ±15.6Hz (purple “1”).

Summing up: Whether considered as a standalone D/A converter or a versatile headphone amp, Benchmark’s DAC1 is an audiophile bargain. Use it to revitalize the sound of your long-in-the-tooth CD player or the DVD player that you never thought sounded as good playing CDs as you had expected. Thanks, John Marks, for alerting both the readers and me to the DAC1.

Fig.8 Benchmark DAC1, headphone output, HF intermodulation spectrum, DC–25kHz, 19+20kHz at 0dBFS into 8k ohms, CD data (linear frequency scale).

Fig.9 Benchmark DAC1, high-resolution jitter spectrum of analog output signal (11.025kHz at –6dBFS, sampled at 44.1kHz with LSB toggled at 229Hz). Source: 24-bit WAV file sourced from a PC with an RME Digit96/8 Pro soundcard and a TosLink connection. Center frequency of trace, 11.025kHz; frequency range, ±3.5kHz.
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GUSTAV HOLST: The Planets

Gustav Holst retains a seat in the pantheon of 20th-century composers thanks entirely to the lasting popularity of his masterwork, The Planets. Written from 1914 to 1916, this opus is a suite of seven tone poems, each taking the name of one of the spheres, with the exception of Pluto (then undiscovered) and our own. While drawing on Mahler's lyricism (Saturn), Stravinsky's rhythm (Mars), and Debussy's impressionism (Mercury), Holst's voice is unique. His passion for the folk music of his country and his interest in astrology combine to capture, in the words of fellow Englishman Ralph Vaughan Williams, the "perfect equilibrium of two sides of Holst's nature, the melodic and the mystic."

From the audiophile's perspective, The Planets' insatiable large and varied orchestration offers exciting acoustical possibilities. And despite the work's use of complex rhythms and bitonality, The Planets remains one of the most accessible entrées into classical music, as evidenced by the long line of imitations churned out by film composers. The work opens with Mars, the Bringer of War, a violent enactment of an ultimately self-destructive war machine, bristling with braying brass and a strident ostinato in the percussion. Presaging World War I (the movement was completed in 1914, before the outbreak of war), Mars speaks to the cold inhumanity and futility of war—or, if you believe the recent ad campaign, the unstoppable power of the Pontiac GTO. This is followed by Venus, the Bringer of Peace, a calm, soothing contrast to the earlier chaos, filled with limpid woodwinds and luminous strings. Mercury, the Winged Messenger is a delicate scherzo whose tunes and phrases leap nimbly through the orchestra at a virtuosic pace. As the middle planet in the suite, Jupiter, the Bringer of Jollity is the sentimental anchor of the work. A shaky or uninspired performance of this movement should categorically eliminate a recording from inclusion in your library. Warm, lyrical, yet marked by English restraint, Jupiter itself is bisected by a stunningly beautiful chorale, the central theme of the movement, which was later extracted and assigned a patriotic text by Sir Cecil Spring-Rice, "I Vow to Thee My Country."

Saturn, the Bringer of Old Age is a relentless and inevitable procession toward death reworked from Holst's own choral setting Dives and Hymeneal. Holst noted that "Saturn brings not only physical decay, but also a vision of fulfillment."

Indeed, the coda comes with the peace of acceptance, in the spirit of Mahler's Das Lied von der Erde. Playful and parodic, Uranus, the Magician is Dukas' The Sorcerer's Apprentice on a grander scale. An ostentatious horn motif is reshaped into varied tangents, and the magician's trickery seduces the ear until he abruptly disappears. Neptune, the Mystic is positively ethereal. There is no main theme per se, though bits of tunes surface and sink. A woman's chorus, heard for the first time, enters almost imperceptibly and remains after the orchestra dies away, growing, in the words of Holst's daughter Imogen, "fainter and fainter in the distance, until the imagination [knows] no difference between sound and silence."

The sheer volume of available recordings of The Planets—currently more than 60—makes it nearly impossible to consider all of them. The performances selected for inclusion here were first chosen on the basis of artistic merit, interpretation, and engaging acoustics, and then on the likelihood that an enticed reader will actually be able to track down the disc. Recordings that include Colin Matthews' ill-fated addendum Pluto, the Renewer are covered here; Holst's arrangement of The Planets for two pianos is not. Historic, modern, remastered, and high-end audio recordings are all represented.

Though simply dreadful from an audio standpoint, Holst's own recording, with the London Symphony Orchestra at 1922 (CD, Pearl 2703194172), is historically valuable for those interested in gaining insight into the composer's vision of the work, which apparently includes speedy tempos, notably in Saturn and Neptune. Be warned that it's snap, crackle, 'n' pop all the way through, and that some instruments are at times muffled.

High-end audio

At the other end of the sonic spectrum, the best of the high-end audio versions available is André Previn's 1974 recording with the London Symphony, now
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John Eliot Gardiner’s 1994 performance with the Philharmonia Orchestra in surround sound (SACD, Deutsche Grammophon 471 634-2) is marked by clean playing. Detailed acoustics reveal fine textures, including gongs in Mars that arrive like the wind of war. Mars is hyper-articulated, paced for tension rather than speed, and is convincing despite (or because of) its largo treatment. Jupiter is driven and precise, the chorale delivered with all the English restraint Gardiner can muster. We feel the real weight of Saturn with warm strings (thanks, SACD), and an oddly triumphant Uranus with massive organ sound.

Surround sound can’t save Leonard Bernstein’s 1971 recording with the New York Philharmonic (SACD, Sony Classical SS 87981) from a measured and micromanaged interpretation. Bernstein does well to bring some clarity to the usually soupy Neptune, and his Jupiter chorale is as boldly nuanced as a great Shakespearean actor’s soliloquy—but Mars is thin, Venus drags, Mercury is ridged with orchestral flubs, and Saturn is reduced to a mere lullaby.

**Pluto, the Renower**

In the liner notes to Mark Elder and the Hallé Orchestra’s premiere recording of The Planets with Colin Matthews’ added movement, Pluto, the Renower (Hyperion SACD A67270), Matthews writes that he had “mixed feelings” when first approached about writing in the final planet. Unfortunately, Matthews didn’t give in to his doubts and fears, and the result is a musically forgettable appendage that unbalances the suite. Making no attempt at pastiche, Matthews’ soundscape-scherzo races around en route to nowhere, occasionally recalling snatches of earlier movements. If you must own a Pluto, avoid this recording; despite conducting a commendable Jupiter, Elder brings little to the podium.

Instead, try David Lloyd-Jones and the Royal Scottish National Orchestra (CD, Naxos 8.555776), also available Pluto-free (DVD-A, Naxos 5.110004). This generally good performance features a tight and foreboding Mars with imaginative tempos, and a simply captivating Mercury. Lloyd-Jones’ Saturn reveals a fine progression from pain to acceptance. The sound is expansive, though unrelenting timpani throughout threaten at times to drown out everyone else in the orchestra and may cause subwoofer-replacement anxiety.

**The very best**

Superb playing and acoustics combine with a thoughtful, gripping interpretation to make Herbert von Karajan’s powerful 1961 recording with the Vienna Philharmonic (CD, Decca 452 303-2) the best version of The Planets available, regardless of format. Bright brass in Mars go for the jugular in a chilling finale. A gentle Venus features sensuous strings brimming with rubato. A warm, virtuosic Mercury leads to a driving and buoyant Jupiter. The chorale within is lent appropriate majesty, yet the movement never loses its humor or playfulness. Saturn features dark, ruddy playing from the strings and woodwinds, and Karajan delivers a wistful, heartrending account. Uranus is given a razor’s edge by the Vienna brass, and Neptune’s quick tempo provides tension where one usually finds stasis. The remastering is warm, with clean separation.

Karajan also has an excellent 1981 account with the Berlin Philharmonic (CD, Deutsche Grammophon 439 011-2). The playing is quite fine, though it’s clear that Karajan has a destination to reach and is making no pit stops along the way. Mars has bright brass and good movement, and Venus is measured and gentle. Jupiter is rousing, but isn’t really given space to breathe. The chorale tune is a bit heavy and the finale is abrupt. Uranus is quite spry and understated. Separation here is occasionally muddled, but the remastered sound is rich.

Georg Solti’s 1979 set of Planets, with the London Philharmonic Orchestra (CD, Decca 430-447 2), takes second place thanks to splendid interpretation; long, long orchestral lines; and, most notably, sustained tension from the LPO throughout. Along with William...
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Steinberg (below), Solti commands the finest Jupiter on disc. Well-pulsed and delightful, crystalline brass execute crisp runs with virtuosic technique. Solti nails the chorale, nobly gliding along. The lightness of this movement is remarkable, never lagging, strong and assured. Mars is rousing, sharp, and animated, while Venus is expressive, if slightly harried. The LPO shapes Mercury with a nice Bartókian edge — gritty and folkish. Saturn is thoughtful and forward-moving, and Solti stretches the movement’s long progression to its limit before releasing to a benevolent denouement. He employs a similar schema in Neptune to fine effect. The opulent remastering is balanced with warm bass.

Notable for the way it reveals inner voices and counterpoint, William Steinberg’s 1971 remastered recording with the Boston Symphony Orchestra (CD, Deutsche Grammophon 289 463 627-2) also captures Boston’s Symphony Hall in a spacious, bright ambience. At a lightning-paced 6:34, Mars is exhilarating and unrelenting, with nice detail in the brass. Venus struts with sensuousness, yet in the end returns to modesty. A Scandinavian lilt gives Mercury a bouncing rhythm to go with spot-on articulation. Brash and confident, Jupiter turns into a drunken ballad in its dance section and is deliberately paced, a fine contrast to the racing Mars. Steinberg pinpoints the nobility of the choral melody, striding with humble determination.

Also excellent
Charles Dutois’s well-groomed 1987 version with the Montreal Symphony Orchestra (CD, Decca 289 460 606-2) rejects whiz-bang explosiveness for thoughtful pacing and considered continuity. We feel the awful weight of Mars, while Venus glides on an ocean of strings, enveloping us gently in sound. Mercury is nearly impressionistic, allowing Dutois the colorist to flex his muscle. The sound on this digital disc occasionally falls flat but is generally lush.

A 2002 LSO Live performance by Colin Davis and the London Symphony Orchestra (CD, LSO0029) is joyfully spontaneous, with detailed textures in crisp digital sound. A well-managed Mars features crisp brass that don’t overblow. Venus is pensive but not gloomy, rich but not overly sentimental. Nice arcing phrases in Mercury give way to a Jupiter that doesn’t take itself too seriously — danceable, with a burst of speed for the finale. Davis’s meditative and foreboding Saturn is fine but lacks the dark edge of Karajan/VPO. Neptune is especially worthy for its dreamy landscape, resplendent with kaleidoscopic imagery in perpetual motion. Colin Davis also has a 2003 digital recording with the Berlin Philharmonic (CD, Philips B0000953-02) that is quite lush, but the unadventurous interpretation and glamor-photo engineering render it innocuous.

Andrew Davis puts the BBC Symphony Orchestra through some extreme tempos in his 1994 digital recording (CD, Apex/Warner 8573 89087 2), but he defends his decisions admirably. Davis excels at bringing out the personalities ascribed to each movement, as in his highly nuanced, upbuilding march to the gloriously inevitable in Saturn, or the lullaby-like Venus — slow and soothing — which recalls Wagner’s Tristan und Isolde. Tragically, Jupiter is a bit of a trudge. The movement never really jells, and comes off sounding contrived. The sound is superior — crystal-clear, with a real wash of aural color.

Leopold Stokowski’s historic 1943 live recording (Cala, CAD0526) sparkles with energy and grace as he leads the NBC Symphony Orchestra through a speedy and playfully slipshod performance. Most notable is Saturn, whose driving noble pace is countered by sentimental portamento, giving unison string passages an Orientalist flavor. The absolutely blazing Mars is given a skulking, ominous middle section before tumbling headlong into a fiery finale. A bawdy Uranus surprises with an almost pensive denouement. This recording’s sound is a drawback: despite remastering, some distortion and rude surface noise remain. Yet the range remains full and the interpretation is simply too compelling to be overshadowed by the technological limits of the time. Stokowski’s remastered 1956 account with the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra (EMI, 7243 5 67469 2 3) features quick tempos and lively interpretations. A nimble Saturn particularly delights: instead of Old Age creeping along, it comes straight in for the kill. Agile and tuneful, Mars is nearly legato. A rubato-filled Venus makes her more volupitous than usual and a rollicking Jupiter builds up quite a head of steam. Neptune’s choir is nothing short of heavenly. The acoustics do not do much more in the way of illumination, but are good considering the year of the recording.

Adrian Boult and the London Symphony give a bold, majestic performance in a remastered 1970 recording (CD, EMI 5 67749 2) of slow, deliberate tempos. A sweeping, grand Mars sustains an almost crawling pace, magically maintaining tension and reaching for the blasts of brass at the finale, drawing them painfully out. A swinging Mercury leans toward impressionism and away from technique. Jupiter is a bit slow and heavy, its accelerations and decelerations more jarring than inspiring. In the pomp-filled
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Saturn, we miss the anxiety that is wont to accompany the Bringer of Old Age, this stately manner carries through to Uranus. Spacious sound and warm concert-hall resonance help to bring out texture, harmony, and counterpoint.

Also-ran
We move away from the A-list Planets toward a 1980 recording by Alexander Gibson and the Royal Scottish National Orchestra (CD, Chando CHAN 6633). Despite an expansive, humanistic Saturn and a convincing, atmospheric Neptune, the music on the whole has no teeth and the sound is flat. This early digital recording is limited in dynamics and loses much in the pianissimo.

Loud and proud, Charles Mackerras's 1989 performance with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra (CD, Virgin 5 61510 2) delivers a go-for-broke Mars, a nuanced Venus, and a smooth Mercury, but on a larger level, the performance is smooth to a fault. The hazy sound on this digital disc tends to obscure. Yoel Levi's 1997 digital surround recording with the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra (CD, Telarc CD-80466) offers warm acoustics with extraordinary bass resonance but little else.

Zubin Mehta's 1971 performance with the Los Angeles Philharmonic (CD, London 289 452 910-2) is all Hollywood sheen, with airbrushed sound and no musical depth. Moreover, this two-CD Double Decca is largely devoted to film music by John Williams — essential listening for no one. Finally, Simon Rattle's 1981 version with the Philharmonia Orchestra (CD, EMI 5 75868 2) lacks propulsion and continuity, and is a little sloppy to boot.

Tomita
A fine endnote to this survey of Holst's magnum opus on disc is the wonderfully entertaining and largely convincing 1976 The Planets by Japanese composer and synthesizer expert Isao Tomita (CD, RCA 60518-2-RG), who performs his own electronic version of the work as a spaceshine journey through the solar system. Apart from cuts in Jupiter and Uranus, along with added sounds of rocket ships, deep space, and mission control, the score is faithfully followed. Interestingly, the work begins as it ends, with Jupiter's central theme warmly interpreted on a music box. That Tomita can even begin to evoke an emotional response with such farfetched orchestration speaks to his genius. That he achieves it speaks to Holst's.
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WorldRadioHistory
The latest aural adventure across time and space led by Catalan conductor and viola da gamba virtuoso Jordi Savall transports us to the melting pot of the early Americas. It's where the cultural imports of the Iberian colonizers mixed fruitfully with the native legacy of the Indians and the traditions of transplanted Africans. In music, the boundary between Old World and New—as well as the barriers between high and low, sacred and secular—were being blurred out of both convenience and mutual fascination. The colonization was a forced (and often brutal, exploitative) marriage, but it produced the rich musical inheritance of Latin America.

Across the 1550–1750 span of Villancicos y Danzas Criollas, de la Iberia Antigua al Nuevo Mundo (1550–1750), Jordi Savall transports us to the melting pot of the early Americas. It's where the cultural imports of the Iberian colonizers mixed fruitfully with the native legacy of the Indians and the traditions of transplanted Africans. In music, the boundary between Old World and New—as well as the barriers between high and low, sacred and secular—were being blurred out of both convenience and mutual fascination. The colonization was a forced (and often brutal, exploitative) marriage, but it produced the rich musical inheritance of Latin America.

The business of the Iberians in the New World wasn't just colonialism but conversion; one strategy for converting the Indians was diverting them, so missionaries incorporated aspects of indigenous language and ritual into Christian ceremonies to lend high spirits to the rites that the natives would appreciate. The frequent humor and call-and-response elements of the sacred polyphonic songs, or villancicos, were looked down on by sniffer Europeans as threatening to "turn the church into a theater" (as quoted in scholar Rui Vieira Nery's excellent, erudite booklet essay). Yet what was censure then sounds like praise to 21st-century ears.

Uncommonly gracious, Savall takes care in his booklet note to credit the 1970s musicologists who collated various anthologies of this mostly forgotten music. Yet it is his long experience and expertise in recreating age-old sounds—often from under-notated medieval and Baroque scores—that imbue these colorful obscurities with contemporary vibrance. Moreover, the players of Savall's Hespèrion XXI and the voices of his La Capella Reial de Catalunya have the ideal Latin accent and authentic improvisational flair—although you can bet that the original performances never sounded this accomplished.

An ideal entry point into Villancicos y Danzas Criollas is the instrumental "Jota"—three minutes of bittersweet theme and improvised variations, starring harpist Arianna Savall (daughter of Jordi and his wife, soprano Montserrat Figueras). After she invokes the tear-stained tune—taken from an 18th-century guitar tablature found in Mexico—the harpist is joined by a drum and castanets, which help lead the piece on a more joyous path.

A more formal highlight is Ritual Formulario: Huitapochap Causiuinin (heaven-sent joy), a beseeching processional hymn. Written to a Quechua text by one Juan Perez Bocanegra in early 17th-century Peru, the doleful, dark-hued polyphony has a silver lining that glints with hope like moonlight through the tops of trees.

Figueras' lyrical if one-dimensional voice has sounded wonderfully right in many recordings and rather out of place in others. Her soprano has audiibly aged, even here in her Mediterranean element. Still, her sweetly ironic manner and folk-like phrasing reveal the beguiling quality of a secular song from Baroque Madrid, "Ay Que Me Río de Amor" (Oh, How I Laugh at Love).

One interesting connection between early Latin American and later North American music made apparent by this disc stems from the European view of Africans and their culture. As in the American minstrel songs of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Africans in the texts of many early New World songs were objects of light parody—even as their traditions offered an undeniably hypnotic inspiration for the music. In the words to "Negro a 5," a pilgrimage to Bethlehem to see the Christ child becomes comically arduous as three African women complain about their wine-induced hangovers.

Pre-echoes of more modern culture can also be heard here, as in a high-energy instrumental version of "Cachua," a Peruvian Christmas song of the late 18th century in which the colors of Amerindian music are bent through a European prism. You can hear hints of modern Latin American music (salsa, etc.) and Spanish flamenco in "Cachua," as well as in the intros to "Juguete a 4" and "Guaracha."

Gorgeously packaged and beautifully recorded, Villancicos y Danzas Criollas is a characteristic product of Savall's burgeoning, Barcelona-based indie label, Alia Vox (artist's voice). Alia Vox discs are marked by the sonic vision of recording director Nicolas Bartolomone, a veteran of many Savall productions over the years and one of the best producers in the business. The warm, natural recording for this disc—captured in a Catalanian castle—is typical of Bartolomone's soundprint. The acoustic has been made to seem richly resonant without being too reverberant; and the sound has the air of performance, with plenty of (but not too much) realistic presence from the musicians.

It's a testament to the taste and vitality of Savall and his associates that this disc isn't an archeological exercise but an essay in living, breathing musicality.

—Bradley Bambarger
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The emotional heart of the Khachaturian concerto lies in its central movement, the Andante sostenuto, which Martin takes at a pace four minutes slower than Kogan or Oistrakh. The extra attention to detail wrings more pensive poetry from the score; the violinist takes her time over the seemingly endless opening melody, poring over its phrases as if she were singing an Armenian folk song of beautiful love and broken hearts.

Conductor Theodore Kuchar and his Ukrainian orchestra are characteristically impressive throughout, with nicely idiomatic wind solos. The crystal-clear recording presents a full, realistic concerto-tante image, although the Kiev studio acoustic seems to grant more impact than bloom. Adding to the considerable allure of this budget-priced disc is its coupling: the rarely heard, 23-minute Concerto-Rhapsody, which Khachaturian composed for Kogan in 1961. Martin makes a persuasive case for the revival of this picaresque score.

— Bradley Bambarger

Even more staggering than Dylan’s genius at writing such songs was the ease with which he could deliver them in the fall of 1964. Over the course of 19 songs, with his between-songs chitchat, frequent gigging, and rapport with the adoring crowd, Dylan creates a warm intimacy that would soon disappear from his shows. After a blistering, word-swirling, nine-minute version of “It’s Alright Ma,” he can’t quite remember the opening words of the next song. You can almost hear him racking his brain as he strums his guitar and gently blows the harmonica intro to “I Don’t Believe You,” before he sheepishly asks, “Oh God…does anybody know the first verse of this song?” His recovery, and the audience’s roar, is a kick to hear all these years later.

Likewise his topical songs. He introduces “Who Killed Davey Moore?” with “This is a song about a boxer…it’s got nothin’ to do with boxing…it’s got nothin’ to do with nothin’…” And Dylan sings four duets with Joan Baez (who is thunderously welcomed by the crowd) on tunes he rarely sang, including “If You Gotta Go, Go Now” and “Silver Dagger,” Dylan accompanying Baez on harmonica.

The occasional botched lyrics, the shout-outs from the crowd (“Mary Had a Little Lamb”), and Dylan’s quick responses (“Did I record that? Is that a protest song?”) are all part of the fun. But, like Columbia/Legacy’s two earlier live releases in The Bootleg Series, Live 1966: The “Royal Albert Hall” Concert and...
The First Five

Pieces of the Sky
AAD7 TT: 43:26
Performance ★★★★★
Sonic ★★★★

Elite Hotel
AAD7 TT: 48:19
Performance ★★★★★
Sonic ★★★★

Luxury Liner
Warner Bros. BS-2998/BSK-3115 (CD).
Performance ★★★★★
Sonic ★★★★

Quarter Moon in a Ten Cent Town
AAD. TT: 43:07
Performance ★★★★★
Sonic ★★★★

Blue Kentucky Girl
Warner Bros. BSK-3318 (CD), 1979/2003. AAD7 TT: 40:12
Performance ★★★★★
Sonic ★★★★

All above: Brian Ahern, prod.; Chris Skene, Paul Skene, Stuart Taylor, Bradley Hartman, Miles Wilkerson, Rudy Hill, Donvan Cowert, engs.

The old saw about the first record being an artist's best is, in the case of Emmylou Harris, true with a wrinkle: it's her first five albums that remain her best work.

Reams have been written about Harris' early career and these landmark records, so I'll summarize briefly. Born in Birmingham, Alabama and reared in North Carolina and Washington, DC, Harris began her musical career as a bluegrass-leaning folkie in the club scenes of New York and Washington.

The most revered part of her now long and accomplished legacy began in 1971, when she met Gram Parsons and subsequently appeared singing harmony on his solo albums, GP and Grievous Angel. She also toured with Parsons, an experience documented on Gram Parsons and the Grievous Angels' Live, 1973.

After Parson's death in 1973, Harris, who'd made one unsteady solo album of her own, Gilding Bird, for the tiny Jubilee label in 1969, signed with Reprise Records, hooked up with producer Brian Ahern (whom she married in 1977), and began work on what would become Pieces of the Sky.

These albums have many strengths in common. The band, the original core of which — guitarist James Burton, pianist Glen D. Hardin, and drummer Ronnie Tutt — was part of Elvis' band, are all super A-list players. Players came and went, but by 1979's Blue Kentucky Girl, Harris had gone into ultra-dream-band mode, having added Rodney Crowell (vocals, guitar, songwriting), Ricky Skaggs (fiddle), and Albert Lee (guitar). Such talents as Linda Ronstadt, Dolly Parton, Bill Payne (of Little Feat), Don Everly, and Nicolette Larson also contributed to these records in smaller ways, usually background vocals.

Equal to the quality players is the indescribable voodoo that came from Harris and Ahern choosing material together. Both were walking song encyclopedias with impeccable ears and taste, and these albums are compendiums of outstanding rock and country songwriters new and old: Dolly Parton, Townes Van Zandt, the Louvin Brothers, Chuck Berry, A.P. Carrer, Jesse Winchester, Lennon-McCartney, and Doc Pomus-Mort Shuman, to name the most recognizable. Chances were also taken on young songwriters, such as the then unknown Rodney Crowell.

But even more than the quality of the individual songs, it's the recipe of songs on each album, the mix of moods and tempos, that makes these records such rare masterworks. In addition, they took the notion of Gram Parson's baby, country rock, to new heights. Although the singles from this quintet made it onto the country radio charts, this was rock music for folkies, and folk music that rockers could relate to. Finally, there was Harris' strong, often bird-like voice, which was then still high and lithe, unmarked by the ravages of time, which now add to it a wonderfully burnished, world-weary quality.

Much as they can be heard as a single block of work, each of these albums has its individual charms. In spite of the songwriting talents she's displayed since Wrecking Ball, Harris' finest original song remains "Boulder to Birmingham," from her debut. Pieces of the Sky also contains an exquisite take on Billy Sherrill's "Too Far Gone," in which Harris' hopelessness is complemented perfectly by Burton's peaceful eloquence. Elite Hotel is known for its fresh covers of such over-recorded gems as "Sin City" (by Parsons and Chris Hillman), "Together Again" (Buck Owens), and "Jambalaya" (Hank Sr.).

For most fans, the remaining three albums — Luxury Liner, Quarter Moon in a Ten Cent Town, and Blue Kentucky Girl — vie equally for the title of favorite album. Each is an eclectic song tapestry that balances sad ballads with upbeat numbers and well-known writers with less known talents. For fans of great songwriting, listening to them immediately becomes an exercise in raised eyebrows and internal monologues with the recurring refrain of "Wow, another great tune." The portrait of Harris that emerges from these albums' focused, deliberate song selection is of a cosmic cowgirl whose sensibilities are as much SoCal as NashVegas. By the time you reach Johnny Mullins' "Even Cowgirls Get the Blues," the final song on Blue Kentucky Girl, the last of these albums to be released, you're fairly sure its opening stanza could be about Harris herself: "She's a ronder I can tell you that / She can sing 'em all night too / She'll raise hell about the sleep she lost /

Defying gravity. Harris was unstoppable in the seventies.
But even cowgirls get the blues."

For Harris beginners, these discs are absolute essentials. To the initiated, the primary draws of these reissues are their bonus tracks and improved sound. It's a well-known fact—one even mentioned in the notes to Pieces—that Harris and Albern always "over-recorded" when in the studio, and so often had as many tracks left over as ended up on whatever album they were working on. It's strange, then, that these records, none of which is extraordinarily long in its original form, contain only two bonus tracks apiece. What bonus material there is, however, is fine, and includes an acoustic take of Harris and Crowell on his "You're Running Wild" (Elite Hotel), and a live version of Guy Clark's "New Cut Road" (Quarter Moon).

Elite Hotel was nearly as renowned for its muddiness as it was for its music—odd, because it was recorded at the same place and in the same way as its predecessor, Pieces of the Sky. While remastering efforts have corrected some of the problems—the sound of all five releases is much improved overall—the old bugaboo of less-than-pristine source material defeats many of the computer-generated wonders applied here. Because the original was oddly muggy, Elite Hotel's opener, "Amarillo," is always going to sound as if it's coming out of a 55-gallon drum.

Not even Emmylou Harris makes classics like these anymore. If you've caught on to Harris only since Wrecking Ball, or have ever wondered where her fame came from, this quintet is the grail.

—Robert Baird

GARRISON STARR

**Airstreams & Satellites**


Performance: 3½

Sonics: 4½

So what happened to all the girls with guitars? Not that long ago, you couldn't swing a cat at a newstand without hitting a magazine with the words "women who rock" emblazoned on the cover.

No more. Britney, Christina, and other, more recent video vixens whose milkshake is better than yours seemingly changed all that. Actually sing and play? Ha—that's for suckers.

Lucky for us, Garrison Starr didn't get the memo. The Mississippi-born, L.A.-based singer has been on the scene for nearly a decade, producing material that nicely bridges the worlds of rock, pop, and alt-country. On her earlier albums—the first of which was released on Geffen, the second returning her to the indie world where artists like her have the freedom to do what they do best—Starr's guitar rang out, her vocals evoking the genuineness of her southern drawl. She, in a word, rocked.

If the general populace missed out on Eighteen Over Me and Songs from Take Off to Landing, maybe they'll pick up on Airstreams & Satellites. Starr isn't striving to reinvent the wheel here, but she does take a more nuanced approach to her work (thanks in large part to Five for Fighting bassist Curt Schneider, who co-produced the disc). Rockers surge and swell, as in the chorus of "Sing" and in a supercharged remake of "Superhero," the Eighteen Over Me track that is perhaps Starr's best-known song. Other songs reveal a lighter touch, as on the bright, acoustic "Underneath the Wheel," the sparkling "Wonderful Thing," and the plaintive title track.

The album's most significant song isn't even listed in the credits. Appended to the end of the album, "Inside Out" is a demi cut with spare backing, but it packs an emotional wallop. On it, a daughter seeks her mother's acceptance of her alternative lifestyle, flatly asking, "How can you be sure that God doesn't live here anymore?" With such a topic, the potential for mawkishness or self-righteousness couldn't be higher, but Starr carries it off with dignity, forthrightness, and even—qualities as lacking in today's music scene as a lady with a six-string.

—Daniel Durchholz

CHANDLER TRAVIS

**Radio Ball, Vols. 1–23**


Performance: 4 to 4½

Sonics: 3½

Chandler Travis is one of rock's great eccentrics. As part of the legendary New England folk duo Travis and Shook; as co-founder of the Incredible Casuals, Cape Cod's garage-surf antidote to the Beach Boys; as leader of the surreal traditional jazz band the Chandler Travis Philharmonic; and as solo artist and major domo of Iddy Biddy Records and Sonic Trout Productions, Travis has been responsible for some of the strangest musical utterances made under rock's wide banner since Don Van Vliet, aka Captain Beefheart, hung up his book of verse.

After the usual years of trying to interest labels in his demo tapes, Travis took a cue from Sun Ra and decided to make and distribute his own records. A classic American regional songwriter whose vision is rooted in the self-determinism and awe of nature characteristic of people who live in the small New England village of Eastham, Massachusetts, Travis is generous to his audience, constantly writing new songs and offering a close look at his influences with covers of a wide range of songs by others, many as esoteric as his own work. He's a great interpreter of Kinks material, particularly lesser-known songs from the band's music hall-inspired middle period (see RB 7: Dog Suit). His writing is steeped in descriptive detail and emotional observation, with a liberal application of ruddy humor and, on occasion, a touch of bitterness. Musically, it ranges from traditional New Orleans jazz and avant-garde art music to punk rock and African Highlife.

On summer Sunday afternoons at the Beachcomber on Wellfleet Beach, Travis holds court with the Incredible Casuals, a band that connects him to NRBQ via guitarist Johnny Spampinato, brother of NRBQ founding bassist Joey Spampinato and currently a member of both bands (see RB 11: The Future Will Be Better Tomorrow). The Chandler Travis Philharmonic is a loose collection of musicians centered around drummer Rikki Bates and featuring a horn section made up of a number of local players who view the CTP as a busman's holiday from their regular jazz or orchestra gigs.

Travis documents all this work on The Radio Ball, a series of recordings that cover his career as a kind of audio diary. It's a significant achievement in the annals of American folklore. Here are a few highlights from recent years in this ongoing series.

RB 1: Holiday Time! The series begins with a recording of various Christmas-
related songs and a show from late 1999 at one of the band’s regular venues, the Midway, a funky Boston bar. Travis likes Christmas, at least in part because he can have a stupid time even if his wife gets mad at him. “I Want a Puppy” reveals his soft spot for dogs, one of his songwriting’s repeated themes. “Memories (of Other New Year’s Eves)” is a holiday song in the Elvis Costello tradition. “Backwards Christmas” traces Chandler’s Christmas Day activities in reverse. The self-explanatory title “Not Unhappy” is a wonderful description of an artist’s satisfaction with a creative, if not lucrative, occupation.

RB 2: Y’Gotta Have the Mental introduces the live rant “2000 or Bust,” a kind of statement of purpose for the project, and includes covers of “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer” and “Surf’s Up.” It also features one of the few Travis classics that recur during the series, “Stay Like That,” an infectious chorus wrapped around a Dagwood sandwich of dysfunctional-relationship lyrics.

RB 4: Miss America Presents the Chandler Travis Philharmonic. Recorded at several performances in the first week of 2000, this one features the tuneful “Fruit Bat Fun” followed by the 1950s-style tearjerker “You Killed My Love” and the infectious melody of “Toaster.” The CTP goes on to play a terrific R&B medley that combines Bill Deal and the Rondells’ “I’ve Been Hurt” (found by Travis on the soundtrack of Trees Lounge, which he recommends) with a Tilt-a-Whirl NRBOQ-style version of “Get Right Back (Where We Started From),” which gives Travis a chance to mention Slap Shot in the liner notes. The band’s versatility is on further display via the Township Jive cover of South African swing band the Jazz Dazzlers’ “De Makeba,” followed by the rousing “Eje Ka Jo,” driven by Dave Harris’ trombone. Travis closes out the set with a soft reading of the Lonnie Johnson chestnut “Tomorrow Night.”

RB 5: Let’s Music collects material recorded by the Philharmonic in 1998, mostly at another Boston-area club, the Kirkland, where they played every Tuesday night for the door, an arrangement that led Travis to refuse to change chords (examples included here: E and F) until the audience paid him. Audience participation was also encouraged, as the elderly woman who serves as the guest drummer on the version of “Wipe Out” demonstrates.

RB 8: The Dog Are My Album is an extremely good 1997 set from the Midway, with a terrific cover of the Kinks’ “I’m On An Island” and a magnificent traditional jazz piece, “Cab Is Dead,” dedicated to Cab Calloway. Also included is the definitive version of “French Toast Man” and another wonderful dog song from Travis, “Get Out of Here,” NRBD’s Terry Adams sits in on “What’ll It Be.”

RB 12: Live at Bickford’s is my favorite of the series, a documentary recording of the record-release party for the Chandler Travis Philharmonic album Let’s Have a Pancake! That “official” album, released in the middle of the Radio Ball series, includes studio versions of many of the best original songs from the live recordings, as well as the fan favorite “Chandler Travis, King of the World,” curiously absent from Radio Ball. The release party was a breakfast set at a local pancake house, with a
mixed crowd of CTP fans and unsuspecting diners, who seemed to like it just fine. In that context, these versions of "Toaster," "French Toast Man," and "Fruit Bat Fun" take on new meaning.

RB 21: Le Spectacle de la Lizard, Travis plays cosmic ringmaster here, assembling a three-ring circus of performances, including: the pretty amazing Planet Philharmonic Trombone Shout Band (a dozen trombones and a bass drum playing in a brassy interlace over a reggae-fied parade beat); the in-your-face folkster Alastair Moock; the amazing guerrilla folksongs of Pepe LaBonne; and the CTP, augmented by Ramona Silver and Suzi Lee, for a Cookies medley. Travis wishes us "Merry Xmas" at the end of the notes, bringing the concept full circle from Holiday Time!

RB 23: Live at Bubala's is a low-key and very eclectic demonstration of Travis' arrangements for brass band (dubbed the Philharmonette for this September 3, 2003 performance). From "Moody's Mood for Love" to the twist-ted skiffle of "In the Summertime," the NRBQ homage "Mona," and the most outrageously inventive cover of "Brown Eyed Girl" ever attempted, Travis always stays one step ahead of the very appreciative audience.

Additional Comments: RB 6: More Mayhem from the Midway includes "Super Bowl XXXIII," written on the spot an hour before the show. RB 9: Basins is worth getting just for the version of another Travis classic, "That's What She Said." RB 13: Monkeys of Nothing opens with the rattle-rousing "Here We Go Audience" and includes a beautiful version of Travis' great love song, "(You and Me) Pushin' Up Daisies." RB 17: Day Job compiles tracks from other bands that the Philharmonic members play in, from the Jazz Composers Alliance Orchestra to the Beach Men doing — you guessed it — a basso version of "Don't Worry Baby." RB 20: You Must Come Over To-Night is a collection of mostly lounge material (a Travis specialty), with a great version of "Sometimes I'm Happy." — John Swenson

THE VON BONDIES

Pawm Shoppe Heart

Stereophile, May 2004

After your face has been tenderized by Jack White's fists, what do you do for an encore? In December, the White Stripes leader used Von Bondies singer-guitarist Jason Stollsteimer for a punching bag at a Detroit nightclub. The brawl between former friends White — an early champion of the Von Bondies and co-producer of the quartet's 2001 debut, Lack of Communication — and Stollsteimer not only generated copy in the music tabloids, it also set the stage for a crosstown rivalry.

The answer to the opening question, of course, is to craft a metallic knockout (we'll be using the full stockpile of Stooges puns here, don't worry) of your own, employing all the muck and muscle associated with the nascent garage-rock revival. Somehow puzzlingly, then, ex-Talking Head Jerry Harrison — who's manned the boards for Live, No Doubt, and Fine Young Cannibals — was brought in to produce the Von Bondies' major-label debut. Similarly, the album's poncey, too-cute title does little to evoke the gritty R&B roots of hometown contemporaries the Stripes, Dirtombs, or Detroit Cobras. Are the Von Bondies coattail-riders going through the Motor City motions?

The opening track, "No Regrets," leaves little doubt that Pawm Shoppe Heart aspires to garage greatness. Its initial guitar-chord buzz immediately brings to mind the MCS's "Kick Out the Jams" before the song settles into a Stooges stomp about misunderstood youth. As big and blustery as the Von Bondies' power chords can be, however, it's the little things that distinguish this album. Stollsteimer's booming voice — the awowed Eric Burdon fan manages much more a howl than a scream — is given plenty of presence in the mix, cutting across the guitars. The band further benefits from its feminine side: guitarist Marcie Bolen and bassist Carrie Smith are a Pixies-like x factor, adding peppy cheerleader vocals on "The Fever" (Bolen sings lead on one song, "Not That Social"). When the Von Bondies keep their chops concise and catchy, as on the gung-ho punk track "C'mon C'mon," they're a nearly unbeatable alt-rock outfit. But when they attempt a sweat-soaked R&B dirge such as "Maired," they painfully adhere to the mold. Call Pawm Shoppe Heart a split decision.

— Matthew Frisch

Who's Next: Deluxe Edition


Performance ****
Sonic ****

Even the most ardent fan of this inarguably great album might reasonably ask "Who needs another Who's Next?" Well, if you've already got the 1995 reissue of the CD and you're mainly interested in the original album rather than bonus tracks and alternate versions of songs, you don't need it.

For everyone else, the answer to the question lies more in your devotion to owning all versions of all things Who, and in disc 2 of this double set. That's where you'll find a remixed Who's Next/Lifehouse-era concert at London's Young Vic Theatre. Lifehouse was, of course, Pete Townshend's grandiose, failed attempt to reinvent rock'n'roll (and maybe theater and film, too), and from which Who's Next was culled.

As far as Whostory goes, disc 2 is indispensible: all but two of its 14 tracks are released here for the first time. The band is hesitant at times as they try to realize Townshend's imposing vision of musical salvation. He even offers some fairly harsh critiques of the then-new songs ("a wee bit lame," he says, after a cautious "Getting in Tune"). Roger Daltrey and John Entwistle were said to be especially dubious about Lifehouse — and it shows. Entwistle's bass isn't as commanding as it is on Live at Leeds, for instance, and Daltrey's vocals are occasionally reticent. I doubt that the pair didn't actually believe in this great material; rather, they probably weren't sold on the Lifehouse concept of audience participation, improvisation, and generational liberation. Even Townshend's guitar does a fade early in "Won't Get Fooled Again"; instead of those ferocious, rhythmic, windmilling whangs, a timid Townshend seems to be peering out at the audience, waiting for the revolution to begin. It never did, and for that, Townshend will be eternally disappointed in Who's Next.

The rest of us will continue to adore the album. Audiophiles especially will appreciate its remastering on disc 1, which contains the original album plus alternate takes of six of its tunes. Remastered from master safety tapes for the first time (the 1995 reissue was a remix of secondary tracks), Who's Next now has the integration of vinyl warmth and digital clarity we all hoped for when CDs overthrew wax all those years ago. This is one of the best "deluxe editions" yet of a classic rock album from MCA. When you add the detailed liner notes to the live disc and the remastered original album, you've got a must-own package for hardcore Who fans.

— Michael Metzger
jazz

JAMES CARTER


Gardenias for Lady Day

James Carter, soprano, tenor, baritone, F mezzo sax, bass & contrabass clarinet; John Hicks, piano; Peter Washington, bass; Victor Lewis, drums; Sandy Park, Sharon Yamada, Lisa Kim, Myung Hi Kim, Ann Kim, Sarah Kim, violin; Robert Rinehart, Tom Rosenthal, viola; Elizabeth Dyson, Sarah Seiver, Eileen Moon, Jeanne LeBlanc, Mina Smith, Bruce Wang, cello; Jeff Nelson, bass trombone; Phil Myers, Erik Raske, French horn; Erik Charlston, vibes, wind machine; Michele Braden, vocal


Performance ****

Sonic ****

B

By the humble standards of acoustic jazz, Gardenias for Lady Day should be one of the big albums of 2004. It presents a series of firsts in the career of rising star James Carter: his debut on the Columbia label; his first album with strings; his first multichannel SACD recording; his first use of multitracked horns to clone himself into a James Carter saxophone chorus. But the production-intensive nature of this project also keeps it from being what Carter fans have been wait-
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It used to be that you actually had to show up at someone's house and eyeball their record collection to know who and where they were musically.

Today, you leave the driving to Apple. A prolonged gander at someone's MP3 player and you know, for instance, that they favor Atlantic-period Coltrane over his Impulse! records, or that the Carpenters are much more than just a guilty pleasure.

When asked about his influences and what he's listening to, Will Oldham, one of rock's most storied recluse, grabs his iPod and begins scrolling.

"Sista Nordenstam, some stuff from this 20-volume Indonesian music collection, Sun City Girls, the Trojan boxed set, Syl Johnson, T-Model Ford, T.J. Kirk from a compilation called Funk Drops, Thin Lizzy, Tom Waits, Toots and the Maytals, Tweak, Wild Magnolias, The Wipers."

Oldham, whose most enduring and widespread fame still comes from his appearance as a wild-eyed backstory evangelist in John Sayles' 1987 film, Matewan, has since fashioned a dark, creaky, puzzling recording career under the names Palace Brothers, Palace Songs, and just plain Palace. Lately he's gone solo under the name Bonnie "Prince" Billy.

"That all goes into the records and people don't know what to think of it," he says of the above MP3 playlist. "Obviously, if I listen to Syl Johnson, does that mean I'm going to be able to play soul music? No. It means that I'm going to take whatever I learn from that and use whatever delivery system that I have genetically available to myself to put it on the record. So I think I'm making a Syl Johnson record, but nobody else does. They think like, 'Oh, that's Appalachia.'"

In its most ramshackle, down-home sense, "Appalachia" just about describes Oldham's music. Frank Zappa channeling Bill Monroe with John Fahey in the band is even closer. The most common perception of Oldham among those who know his records is that he's a latter-day Dock Boggs — someone raised in the love-and-murder world of mountain music (he's from Kentucky) who then discovered punk rock, mixed the two, and seasoned the result with his own fears, failures, and beliefs. Oldham's got lots of beliefs. Blurred religious language informs his lyrics: "Deep Down Among the Fiery rafters/Eternal Screammers, unsainted sinners/Those who let their souls get the best of them/And now they live deep down." (from "Idle Hands are the Devil's Playthings"). His music is punk gospel, acoustic, angry and filled with fervor and mystery.

Mystery, religious and otherwise, is in fact the key principle of Oldham's cultish career. Despite his denials he's spent a decade building this cult. Few artists have the press with his prolonged vehemence. What interviews he's given have been cranky and obtuse. His albums covers usually feature murky illustrations or shadowy photos, and like rock's chief recluse, Neil Young, Oldham rarely allows a clear picture of himself to be taken. Kids looking for anti-heroes have eaten it up.

This cryptic, self-created mythenalness often overwhelms his music, which in itself can be hard to listen to: too much art with a self-conscious capital "A." However, some of what he's done over the past decade has both an undeniable charm and a zealous, if geeky and provincial, following.

Like a lot of Will lore, I always suspected that when you sat down in a room with him, the great and weird Will Oldham would prove to be neither. Over an hour's conversation on a cold Saturday night in a hotel in the dark bowels of Manhattan, those suspicions were confirmed.

"The only deliberate aspect of this [his self-created mystery] is when people attempt to...when they want to transfer or pursue the meaning of a song beyond, when people go here and try and go here..." his finger draws a line in the air between himself and an imaginary record, "...what they're hearing occurred at a specific place and time and the human being has since gone this way. It's counterproductive and it doesn't make for good listening."

Listening, strange as it sounds for someone once dedicated to being lo-fi, is what Oldham's new album of re-recordings of his best-known songs is all about. For perhaps the first time in his career, he's made an accessible record, one that the non-underground masses can listen to and enjoy. Instead of the usual dark twists and bends of his albums, Bonnie "Prince" Billy sings Greatest Palace Music (Drag City) is positively sunny. Few collections of re-recorded older material have much to say artistically, but this one speaks volumes: Oldham, at least for the moment, wants to step out of his cult and be heard by a larger audience. Palace tunes like "Pishkin," "I Am a Cinematographer," and his best-known, "You Will Miss Me When I Burn," all spark in fresh arrangements and Oldham's newfound energies as a singer.

When asked why he's making this move toward the mainstream now, all he has to say is, "I want to take advantage of new musicians and new ways I've learned to sing these songs."

Another surprise is that Oldham made the record in Nashville, home to the beast that is mainstream country music. In years gone by, or at least as the legend of Oldham would tell it, he'd have never ventured near this hive of evil, money-focused commerciality. But the presence of less-than-mainstream Nashville veteran Mark Nevers (Lambchop), who co-produced, helped ease Oldham's entry into Music City. So did the chops and spirit of one of country music's most storied sidesmen, Hargus "Pig" Robbins. Most famous as the keyboard player on Bob Dylan's Blonde on Blonde, the blind Robbins has also played on records by Patsy Cline, Joan Baez, Willie and Waylon, Tom Jones, Ray Charles, John Denver, Doug Sahm — and alt-rock crazies Ween, on their 1996 landmark, 12 Golden Greats.

Although he's just cut the most ajar album of his career — and has even consented to sit for interviews such as this one — Oldham isn't turning over any new leaves just yet. Those who revere his craggy personality and arcane ways need not fear — one question about future touring brings Bonnie "Prince" Billy back in a hurry.

"People expect that someone wants to perform. I don't like the audience's applause. I like playing music with friends and getting paid for it; that's an awesome job. I'm not feeding on the entertainer thing."
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