EDITORS’ PICKS: 80 GREAT RECORDINGS

FEBRUARY 2005

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John Marks

The Sound Of Music

"Most people really don't like music—they just like the way it sounds"

A t first blush, the above statement might strike one as the verbal equivalent of a fur-lined teaup. Its capacity to startle and amuse derives from its nonsensical, even absurd, nature.

However, on closer examination, this bon mot carries within it an important truth that perhaps can shed light on the current state of melancholy and angst among those who make and sell equipment dedicated to re-creating music—and music alone—in the home.

Years ago, it was said that anyone who knew enough to be a good computer salesperson could make more money as a computer consultant, that anyone who knew enough to be a good computer consultant could make more money as a computer programmer, and that anyone who knew enough to be a good computer programmer could make more money running his or her own software company.

Leaving aside the issue of whether this dynamic operates to promote people above their level of competency; it does show that people who are acting as rational economic actors usually migrate in the direction of more money. Rare indeed is the "stereo shop" of yore that has been able to survive, let alone prosper, without making some kind of accommodation in the direction of more money.

I don't fault anyone for doing whatever is necessary to keep in business. My point in this essay is that those of us who care about music and of itself need to do a much better job of defining terms, establishing and respecting boundaries, and gently persuading people that good audio is worth taking trouble over, because good audio can get you closer to the soul of good music—if you're willing to pay attention. Otherwise, local audio stores will keep closing, and we should resign ourselves to such minority-status as is accorded the Latin Mass, wooden boats, and chess.

Just like the computer salesperson who became a consultant, many former audio shops have learned that there is more money to be had, and with less fuss, by designing and installing home theaters. Mutatis mutandis, many home-theater designers now have branched out into whole-home automation, lighting control, motorized window shades, and the like.

They are migrating with the money.

As far as enjoying music from two-channel sources goes, the major problem I have experienced in most home theaters is that a room that has been acoustically optimized for surround sound for movies will sound rather lifeless and uninviting playing back two-channel audio. Tonally, this is because the reverberation time is too short. Spatially, such a room's related lack of reflective and diffusive surfaces robs the room of the ability to create the illusion of acoustical "envelopment" from two-channel sources that a good, dedicated listening room can. My rule of thumb is that a room optimized for stereo will usually sound acceptable for movies, and that that is a better compromise than optimizing for movies and getting poor-sounding stereo.

Many whole-home projects do include multizone music throughout the home, and this, one would think, should be a good thing both for music and the audio business. But the problems with this approach are twofold. First, audio quality is usually compromised in such settings. The speakers are usually located in walls and ceilings, are not full-range, and often, little or no attention is given to room acoustics. Furthermore, the audio quality of the program sources (such as music channels on cable) is often middling.

Second, the entire philosophy of "music throughout the home" is that the music is just there, an accompaniment to other activities rather than a focus of attention in itself. For this philosophy to work as designed, neither the music nor the audio system should call attention to itself, or make demands on peoples' intellects, emotions, or souls—that would interrupt the other activities.

"What's that soft but slightly tinkly noise in the background?"

"Let me look. Ah, it's the Goldberg Variations. You were saying...?"

That is the Great Divide, the watershed, the line in the sand: Are the music and the music system intended to provide accompaniment to other activities (such as conversation, cocktails, housework, or reading), or are they intended to be a focus of attention in and of themselves?

As I think many retailers have discovered, people who want music to accompany other activities are not interested in the equipment in and of itself as a hobby, nor are they all that much interested in music in and of itself. As long as the equipment sounds noticeably better than the overhead speakers at the supermarket, where Steely Dan accompanies your provisioning, the customers are happy.

Years ago, if you wanted music to accompany other activities, you had to get a regular stereo just like everyone else. It would often be located in the living room, and was played loudly enough to be heard in the kitchen or elsewhere. Now, you can command audio in a room as easily as switching on a light.

This is where Sir Thomas Beecham's quip, which I paraphrased at the beginning, reveals itself as prophetic. People who aren't passionately involved in the search for the deepest meanings to be extracted from a composition or performance really don't like music; they just like the way it sounds. And if you just like the way music sounds rather than what it might mean, a decent mid-fi system—or in-wall speakers—will be good enough. It is only when the search for meaning becomes paramount that we hunger and thirst to extract from a recording every last nuance of dynamics and detail.

If we want to keep on making and selling (and writing about) fine audio equipment, we have to help people recover the lost skill of paying attention, for considerable periods of time, to something other than TV; we have to help people discover that there is meaning in music above and beyond the way it happens to sound; and we have to show people that fine audio equipment helps you get those deeper meanings.

High-end audio dealers can act in their own enlightened self-interest by hosting "listening nights" at which compositions that will be performed live within the community in the near future can be previewed—and not necessarily in the store. A small hall or auditorium will be more impressive and seat more people. Enlist a local classical DJ or music professor to provide commentary. Or, invite young student musicians in to hear how the pieces they're working on are supposed to sound. How about a discount program for professional musicians and music educators? Lots of families spend hundreds or thousands on music lessons and instruments. They should be good prospects for affordable but good dedicated audio systems. The possibilities are not really endless, but they are substantial and underutilized.

Reaching out without dumbing down is always a tough nut to crack, but the alternative should be obvious.
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- Marc Mickelson and Roger Kanno, SoundStage! on the S8
Nice newsletter
Editor:
Just wanted to let you guys know that I love the Stereophile eNewsletter...keep the content coming! Thank you!  Donald N. nunh@yahoo.com

Thanks, Mr. N. When the subject of an e-mail newsletter first came up, I wanted one that did not duplicate the content of either the magazine or our website. I thought Ken Kessler and Wes Phillips did a great job with the first, December issue— you can sign up to receive Stereophile’s free monthly newsletter on the home page at www.stereophile.com.  —JA

Not so nice magazine
Editor:
I was looking for a good audio magazine, again, after many years of being away from the hobby. I was considering Stereophile. However, I cannot in good conscience permit your publication to cross my doorway. Your promotion of pseudoscience and ignorance of proper testing procedures makes you and your magazine a laughing stock.

Speaker wires that show which way the electrons are supposed to travel, heavily promoted high-end crap, and other weird items that consistently fail double-blind tests should be ignored or denided, but you promote them.

You obviously place ad revenue above accuracy. Whether this is dishonesty or delusion makes no difference. You cannot be trusted, and writers who support this nonsense should be castigated. So, until I no longer can, I will tell anyone who listens that you and your pseudoscientific writers are gooballs, and will not subscribe or patronize your sham advertisers.

James M. Donovan
Lakewood, CO
mike_score300@yahoo.com

But we get ‘em young!
Editor:
I hope she does not ask for a tube doll soon!

Kunter Kuthlay
kunter.kuthlay@kratis.com

Red Shift...
Editor:
I was intrigued by “Red Shift,”

Keith Howard’s article on Doppler distortion in loudspeakers (November 2004, p.62). However, it omitted a very important point: all original music has the same shift. You see, all sound is generated by a vibrating medium in air to create waves. Any vibrating object (air stream) would have the same “Doppler”-style effect on the wave—speaker, violin, flute, piano, drums, or anything. Since this “shift” is inherent in the sound we hear live and deem to be “correct” or “original,” then duplicating this effect in a speaker should not be considered a fault in the process. All speakers have limitations, but this is not one of them.

Peter J. Smith
Pay99@aol.com

It must be true that some musical instruments generate Doppler sidebands, Mr. Smith, in which case this forms part of their characteristic timbre. The aim, of course, is to reproduce this faithfully, without the addition of further distortion by the loudspeaker or anything else. Musical instruments also produce rich harmonic structures; this does not mean that, say, an amplifier with significant harmonic distortion can be excused on the basis that it is “duplicating” what musical instruments do. The same reasoning applies to Doppler distortion.

It is not true—although I have seen it suggested more than once in audio-related Web forums—that the passage of sound through air adds Doppler distortion at any significant level. If this were the case, then sound reproduction would be doomed by the fact that the sound is, generally, transmitted through the air twice: once on recording and again on replay. It would also show up in measurements of loudspeaker IM distortion, which it does not.

Doppler distortion in loudspeakers is real. It can be measured and it can be simulated. Like any other distortion, it is undesirable.

The only controversy surrounding its practical signi-

—Keith Howard

Good call, Sam
Editor:
After reading about the Sony D-EJ100 portable CD player in the December “Sam’s Space” (p.34), I went to a local retailer and picked one up. I plugged it into the Tivoli Model One—I hadn’t realized it had an Aux input— and voilà! For less than $150, I have a rig in my office that sounds great at office-acceptable levels (read: quiet). I may need to build a similar system at home when our newborn arrives. Good call, Sam.

Andy Sedik
asedik@yahoo.com

Not so good, Sam
Editor:
Ten years ago, I wrote you a scathing (at least I thought so) letter denouncing a bunch of so-called “audiophiles” who were raving about an absolute piece of crap, the RadioShack Optimus CD 3400 portable CD player. None other than your pompous, tone-deaf, brain-dead hack, Sam Tellig, led this group. I had hoped that that letter and a few others I have written since then would have educated him. Alas, this is not the case.

Sam, in the December “Sam’s Space,” regurgitates that dog’s dinner, then goes on to talk about another piece of useless crap, the Sony D-EJ100 CD player. He seems to think that promoting lousy hi-fi is funny. Perhaps in the land of iPod, the Sony is good. But in the land of high-end audio, the Sony is totally useless.

As for the Sony Earbuds, they are made of hard plastic and feel like nails being driven into the ears. And that’s before you plug them into anything! They should be renamed “Earduds!” Talk about sonic purgatory. They sound like crap, too.

Mr. Atkinson, I think it’s time to get rid of the old fart. If not, you must start editing Sam’s writing for content. I know he has a hallowed status as the granddad of Stereophile, but he is also Stereophile’s Dan Rather. Sam is not inviolate, and should be curbed from doing a disservice to an already fragile industry. From computers to iPods to surround-sound systems, we are bombarded by bad sound.

—Keith Howard

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Let’s stop our champions from spreading calumny.

—Roy Hall
Music Hall

I am sure that Roy—ever the thrifty Scott—did not actually buy and listen to a Sony D-EJ100. So how does he know how it sounds? He just can’t bear the thought that something cheap and cheerful might sound almost as good as the overpriced, specialized merchandise he foists on folks. (Only kidding.)

I never said the Sony D-EJ100 was as good as, er, a Creek CD50SE. But I suspect that Creek and maybe some other manufacturers may find the Sony's quality of sound a little too close for comfort.

If you really want to hear what the Sony D-EJ100 can do, run it into a Musical Fidelity X-10-3 line stage. I’m sure Roy doesn’t want to hear about that, either, as he doesn’t sell it. But I’ll bet he berates Mike Creek for not thinking of the idea first.

Oh—and if Roy had a cheap CD portable player to sell, you can be sure he’d be singing its praises. Might we see a Music Hall Mumbu-Jumbo CD portable produced in China sometime soon?

—Sam Tellig

Thank you, Sam
Editor:
I want to thank Sam for the suggestion that I call my next product the Music Hall Mumbu-Jumbo. It’s a great name. I’ll seriously consider it. (And I thought he’d lost his creativity.) Sam’s correct—I didn’t buy the Sony. One of my son’s friends had one. It still sounded like shit.

I know it will sound “better” through a Creek, but, as my old pal Ivo Tiefenbrunn used to say, “Garbage in, garbage out.” (Actually, I think he said something like, “Don’t plug that useless piece of shit into any of my amps.”)

Sam is wrong. Crap is crap, and the sooner he acknowledges it, the better it will be for all of us.

—Roy Hall
Music Hall

Ah, but how did you listen, Roy? The player needs a headphone amp or an MF X-103.(Your Creek headphone amp does very nicely)

—Sam Tellig

What noise?
Editor:
In the November issue (p.133), Kalman Rubinson describes the addition of new AudioQuest cables to his audio system. He hadn’t expected much change, he writes, but, “Son of a gun! Background noise in the system seemed to drop like an anchor.” I assume Mr. Rubinson enjoys high-end equipment—yet it has background noise? I have a very simple system—systems, actually—both of them together doubtless costing less than his new cables, but I am aware of no back-ground noise at all. I would be horrified to detect any, and if I did, I would immediately seek the malfunction causing it.

Must I conclude that the price of high-end equipment includes background noise? Indeed, Mr. Rubinson does not say that these new, wondrous cables finally achieved background silence in his system, only less noise. Am I missing something?

—George Goldberg
Tucson, AZ
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Good point. There is no significant background noise in my system, but has there been in my memory, when I listen to my usual sitting position. However, all systems have some noise, and one can hear this (1) without music signals, (2) within the gain turned up high, and (3) with one’s ear within 6” of the speaker. My pleasure in having this improvement is more implicit. I assume that lower noise is advantageous and, although the difference is not by itself readily detectable, it did permit more low-level detail to be heard clearly, unmasked by noise.

The quotation from my review, by the way, was in regard to the insertion of new AC outlets and power filtering, not to the use of the AudioQuest cables.

—Kalman Rubinson

What stands?
Editor:
In his lists of “Associated Equipment,” Art Dudley frequently mentions Mana stands. Would it be possible to find out which Mana stands he uses, since these are not mentioned in “Recommended Components”? I’m particularly interested in the Mana turntable stand.

—Tony Bianardi
Pittsboro, NC
tbiancar@juno.com

I bought a few different Mana stands eight or nine years ago, Mr. Biancardi, but the one I continue to use the most is the Mana Reference Table, which is pretty much their bread-and-butter product. This is the one you see pictured most often: a 6”-tall metal frame table with a glass top, perched atop an 18”-tall metal frame table with a composite top. I use this to support my Linn LP12, and I’ve found it to be consistently effective at getting the best performance from that player.

I also have the wall-shelf version of the above, lagged in a piece of hardwood, itself lagged into the studs of my listening-room wall. (The spacing between the two vertical portions of its frame are about 20” apart, not the 16” spacing of most stands: Perhaps building codes are different in the UK, where Mana makes its products?) This used to support my other LP12, but these days I use it beneath my Fisher 500-C receiver.

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CALENDAR

Those promoting audio-related seminars, shows, and meetings should fax (do not call) the when, where, and who to (212) 886-2809 at least eight weeks before the month of the event. The deadline for the April 2005 issue is February 1, 2005. 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 vgl@atlantic.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.

ILLINOIS

Friday, January 21, 7–10pm: Glenn Poor's AudioVideo will host a seminar featuring Daniel Jacques of Focal–JMLab. Daniel will discuss and demonstrate the unique technology and artistry of the Utopia speaker series. For more info and to RSVP, call (217) 356-5456.

MICHIGAN

Wednesday, February 16, 7pm: Overture Audio (618 South Main Street, Ann Arbor) is pleased to announce the North American premiere performance of the AVI Laboratory Series electronics and Trio monitor loudspeakers. Tom Jankowski will conduct demonstrations of the entire AVI product line, including the S21 Mi integrated amplifier and S21 MC5 integrated CD player, as well as the Neutron IV, Pro Nine Plus, and Trio loudspeakers. For more info and to RSVP, e-mail mail@overture-audio.com or call (734) 662-1812.

Thursday, February 17, 6:30–8:30pm: Paragon Sight and Sound (Ann Arbor) will host an evening seminar with Wilson Audio's John Giolas presenting the MAXX 2 speaker system, and Transparent Audio's Brad O'Toole demonstrating the unique technology associated with a seminar or similar event.

US: YOUR DISC PLAYER

Barry Willis

In early 2004, test marketing of DualDiscs in Boston and Seattle indicated that music fans would eagerly accept the new format, which combines standard Compact Disc audio content on one side with DVD audio and video on the other. However, DualDisc's official debut was anything but auspicious. In early November, Sony issued a warning that the discs might cause problems when used in many models of the company's popular PlayStation gaming consoles. Among the many caveats was a note that the CD side of a DualDisc "does not meet the technical specifications to be called an Audio Compact Disc, set forth in the Red Book Audio Compact Disc specifications."

Sony and Philips were the originators of the CD, whose 20-year technical licensing agreement recently expired. Sony could have been bluffing when it stated, "Because the DualDisc does not adhere to the industry Red Book specifications, the audio side of a DualDisc may not play correctly in PlayStation, PSOne, or PlayStation 2 consoles"; however, the official Sony warning was shortly followed by one from Onkyo cautioning consumers not to use DualDiscs in any Onkyo products, including disc players and disc drives.

Pioneer issued a similar statement (www.pioneerelectronics.com/pna/article/0_2076_3143_162057205,00.html), in which they flatly recommended "consumers not use 'DualDisc' products with any Pioneer products, including CD players, DVD players and recorders, and computer drives until Pioneer has an opportunity to test them. At this point in time, Pioneer does not know whether Pioneer products can safely handle these new hybrid discs, or whether these discs may damage your Pioneer products."

Cautionary moves by manufacturers could simply be a tactic to ward off warranty claims from customers with discs jammed in their machines. To accommodate the two different format sides, a DualDisc is a tad thicker than a standard CD or DVD, and might cause problems in some eject mechanisms.

Even so, DualDisc took a substantial share of consumer confidence. In late October, a WMG spokeswoman explained that "a technical error occurred on the CD side of The Donnas' DualDisc in the pre-manufacturing software process" and said that fans could log onto The Donnas' website, www.thedonnas.com, and download the missing track. The WMG spokeswoman claimed that the production error was "unrelated to DualDisc technology" but suggested that unhappy fans could return the discs to wherever they were purchased and get replacement CDs in exchange. Those, at least, will play in any machine.

UK: MONMOUTH

Ken Kessler

All but forgotten in the field of surround sound are the efforts of UK classical music label Nimbus Records (www.wyasstone.co.uk). More than 25 years ago, Nimbus recorded with Peter Fellgett and Michael Gerzon's two-channel-compatible, matrixed UHJ Ambisonic Surround system, using multi-capsule Calrec Soundfield microphones. Other labels, including Unicorn-Kanchana, also supported Ambisonic, releasing such rarities as a UHJ Ambisonic recording of the soundtrack to North By Northwest on LP. Playback decoders were available from the UK's National Research and Development Council (NRDC) and speaker manufacturer IMF. As timing would have it, the Ambisonic releases appeared when users could still recall the unfortunate experience of 1970s quadraphony, and Dolby Digital was still some years off. However, those who have heard proper demonstrations maintain that the UHJ Ambisonic technique remains the most convincing surround-sound format ever.

Now, well into the multichannel era, Nimbus has announced the release of a set of surround-music titles on DVD-Audio featuring DTS surround sound. Dubbed the Surroundyourselfwith series, it will present highlights from Nimbus' extensive catalog of Ambisonic recordings, dating back to the 1970s. Nimbus used the newly released DTS Pro Series Surround Encoder (www.dtsonline.com) to create the DTS recordings.

A British invention, the Ambisonic technology recorded a 360° soundfield...
using a single-point microphone with four (later eight) capsules. This sound-field was then UHJ-encoded to provide a two-channel stereo-compatible signal, and decoded back to four-channel surround with the appropriate equipment. A full eight-channel rig used ceiling and floor speakers. Nimbus has been recording with Ambisonic for more than 30 years; before the company played a leading role as an independent manufacturer of CDs, its earliest Ambisonic releases appeared on LP. (Nimbus built the first CD factory in the UK.)

Although Ambisonic was not a commercial success, Nimbus continued to use the system, maintaining that it produced "the most natural recordings in keeping with the principles of true performance." Now the company is enjoying belated payback with the widespread domestic use of surround sound, courtesy the success of home-theater systems. The reissue of Nimbus' Ambisonic recordings on the DVD-A format is a natural response.

The reissues will adhere to the original four-channel playback format, which also adheres to DTS's philosophy: to "provide sound in keeping with an artist's original intent." "[This] fits well with Nimbus' own fundamental belief that their music recordings sound better in surround," said Gerben Van Duyl, director of business development for consumer content, DTS Europe. "By releasing the Surroundyourselfwith series with DTS surround sound, many people will hear these recordings for the first time the way they were originally meant to be heard."

Nimbus launched the series with five discs: compilations of music by Elgar, Beethoven, Schubert, and Rachmaninoff, as well as a disc of American Classics by Sousa, Copland, and Barber. Future releases will include Indian classical music, flamenco from guitar player Paco Peña, Mendelssohn's incidental music, and the essential recordings of Enrico Caruso. Nimbus has more than 1000 titles in its back catalog; surround-sound enthusiasts can finally look forward to a steady flow of beautifully recorded material with which to exercise their multichannel systems.

**US: NEW YORK CITY**

**Kalman Rubinson**

At nearly simultaneous press receptions in London and New York on November 17, B&W unveiled its new 800-series loudspeakers, the first complete redesign of this respected and venerable line in more than six years. Wisely, the presentation began with cocktails and a surprisingly entertaining technical description of the innovations. The latter offered many reassurances that, while B&W engineers examined all aspects of the 800 line, they made no changes simply for the sake of change, and the basic design principles withstood this re-examination. When we were at last treated to a display of speakers themselves, we were thus not surprised that they greatly resembled their predecessors. We focused on the new features.

Most notable is the incorporation of a diamond diaphragm for the tweeter of the top models in the line, in place of the aluminum dome used in the past. This material was employed after Finite Element Analysis (FEA) indicated that the physical properties of other exotic materials, such as titanium and beryllium, did not offer significant advantages for audio performance despite being stiffer and/or less dense than aluminum. The vacuum-deposition process of making the polycrystalline diamond diaphragms is expensive, and that cost is reflected in the new models' retail prices. That said, I found it striking that B&W's engineers extolled at length the speakers' audible performance rather than their measurements.

The new series' tweeters, diamond and aluminum alike, are fitted with a...
Coming January 2005
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"...Halcro’s effortless dynamics and astonishingly clean presentation will satisfy the listener’s soul."

"...Halcro’s dm38 effortlessly joins the ranks of top-rated power amplifiers, not only for its sound quality but also its measured performance."

"...the dm38 combined great dynamics and great bass control with a superbly transparent view into the recorded soundstage."

"...superb measured performance in line with Halcro’s reputation."

John Atkinson, Stereophile, October 2004

The Halcro dm38 power amplifier.
All the outstanding qualities of our monoblocks in a single stereo unit.
No other stereo amplifier on the market produces such low levels of distortion. Signal interference is virtually eliminated, unearthing more ambient detail. A lower noise floor brings greater dynamic range. Top-end, mid-range and bass are life-like and uncolored. Halcro delivers pure music, completely natural and non-fatiguing.
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HALCRO
INDUSTRY UPDATE

A pure-diamond tweeter dome from B&W.

of the few visible changes in the new series.

The other major change is in the composition of the tweeter diaphragms, which are now made of a central 8mm layer of Rohacell, a polymethylacrylimide hard foam, between two layers of carbon fiber. Both the animated FEA results and the performance tests clearly showed the advantages in stiffness, internal damping, and linearity over the paper-Kevlar material used before. I was amused to hear Dr. John Dibb, B&W's senior development engineer, describe how a single Rohacell woofer cone could support his entire weight. Shades of Harold Leak standing on his original Sandwich cone in the 1950s!

The signature (small s) feature of the 800s, the yellow Kevlar FS-T midrange, is retained in the new versions, but with a streamlined magnet structure and support. The general cabinet design—the distinctive Nautilus midrange and tweeter compartments, the matrix bracing, the dimpling of the port surface to reduce airflow turbulence, the one-piece molded construction—is also retained. And the new drivers' superior performance has meant that the crossover networks have been refined and simplified.

The new line's top three models are three-way designs with all of these fea-
tures, including the diamond tweeter, FS-T midrange, and a supporting base that controls output from the low-frequency port on the bottom of the main enclosure. The 800 has two 10" Rohacell woofers ($10,000, all prices per speaker), the 801 has one 15" Rohacell woofer ($8000), and the 802 has two 8" Rohacell woofers ($6000). The 804 and 805 retain the Nautilus-inspired tweeter mounting but use an FS-T midrange in a conventional enclosure and an aluminum tweeter. The three-way 803 models straddle this dividing line: The 803D is available with the diamond tweeter and three 7" Rohacell woofers ($4000), the 803S with an aluminum tweeter and two 7" Rohacell woofers ($2750). Also updated are the three-way 804 with two 6.5" Rohacell woofers ($2000) and the two-way, stand-mounted 805, with a single 6.5" Kevlar bass-midrange unit ($1250).

Those are just the tip of the iceberg. B&W fills out the line with four new center-channel models, including the humongous three-way HTM1 with three 8" Rohacell woofers ($8000), two surround speakers, and three sub-woofers, each of which comes with a 1000W amp, two with DSP equalization to make them very room-friendly.

**US: YOUR LISTENING ROOM**

**Jim Austin**

Somewhere out there, computer geeks are rejoicing. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has produced a "Report and Order" revising Part 15 of its rules to encourage the development of Access Broadband-Over-Powerline (Access BPL) Internet-access technology. Access BPL means that high-throughput Internet data will soon be available directly from your AC receptacle.

The FCC decision marks a major step in a controversy between BPL supporters in the communications, Internet access, and utilities industries, and other interest groups—especially cell-phone companies and amateur radio operators—which are concerned about the adverse effects of the new technology, especially the likely high-frequency emissions from power lines. Recent research has resulted in ways to minimize those emissions and their impact, but not to eliminate them.

The FCC has a mandate to encourage new technologies and promote economic development, something the current commission—including its chairman, Michael K. Powell, son of former Secretary of State Colin Powell—does with obvious joy. Powell, in particular, is an unabashed cheerleader for BPL and its potential to make broadband Internet available in underserved areas and increase competition in areas already well served by broadband, whether over cable, wireless, or digital subscriber line (DSL) services. Powell's support for the technology has been so strong that one amateur-radio group—the American Radio Relay League—has tried to get Powell to recuse himself from the FCC's deliberations. Powell refused.

Access BPL uses existing power lines to deliver broadband Internet service, typically using carrier frequencies in the 2–30MHz range. Such high frequencies tend to radiate, leading to serious concern about potential interference with various forms of communication. These concerns led the FCC to require, in their recent Report and Order (R&O), that
BPL service providers exclude frequencies involved in, e.g., aeronautical and aircraft communications, and to create "exclusion zones" near critical facilities such as Coast Guard and radio-astronomy installations.

Members of the amateur radio community are apparently rather pleased with themselves for having won the FCC's attention, but it isn't obvious that they've won much else. Chairman Powell conceded that, even with the new rules in place, BPL will affect some spectrum users, including, as he remarked at a press conference, "all those wonderful amateur radio operators out there."

One group that hasn't won the attention of the FCC—probably because they haven't sought it—is audiophiles and other consumers of AC-fed consumer electronics. The few precautions the FCC mandated in their recent R&O were aimed at mitigating radiation and its consequences. There's no mention, apparently—the actual report isn't available yet—of the effect that fairly high-level, high-frequency noise is likely to have when it enters delicate CD-player or preamp circuits through the power cords.

The effect of high-frequency nasties on electronic devices is complex, with several known mechanisms and some, apparently, that aren't well known, at least in the mainstream audio community. Most audio designers insist that the quality of the power—including its amplitude, the shape of the waveform, and the presence or absence of high-frequency noise—can have a major impact on the quality and character of reproduced sound.

PS Audio's Paul McGowan, currently a designer of both amplification and power-quality equipment, was ambivalent. "As an audiophile, I am horrified by this action, and as a manufacturer of AC products that will eliminate this noise, I am delighted. This is another nail in the proverbial coffin of those who were hoping power-quality issues are going to fix themselves."

Manley Labs' EveAnna Manley was not ambivalent: "Oh no! If they allow broadband over power lines, then maybe someone will hack into my tube amps!" She continued: "Yikes, that is horrible news. It has to hurt passionately. It has to hurt per- tube amps!" She continued: "Yikes, that is horrible news. It has to hurt passionately. It has to hurt per-

"20 Stereophile, February 2005"

"Stereo Phil e, February 2005"

Well invite a radio station and some arc tube amps!" She continued: "Yikes, might someone will hack into my tube amps!" She continued: "Yikes, that is horrible news. It has to hurt passionately. It has to hurt per-

The Benchmark DAC1 digital-to-analog converter, Rory Rall filled in some details: "The question is, how well was the power supply designed, and was injected RF taken into consideration when doing the design?" Current Benchmark designs, including the DAC1, are tested for compatibility with some RF sources such as noisy lighting systems, but, like most—perhaps all—audio components, they were not designed to reject injected RF power. Will it make a difference in the way the DAC1 sounds? They don't know yet. "We simply have to do the design and measure."

So what is to be done? Most high-end audio equipment will probably need to be redesigned to some extent. McGowan: "We will have to redesign our passive [power-filtration] devices to provide steeper filtering, or perhaps even create notch filters at the specific bandwidth." PS Audio's regeneration products will not be affected.

"Well, if this infection of the mains happens," says Manley, "I am sure we'll see it on our test gear at the factory and have to start taking measures in our power supplies to combat extra HF hash entering the units. The challenge will be designing filters that themselves don't adversely affect the audio because, as we know, everything introduced has a sonic impact."

Despite that sonic impact, audiophiles and audio manufacturers have been largely silent—oblivious might be the more appropriate word—in the BPL debate, even in comparison to the small but rowdy amateur-radio crowd. But even if audiophiles had spoken loudly, they probably wouldn't have accomplished much, given the FCC's obvious enthusiasm for an on-the-cheap broadband solution. Chairman Powell: "The potential for the American economy is too great, too enormous, too potentially groundbreaking to sit idly by and allow any claim or any possible speculative fear keep us from driving this technology and . . . America into the broadband future."

Powell and the FCC may view BPL as a godsend, especially in underserved communities, but the first commercial implementation of the new technology will likely be in a city that can hardly be described as "underserved." Consolidated Edison, together with recent startup Ambient Corporation, intends to introduce broadband-over-powerline service soon in Stereophile's home city of Manhattan.

US: SILICON AVENUE

Barry Willis

One of the most enduring obstacles confronting audio engineers has been how to generate powerful low bass without the need for large loudspeaker enclosures. It's been generally accepted that really effective low bass means moving large quantities of air, which in turn means large drivers in large cabi-
"What’s wrong with this picture?"

Dear Music Lover,

If you’re like a growing number of audiophiles, you’re a bit frustrated. Too often you have to “crank up” your system for it to come alive, but then, it begins to sound harsh and unpleasant.

Do you know why?

What they won’t tell you

Nearly all “high-end” speakers have serious problems that interfere with the music’s message. If by chance, you haven’t discovered this for yourself, you’re about to hear the unvarnished truth...

Deaf or dumb?

Speakers that need 30-50 watts just to come alive are simply deaf to the subtler emotional cues in the music. It’s these subtleties that make the difference between connecting with the music and simply listening to it.

And it’s why many don’t listen to their music as much as you’d expect. What a shame.

TECHNICAL COLORATIONS

Nearly all speakers sound different depending on the volume setting. This unwanted and unnatural coloration is due to their drivers (woofers, tweeters, etc.) exceeding their most linear operating region. This alters the performance of the drivers. Unfortunately, this is largely unrelated to price or marketing claims!

Drivers become limited in their movement, and whichever driver does this first will change the sound. If the bass driver starts to compress, then the tonal balance shifts to a bright and unpleasant sound.

This phenomenon is so common that it has a name. It’s called displacement compression.

There’s a related coloration, equally as damaging, called thermal compression, but hey, I don’t have room to expose every sin!

Utter CHAOS

No one mentions CHAOS. CHAOS is my term for what happens to drivers that are asked to move a significant distance. Unfortunately, they never stop moving in time to reveal the musical subtleties that follow.

When there’s no signal at the end of a note, what’s left is unwanted vibrations, or CHAOS. Not only most cone speakers, but also stretched diaphragm speakers exhibit this problem.

When CHAOS is eliminated, the sound is shockingly more pure and compelling.

Voodoo Economics

Ever hear this one? “My (expensive) speakers are so revealing that only a few of my recordings are listenable!”

Speakers that are “too revealing” (audiophile code for cold and harsh) suffer from most if not all of the above design flaws. Ever listen to a system and find that you’re relieved when it’s turned off?

Why would anyone want to pay more to enjoy their music less?

Set your music free

Quite simply, Avantgarde Acoustic Hornspeakers convey all of the music without causing any of those problems.

To get more inside info on Avantgarde Acoustic speakers, visit our website. Read the reviews. Click on “Atlanta Visitors” to read what the skeptics discovered! Or call me at 770-777-2095.

And be sure to request our acclaimed 16-page 31 Secrets to Better Sound. Plus, we’ll include our top 170 Reference CD list, absolutely free!

Best regards,

Jim Smith

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'movie theater' quality bass without a big black box sitting on the floor. Architectural sound systems can now include the sound of a 12" subwoofer in a 3" wall, without shaking the wall. From consumer to professional applications, Tymphany is changing the shape of deep bass.

LAT products do this through a linear array of multiple smaller diaphragms, generating sound at "high decibel levels from 20Hz to above 4kHz" through multiple flow ports along the sides of the loudspeaker housing. "The Tymphany LAT conforms to the physics of loudspeakers, but changes the conventional shape and method of how air is moved," Kantor explained. Balanced drivers work in opposition, canceling cabinet vibration but generating large sound-pressure levels from small tubular enclosures.

LAT technology is "scalable down to 2" and up to 12" in diameter at any length, can be stacked into large clusters for even more power, is compatible with existing electro-acoustic driver design tools and processes, and works with vented box, transmission line, infinite baffle, and sealed enclosures to provide thorough ease of design," according to information available at www.tymphany.com.

UNITED KINGDOM
Paul Messenger

It's been a while since I reported any developments from NXT, the UK-based maker of flat-panel speakers that originally grew out of Mission at the end of 1996 (but is now independent), to develop and license modal (as distinct from pistonic) transducer technologies. In modal operation, sound is generated by setting up multiple resonances in a light, stiff panel; NXT's major contribution has been to develop the mathematics that allow this effect to be predicted and, to some extent, controlled.

Since its launch, NXT has signed up some 250 licensees for applications that span the audio field, but its activities have been largely peripheral to specialist hi-fi. However, a new NXT development, Audio Full Range (AFR), is already beginning to play a role in automobile sound systems, and could turn out to have hi-fi applications as well.

The basic idea behind AFR is simple enough: Create transducers that operate pistonically at low frequencies (where such motion moves plenty of air and modal operation is less effective, especially with small panels), but that switch to modal operation at higher frequencies. This has the theoretical advantage of creating a single drive-unit that is able to cover the full audio frequency range without the high-frequency "beaming" that plagues all-pistonic drivers. Modal drivers don't follow the rules of sound distribution that piston drivers do; even a large modal surface has wide high-frequency distribution.

But what sounds attractive in theory is much trickier to actually accomplish. NXT has long anticipated the theoretical perfection of the AFR concept, but it has taken some time—and a measure of good fortune—to bring it about. First and most obvious, there's the difficulty of smoothly and evenly managing the transition from pistonic to modal operation. Less obvious is the fact that, because it has a wide bandwidth, an AFR driver needs good power handling, hence a relatively large and heavy voice-coil, which in turn tends to reduce the high-frequency output in modal mode.

After extensive experimentation it turned out that the solution to both problems came through using a voice-coil of unusually large diameter—typically, for a circular diaphragm, an AFR voice-coil is roughly half the diameter of the diaphragm. The AFR drivers' wide treble distribution, simplicity, compactness, light weight, and low manufacturing costs all indicate a product that will have considerable appeal to car manufacturers. British sports-car maker TVR has recently announced plans to fit four of its models with small, dash-mounted "Mini-AFR" units in partnership with conventional woofers. These small "Mini-AFRs" can operate down to surprisingly low frequencies: 300Hz is specified for a 2.2" version. That has obvious potential for the satellites of 5.1-channel sat/sub surround systems, and for two-way systems with a much lower crossover frequency than the 2–3kHz normally used with conventional drivers. Many speaker designers would welcome the chance to move the crossover point down and well away from the critical "presence" band, where the ears are particularly sensitive, while avoiding the power-response discontinuity that usually occurs at the transition from bass/mid driver to tweeter. NXT's AFR approach could well find a home in the hi-fi world.

THE INTERNET
Barry Willis

Napster creator Shawn Fanning, now 24 years old, is back with a legitimate download service, Snocap, Inc., which he claims will hinder piracy and improve the bottom line for the music industry by giving the industry stronger control over distribution and pricing. Based in downtown San Francisco, the startup has signed a deal with Universal Music Group. The world's biggest record label, UMG will provide its entire catalog to music fans through Snocap's database. The company is also in discussion with Sony BMG. Snocap has received approximately $10 million in financing, led by venture-capital firms Morgenthaler and WaldenVC, according to the San Francisco Chronicle. A competing legitimate download service, Peer Impact, is expected to launch early in 2005.

Meanwhile, BlueBeat (www.bluebeat.com), based in Santa Cruz, California, has announced what it believes is an antidote for music lovers fed up with the low quality of most online audiostreams. BlueBeat claims to deliver its selections at 320 kilobits per second, a vast improvement over the average streaming rate of 64–96kbps. With DSL or broadband cable connections, music lovers can log on to BlueBeat and enjoy "spectacular, crystal-clear sound" via the company's secure online broadcasts. BlueBeat requires downloading dedicated software to stream its content, and
It has been said that the most demanding challenge is to follow up success with another. If so, Vienna Acoustics has passed with flying colors. The all-new Classic Grand family from this first-rank speaker house builds upon their previous offerings in every way.

From crisp, clean veneers—a Viennese hallmark—to sound quality that is the foundation of their carefully crafted reputation, these new Classic Grand offerings are lovely in every sense of the word.

Beethoven Concert Grand is featured here in cool, elegant maple. Other available finishes include a warm cherry and flawless piano black lacquer. An optional hand-selected, book-matched, rosewood is also available at a slight up-charge.

Vienna Acoustics Classic Grand - beauty personified coupled with sound quality that is expensive, exquisite and refined.
expects as many as 1 million users by spring 2005, according to a December
1 press release. It’s a “high-fidelity
haven, and all free of charge to the
user,” BlueBeat claims.

Grokster, Ltd. plans to expand its
Internet file-sharing services to
include leveraging users’ computers as
sources for music streaming, according
to November 15 news reports from
Silicon Valley. Grokster Radio was
scheduled to launch last November, in
partnership with Mercora, Inc. of Sun-
nyside, California, whose technology
allows users to stream music from
other computers on the Grokster net-
work, but is claimed to block perma-
nent downloads, thereby serving
music fans searching for new music as
well as the recording industry, which
needs to sell it to them. As in the orig-
inal Napster model, users can search
for titles among other users’ files. Mer-
cora then monitors songs streamed
and pays royalties to music-publishing
and recording-rights organizations at
the rates paid by Web radio stations—
currently about $400 per month, a fig-
ure expected to rise to more than
$20,000 per month by the end of next
year, if all goes according to plan.

Exactly how money will be collect-
ed from Grokster users for this pur-
pose wasn’t made clear in various
reports, although there were allusions
to “advertising sales” and “future sub-
scription fees,” buzzwords familiar to
anyone who lived through the dot-
com boom. Pre-release hype included
the statement that Grokster Radio
would be “the world’s largest radio
network,” in the words of Mercora
cofounder Srivats Sampaths. Approxi-
mately 8 million copies of Grokster
software have been downloaded since
its debut four years ago.

The move comes in the face of con-
tinuing opposition to file sharing by the
entertainment industry. On November
10, a coalition of industry trade groups
appealed to the US Supreme Court,
seeking a reversal of an August 19,2004
ruling by the Ninth Circuit Court of
Appeals, in San Francisco, that file-shar-
ing software made by Grokster and
StreamCast Networks, Inc. did not vio-
late US copyright law (www.stereophile.com/news/082304law-
suits/index.html). That ruling sent a
shockwave through the music industry,
which responded with the November
10 petition to the Supreme Court to
hear the case of MGM Studios, Inc., et al v.
Grokster, Ltd., et al. Signers of the petition
included the Recording Academy (aka
the Grammy Organization, www.gram-
my.com) and various member organiza-
tions, including the American Feder-
aton of Musicians (AFM), the American
Federation of Television and Radio
Artists (AFTRA), the Country Music
Association (CMA), the Gospel Music
Association (GMA), the Hip-Hop Sum-
mit Action Network, the Jazz Alliance
International, and the Rhythm & Blues
Foundation. Grokster and StreamCast
Networks have filed a joint brief
requesting that the Supreme Court let
stand the Appeals Court ruling.

Despite downloads and piracy, CD
sales are up in the UK, driven primar-
ily by the popularity of British acts such
as Dido, Will Young, and Katie Melua,
according to statistics posted November
27 by The Hollywood Reporter. The British
Phonographic Industry (BPI) reported
that album sales reached a record 237
million units in the fiscal year ended
September 30, with retailers pulling in
£1.2 billion ($2.3 billion) in revenue, a
2.7% gain over the previous year.

UK: LONDON
Paul Messenger

In December’s “Industry Update” I
noted that a number of the larger spe-
cialist hi-fi companies did not attend
The Hi-Fi Show, the UK’s biggest and
longest-running audio show, sponsored
by Hi-Fi News and held at Heathrow
airport hotels in late September.

Instead, they exhibited at a November
show, The What Hi-Fi? Sound and
Vision Show 2004, sponsored by What
Hi-Fi magazine at a venue much closer
to central London, the Novotel Hotel
and Conference Center.

From a hi-fi point of view, The
What Hi-Fi? Show was much smaller
than the Heathrow event in terms of the
number of exhibitors, in part
because the show also included lots of
AV, home computer, and other gad-
getry. But it also seemed significantly
better attended; those exhibitors I
spoke with seemed pleased with the
opportunity to introduce to a new
type of visitor the delights of “serious” hi-fi,
even if the diehard hi-fi enthusi-
ast or journalist didn’t find the show as
interesting as Heathrow.

Still, there were gems waiting to be
discovered. Noteworthy among these
was the first public appearance of Wil-
son Benesch’s radical and interesting
subwoofer, or Precision Bass Infrason-
ic Generator, as WB describes it. Its
15” driver lacks entirely the usual
arrangement of driver frame and bask-
et. Instead, the cylindrical enclosure
itself directly supports the edge of the
cone/surround, while the motor is
built around a complex and magnifi-
cently massive (22 lbs) machined cen-
tral pole-and-magnet assembly. Twin
trace-coils provide balanced push/pull
drive to each side of a very light but
very stiff cone of carbon-fiber com-
posite (CFC), and the whole thing is
driven below its natural sealed-box
resonance by a powerful, equalized
digital amplifier in a separate enclo-
sure. This extraordinary device is still
very much a work in progress.

Two trends in today’s loudspeakers
are the increasing use of curved cabi-
networks and of cast-alloy-frame main
drivers. Both features are found in new
ranges from Acoustic Energy and
Wharfedale. AE’s new, midprice Aelite
line features real-wood veneers on their
tapered, curved cabinets, plus metal-
cone, cast-frame main drivers. Does the
Wharfedale’s new Diamond 9 series—
but the enclosures are clad in vinyl to
keep prices within a beer budget.

New stereo electronics seemed thin
on the ground, though I did spot the
very attractive new CD 8X CD player
and 8vs integrated amplifier from
Cyrus, both mounted in the company’s
bijou “half-width” cast-alloy casework,
which seems to have been around for-
ever yet still looks fresh and tasty. This
was not a show for tube electronics, but
the vinyl revival was represented by
such confections as Roksan’s Radius 5
turntable with Nima unipivot tonearm,
which looked lovely in alloy tubing and
transparent Perspex.

One big surprise was the ambitious
launch of several complete electronics
and speaker systems under the Danish
Vifa brand. Better known as a supplier
of speaker drive-units to companies
making complete speaker systems,
Vifa is one of three main brands oper-
ating within the DST (Danish Sound
Technology) group, Europe’s domi-
nant supplier of raw drive-units. The
decisions to spend two and a half years
developing such a large collection of
new components, and to launch them
under a brand name little known to the
public, seem bold; time alone will
determine their commercial future.

The What Hi-Fi show might not
have been as interesting to the hi-fi
veteran as the Hi-Fi News event, but it
has secured its place on the calendar
simply by delivering the sort of visitors
exhibitors want to meet.
US: BERKELEY, CA
Barry Willis

Berkeley, California–based Fantasy Records has been sold to Concord Records of Beverly Hills in a deal valued at $83 million, according to a December 4 report in Billboard. The music enterprise of film producer Saul Zaentz and partners, Fantasy is well known for its huge catalog of works by jazz greats Count Basie, John Coltrane, the Modern Jazz Quartet, Miles Davis, Bill Evans, Ella Fitzgerald, Thelonious Monk, Joe Pass, Oscar Peterson, and Sarah Vaughan, as well as soul and blues stars the Dramatics, Isaac Hayes, Albert King, the Staple Singers, and Johnnie Taylor.

Dave Brubeck was the first artist to sign with the label; its most successful act was Creedence Clearwater Revival, a local rock band from El Cerrito, just north of Berkeley. (The band’s lead singer, John Fogerty, was a shipping clerk at Fantasy.) In the early 1970s, CCR put out a string of hit albums that took Fantasy into the big time, but also set the stage for prolonged animosity between the band and the label’s executives.

Old-school artists on the Concord label include Charlie Byrd, Rosemary Clooney, Herb Ellis, Stan Getz, Gene Harris, Tito Puente, and Mel Tormé. More recent acts include Karrin Allyson, Patti Austin, Peter Cincotti, Michael Feinstein, Nienna Freelon, Robben Ford, Marian McPartland, Barry Manilow, Ozomatli, Eddie Palmieri, Poncho Sanchez, and Curtis Stigers. Concord's latest hit is Ray Charles' final recording, Genius Loves Company, a joint production with Starbucks' Hear Music. Together, Fantasy and Concord enjoyed $42 million in global sales in 2003. The combined entity will be known as Concord Music Group, Inc. (CMG), to be headquartered in Beverly Hills, with a San Francisco Bay Area office in the Fantasy building. The combined company has a workforce of about 120 employees, which will be pared down as redundant jobs are eliminated. The Fantasy Records building and recording studio weren't included in the deal, but will be leased by CMG.
In every detail the CAD-211M Anniversary Edition triode amplifiers represent the ultimate in home audio perfection, now celebrating eleven years of continuous production and refinement. The Anniversary Edition 211Ms are the showpiece of Cary Audio engineering, artistry, and music reproduction.

Enjoy more perfection with the latest edition of the SLP-98 full-featured preamplifier. In continuous production since 1990, the SLP-90 series of preamplifiers have captured the heart and soul of music lovers around the world.

Audition the new CAD-211M Anniversary Edition amplifiers along with the matching SLP-98 preamplifier at select Cary Audio dealers and experience sheer Cary Audio perfection.
British hi-fi has lately taken its lumps. Quad electrostatic speakers are now made in China. Wharfedale, Epos, and Mordaunt-Short speakers are all made in China. Cambridge Audio electronics, once actually produced in Cambridge, England, are assembled in PRC, which is code for People’s Republic of China. And the new A5-series components from Musical Fidelity? “Built in Taiwan.”

Yet hi-fi products continue to be made in the UK, France, Germany, Italy, the US, and Canada. As one hi-fi manufacturer explained, “If you’re talking about expensive products and limited production, I can make them at home. Besides, I have no choice. Most Asian OEMs [original equipment manufacturers] aren’t interested in producing a few dozen or a few hundred of an item. They want orders for thousands or tens of thousands of units.”

There’s irony. Many Asian audio-philosophers, in China and elsewhere, place a premium on products made in the West. Harbeth speakers, made in England, have long been favorites in Hong Kong. The Vietnamese, with something of a French cultural past, take to Triangle speakers. It’s the same around the world. Moscow hi-fi buffs regard McIntosh gear as capitalist and cool.

Maybe there’s room for everyone at the table—big firms and small, those who mass produce in China and those who sell specialist hi-fi kits in China. Still, look for even more production to migrate East in the future.

Item. Rumor has it that one very high-end US manufacturer now has its faceplates made in China. Which might account for the leap forward in quality. The old faceplates were crappy.

Item. One European electronics maker told me he plans to keep production of his established brand at home, but he’s considering a new budget line, under a different name, designed in Europe and made in China. We’re likely to see more of this.

I still have a soft spot for small, specialist hi-fi firms based in the US, the UK, and Europe. Or Asia, for that matter. Perhaps no electronics firm is closer to my heart than Sun Audio, whose Japanese premises are said to more resemble an atelier, or workshop, than a factory.

I like firms such as Creek, Rega, Conrad-Johnson, Quicksilver Audio, Unison Research—firms that haven’t abandoned two-channel hi-fi. In a world of big-budget systems, individualists such as Creek, Rega, Conrad-Johnson, Quicksilver Audio, Unison Research stand out like Tip Toes.

The Sugden A21a integrated amplifier.

Sugden & Harbeth, so very English!

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Put this in your pipe and smoke it, as my Uncle Harry—still chitter at 94—likes to say: The boom in home theater is part of the housing boom; like the rest of the housing boom, it’s fueled by low mortgage rates and rising property values. People are using mortgage money to install home theaters as part of the house. What do you think might happen when mortgage rates rise significantly and the housing bubble bursts? The lucky firms might be those that are sticking with two-channel stereo. Like Sugden.

And maybe it’s time to wring out the excess. The other day, I received a press invitation from a well-known speaker manufacturer inviting me to audition a half-million-dollar surround system. That’s $500,000 for the speakers and the electronics, not counting the video. The manufacturer described this as a “dream system.”

More like a nightmare. Do you think such a system would bring its owner happiness? I declined the invitation.

A 49-year-old physician, posting on an Internet discussion group recently, observed the pathology of Audiophila nervosa—or Audiophila psychosa. Where are happiness, humor, and humility, he wanted to know, among those who pay $30,000 for a pair of speakers or lay out $10,000 for a set of speaker cables?

I’ve written about my late friend Lars, who died of a heart attack at the age of 59. I think his audiophile hobby became the occasion of more stress and tension than relaxation and pleasure. Another friend, the Brass Ear, came to much the same conclusion. Fortunately, he’s still alive. He traded in his gear and downsized to a Bose Wave radio. Ever the audiophile, Brass put the Bose on a set of Tip Toes.

I might have suggested another possibility to Brass: buy a Sugden A21a. I’ve been living with this 25Wpc integrated amp for two months now, and I’ve derived more pleasure from it than I have from some hugely expensive separates.

Sugden A21a integrated amplifier

Sugden. The very name sounds so English, so down-to-earth. Like Creek. Or Leak. Or Mordaunt-Short.

J.E. Sugden & Co., Ltd., is located in what looks to be an old mill in West Yorkshire—a site where stuff has been made since the dawn of the industrial revolution. I wouldn’t be surprised to find that the factory is powered by a water wheel.

The firm’s founder, James E. Sugden, retired more than two decades ago. He’s said to be alive and well, hanging out somewhere in a rural part of northeast England. Tony Miller has run the company for more than 20 years, building on Sugden designs that originated in the 1960s, when the fledgling company was in the vanguard of British solid-state hi-fi.
That undeniably sweet Revel sound. High-performance drivers with ultra-low distortion. Sleek cabinetry available in Natural Cherry, Maple or Black Ash finishes.

The F32 floor-standing loudspeaker, C32 center-channel, and M22 monitor* push the Performa series to a new level of refinement. Visit your Revel dealer and treat your eyes to what your ears have always loved.

The new Performas from Revel.
By the time you read this column, Sugden will have introduced the A21SE (special edition). Tony Miller tipped me off in advance: It will deliver almost twice the power and cost roughly twice as much as the A21a, which will remain in production.

Now, if 25Wpc isn't enough, you have two choices. You could cough up twice the dough and buy the new SE, or you could purchase the A21a and match it to an A21ap power amp. You would probably use the integrated to drive the tweeters and put the power amp—also

**THE SUGDEN SLOGAN IS “RESCUING MUSIC FROM TECHNOLOGY.” MY OWN MOTTO MIGHT BE RESCUING SOUND FROM AUDIOPHILES.**

The A21a uses a single pair of NPN bipolar output transistors per channel to deliver its rated 25W into 8 ohms. Obviously, the amplifier is best suited for sensitive speakers and, perhaps, small rooms.

The Sugden slogan is “Rescuing music from technology.” Quite proper, that. My own motto might be rescuing sound from audiophiles. Sugden’s Tony Miller went so far, in an e-mail, as to term technology the “bête noire of music reproduction.” The French would love that. (My first teacher of French called me “the bête noire of the classroom.” Bête noire means black heart.)

According to Sugden, “Technology is generally employed and developed to encompass mass markets and create infinite growth in demand and fuel the next generation of must-have items. No time to stop and smell the flowers or even observe they exist.

“Sugden’s task is to embrace technology, then apply it to obtain the reproduction of an art form which is far too abstract to conform totally to technological disciplines. The experience of different circuits and their interrelationships, coupled with the performance of selected electronic components, all wrapped up in many pairs of trusted ears, creates a font from which we draw... If our final arbiter is the sense of satisfaction in the listening experience.”

**News flash!**

Sugden does not rush to market with new products all the time, so this is news:
resolution was very good, if not exceptional. There was what my late friend Lars used to term a “whale” over the sound. He meant veil. At its modest price, I warmly recommend the A21a. You might save on heating oil.

My colleague John Marks, too, likes this amplifier, mentioning only “incremental shortcomings” (“The Fifth Element,” in the November 2003 Stereophile, Vol. 26 No.11). Indeed, it was the illustrious Mr. Marks who put me on to the amp’s availability here in the US.

The sound wasn’t tube, Solid-state can have its own set of virtues. I did not note the startling sense of immediacy I experience with single-ended triode at its best, typically with one of the flea-watt persuasion. But I don’t get that from most tubed amps, either.

I did hear sound that was consistently satisfying and seductive with all types of music. I’m particularly taken by The Complete Recordings of Enrico Caruso—just issued as a set on Naxos. You’ll hear about the set shortly, after I’ve had more time to sort through it. For the moment, I will tell you that the original 78s have never been transferred so successfully to any other medium. A triumph.

Was the Sugden a little...you know...polite? Enrico Caruso didn’t think so. Nor did Ezio Pinza, Maria Callas, Jascha Heifetz, and so on. The heck with Hillary Hahn.

The Sugden A21a has a way of making most other solid-state amps sound a wee bit sterile. Dry, Harmonically threadbare. Want a great integrated amplifier for your parents? This is it. My friend Marc is considering one for his son, who is finishing up his cello studies at the Eastman School of Music.

You might consider matching the Sugden to a pair of Triangle speakers. I could assemble a real “dream system” for as little as $4000: Triangle Heliade speakers, perhaps, for a little over $1000; a suitable CD player, or a DAC. Bada bing, bada boom, as they say over in Bay Ridge.

Harbeth Super HL5 loudspeaker
Harbeth is located in the south of Eng-

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**Picture perfect. Surround spectacular.**

Rotel’s new RSX-1067 is the definitive Home Theater surround receiver. It is replete with all of the features a video fanatic could ever desire including: High Definition video switching, video transcoding, multi-zone, multi-source audio capability and seven channels of amplification. The RSX-1067 provides outstanding audio and video performance along with exceptional versatility. Hear it along with all of our other superb components at your authorized Rotel dealer.
land, so they and Sugden are not neighbors. The two firms are on friendly terms, though, and share much in common.

Harbeth is not so old as Sugden—but in some ways the tradition goes back even further. The company was founded in 1977 by Dudley Harwood, ex of the BBC's Loudspeaker Research Department, and his wife, Beth. The launch product, back then, was called, simply, the HL monitor. I considered buying one, but I already had Spendor BC1s. The HL went through several versions: Mk2, Mk3, etc.

In its fifth incarnation, the HL became the HL5, introduced in 1988. There was a change a few years later when the Harbeth-made Radial driver was substituted for the original Audax polypropylene bass/midrange driver; this was the HL5ES. Finally, there was an "upgrade twist," in Alan Shaw's words, a few years later with the addition of the supertweeter. (Alan Shaw bought Harbeth from the Harwoods in the 1980s.) This is today's Super HL5.

"Dad, what are you doing with the review pair?" inquired my son, David, over Thanksgiving.

"Packing them up, sending them back, I guess. Want to help?"

"Yes—on condition that I buy them," David declared, decisively.

"Good choice!" I exclaimed.

My son does not usually buy Dad's review gear. He last bought a pair of speakers 15 years ago. Something about the Harbets hit home. Literally.

"Yes, the Harbets," he said. "These speakers. I want these, this pair."

My son is now 38, so perhaps this represents a long-awaited (by me) maturing of his oft-wayward musical tastes—Lounge Lizards and the like. He and his wife, Julie, spend much more time now at Carnegie Hall and Lincoln Center. Not long ago they went to Iridium to hear Les Paul. There's always hope your kids will turn out right. I'm talking musically, now.

"The Harbeths sound so natural," David said.

"I'm not wild about the shape of the cabinets," said my wife, Marina.

Kindly.

The Super HL5s' beautifully finished cabinets are foursquare—forthright, one might correct. Each speaker measures 24.9" high by 12.6" wide by 11.7" deep and is meant to be placed on a 12"-16" stand, which runs counter to the current fashion of building loudspeakers down to the ground—ie, to make floorstanders. Even Harbeth and Spendor seem to be accommodating contemporary fashion with their new floorstanders. Yet traditional speakers remain in both manufacturers' lines.

"This is the classic two-cubic-foot BBC box," I said, putting on my expert's hat. Marina and Julie hadn't a clue what I meant, but David did. With our black-and-white TV locked in the closet—and such miserable reception the kids didn't want to turn it on anyway—David and his sister, Amy, had spent their childhood evenings with the Spendor BC1s in our living room.

"Yeah, Dad, the sound. It's real."

I phoned the Harbeth importer, Walter Swanbon, of Fidelis AV.

"Sorry, Walter. Didn't want to disturb your holiday, but the speakers are gone. My son heard them and took them. He had a rented SUV, so it was an opportune time."

The Harbeth Super HL5 is available in your choice of two light standard finishes: eucalyptus and cherry. Real wood
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World Radio History
veneer, of course. Go for the eucalyptus. The grain is beautiful and the wood should darken naturally over time. The price is $3995/pair.

Add $250-$400 for the bespoke stands made by Skylan Stands, of Canada. Fine stands these, made by a genial Irishman, Noel Nolan. The tops and bases are made of MDF (medium-density fiberboard) and the columns are made of polymer. Those materials ring less than metal. The stands can be filled with sand or lead shot. Check them out at skylanstands.com. Not just for Harbeths.

Harbeth gives the nominal impedance of the Super HL5 as 8 ohms, the sensitivity as 86dB/W/m; they recommend 25-150W of amplifier power. We’re not talking about some American-made monstrosity whose impedance dips to 2 ohms or less. This is a proper Beeb-inspired design that’s possible to drive without having to buy a grotesque American hyper-powered amp. (I do have to give John Atkinson something to delete. Marina and other Russian speakers will get the joke.)

The three-way Super HL5 is actually more of a classic two-way in that a single bass/midrange driver handles most of the music. Harbeth’s Radial 7.8" bass/mid driver, made in-house, is at the heart of this speaker and the Harbeth sound. The cone consists of injection-molded polymer with a glass microsphere fill. It’s terminated by a nitrile rubber surround. The driver is proprietary; only Harbeth has it.

Harbeth doesn’t specify, but the Radial driver crosses over to a 1" aluminum-dome SEAS tweeter at around 3.5kHz. The tweeter, in turn, gives way to a 0.8" Audax titanium-dome super tweeter at around 15kHz.

If the glory of the Super HL5 is its neutral midrange, the treble is exceptionally well presented—extended, open, and sweet. What happens where you can’t hear might affect what happens where you can. This is part of the appeal of CD upsampling—the magic bullet. Ask your dog or cat.

The Super HL5 is not cheap, but the product hasn’t beencheapened. The construction is labor-intensive—each cabinet must be carefully assembled and tuned. The thin speaker walls are part of the design. The Super HL5 is meant to resonate, much like a string instrument.

When I consider that I bought my Spendor BC1s in 1972 for around $750, a price of $3995 for a pair of Super HL5s seems fair, even understated. I figure inflation as being at least sixfold since 1972. That would put the HL5 at $4500/pair. And much as I loved my Spendor BC1s at the time, Harbeth’s Super HL5 is a better speaker. It sounds cleaner, handles power better, and has more air on top. It retains the midrange magic of the Spendor BC1 and, for that matter, of the original Harbeth HL.

Some observations:

The Super HL5 joys with some juice—or, as the late Lars might have said, yows with yuice. (I do miss teasing him. I used to stalk him with a notepad, taking down each bon mot.)

I loved this speaker with Parasound’s Halo JC 1 mono amps, rated at 400W each. Overkill, perhaps—but the sense of control and dynamic ease was wonderful. Of course, one should take care. A powerful amp is like a powerful car—the power is there in reserve. Remember, you’re more likely to damage a loudspeaker driver with too little power than with too much.

The Super HL5 does not seem a likely candidate for use with a fleapowered single-ended-triode (SET) tube amp. A larger SET tube amp, such as the Cary 805C, might be the cat’s whiskers, however.

The Super HL5 doesn’t seem to need tubes to sound sweet and musical. So you might just go with solid-state and avoid tube *tsuris*. (Tube *tsuris*, or grief, usually involves power-amplifier output tubes, not small input tubes.)

For most of my listening, I used one of two integrated amplifiers: the Musical Fidelity A5 and the Lavardin IS, which the Harbeth importer is bringing in. (Bienvenue, Lavardin!) Much depends on room size, listening levels, etc. My son drives his newly bought Super HL5s with a rebuilt Marantz 8B—thirtysomething watts per side. I found the Sugden A21a a mite shy on power for this speaker. (It might work better in a smaller room.) But you could add the Sugden A21ap power amp—or go for the new Sugden A21 SE integrated.

Something else about the Super HL5. It really is a full-range speaker (please, Chief, no placing it in the “Recommended Components” category of “Limited Low-Frequency Response”). The frequency range is given as 40Hz-24kHz, ±3dB, in “free space.” Which I suppose means don’t stuff it in a corner, as some Americans do, or put its back flush with the wall, as some Brits seem fond of. Give it space to breathe and come alive.

I thought the Super HL5’s bass was exceptional. David did, too: full, rich, deep, warm without being woolly. I think you’d have to be an audiophile idiot to want to extend—and most likely spoil—such seamless quality of sound with a subwoofer.

The Harbeth Super HL5 is one of the finest speakers to come my way. Give it a listen, lest you spend more—much more—and get far less lasting musical satisfaction. This speaker has been a classic for more than a quarter of a century, and will still be a classic 25 years hence. You’ll likely never regret having bought a pair.

Funny thing. We had a visitor from Israel—originally from Russia—who has considerable musical experience. During the days he spent with us, he heard several loudspeakers. I did not show favoritism to any particular one. Eddik (that’s Eddie, in Russian) took his time with listening, as you might, too. He fixed on the Harbeth.

Don’t expect the Super HL5 to blow you away right away. That’s not what it does. And please do not subject this speaker to some idiot audiophile “shoot-out” at your dealer, where you chase from speaker A to speaker B—an exercise almost certain to make any two speakers sound almost the same, and akin to a dog or cat chasing its tail.

To appreciate the Harbeth Super HL5, do what Eddik and my son did: sit down, relax, listen at length. No jumping up and down to change the CD. No switching back and forth between this speaker and that. Give the HL5 the respect it deserves. Just sit down for a long run, relax...listen.

Then listen some more.
The new A5 Integrated amplifier and CD player from Musical Fidelity set new performance standards at moderate price points. The A5 CD player offers better performance than the NuVista CD player at half the price, and the A5 Integrated amplifier offers more sonic purity and sheer muscle than anything we know of in its price range.

* **A5 Integrated amplifier**
  - 250w/ ch into 8 ohms
  - 400w/ ch into 4 ohms
  - 75 amp peak-to-peak current output capability
  - Home Theater bypass

* **A5 CD player**
  - 24 bit / 192 upsampling
  - Extremely low jitter of 135 pps
  - mu-vista 6112 tube output stage
  - Limited edition of 1,500 pieces

MUSICAL FIDELITY

www.musicalfidelityUS.com
This was supposed to be my report on analog gear at Home Entertainment 2004 West. The San Francisco show was canceled because of a hotel-workers' lockout, but my column wasn't! Fortunately, I'd gotten an early start on what was to be next month's column because I wanted to actually get ahead on the audio-reviewing assembly line. No such luck.

First, some old business: I'd promised to audition the T+A G10 turntable with its built-in phono preamp bypassed, to get a better handle on the G10's performance. But when I removed its bottom plate, I found it difficult to remove the phono plugs that had been inserted into the base of the SME tonearm. After much careful but forceful tugging and no luck, but more flexing of the SME's base than I was comfortable with, I decided it was best not to proceed.

My choice of phono cables would have had to have been routed through the bottom plate's cutouts which are there to allow access to the phono preamp's gain and loading DIP switches, and because there's not much clearance, I'd have had to raise the table so the cables would clear. While this is all doable, I don't recommend it. Perhaps at some future date I can get a sample without the built-in phono preamp and give another listen.

Removing the bottom plate did allow me to examine the motor supply, the internal construction, and the phono preamp, with its individually tweaked motor supply and heavy metal damping bar. While the phono preamp is tucked out of sight, it's no afterthought but a serious piece of gear with a generous power supply.

**Shelter cartridges**

Shelter moving-coil cartridges, imported by Axiss Distribution, have gotten a lot of good press of late. No doubt one reason is the distributor's retail prices. While I'm not privy to the actual import costs or to what dealers pay, Shelter's 501 Mk.II appears to be, for all intents and purposes, a Crown Jewel SE, which I once owned. I reviewed the original Crown Jewel Reference in the April 1997 *Stereophile*, and later owned a Crown Jewel SE. The only significant physical difference I could come up with (assuming the specs I was given are correct) is that the CJ used a samarium-cobalt magnet, while the 501 Mk.II's is neodymium. The Crown Jewel SE cost $2650; the Shelter 501 Mk.II costs $850.

I don't know what kind of deal Sounds of Silence, which imported the Crown Jewel, had with Shelter, but it might seem that, given the huge price difference in eight years, someone in the loop was making a lot of money. On the other hand, as is usually the case with hand-built, hand-tweaked, limited-edition products such as phono cartridges, there can be a wide range in specs and performance from sample to sample; perhaps the best-spect'd, lowest-tolerance samples became Crown Jewels, the rest Shelters. Custom badge also costs extra. Or perhaps an importer willing to take on a four-tier cartridge line gets a significant price break over one interested in only a single model. Another issue is volume—back in 1997, analog had not yet recovered to the degree it has today. Smaller volume may have translated to higher unit cost.

I'm not here to defend or attack anyone, merely to point out that, in the wacky world of high-end audio, things aren't always as they appear—though it appears obvious that now, in 2005 the Shelter line is available in the US at extremely attractive prices, starting with the 301 at $550.

Shelter cartridges are built by an Ozawa-san, a former employee of Fidelity Research, which built legendary cartridges and tonearms in the 1970s—too rich for my hippie blood back then, but I sure lusted. Like car models within a line, in which the basic design remains constant while engines, transmissions, suspension, tires, and interior and external trim packages change, all four Shelter cartridges share an anodized aluminum body with varying finishes, a neodymium magnet, a claimed frequency response of 20Hz–20kHz, ±2dB, greater than 25dB separation at 1kHz, and an aluminum pipe cantilever. Whether any or all of the Shelters have a beryllium bar inside the cantilever, as the Crown Jewel did, I was unable to ascertain.

Channel balance at 1kHz, not specified for the 301, is said to be within 1dB for the 501 Mk.II and 0.8dB for the 901 and 90X. This is merely adequate; many other competitively priced brands claim 0.5dB. Compliance is a low to medium 9cu (μm/mN) across the line, with the exception of the 301, which is not specified.

All four cartridges worked well in the Graham 2.2 or Immedia RPM-2 tonearms, both of which are of medi-
um mass, with the resonant frequency in the desired 8-12Hz range. With the exception of the 301, which uses a 0.65mil conical stylus, the Shelters are fitted with a 0.3 by 0.7 nude diamond stylus, which has a moderate, "install friendly" elliptical profile. The output increases in increments of 0.1mV as you move up the Shelter line, beginning with the 301's 0.3mV, and, as you might expect, the increased number of coil turns that produce the higher output voltage increases both DC resistance and overall cartridge weight. The 301 and 501 Mk.II weigh 8.1gm each, the 901 weighs 9.1gm, and the 90X weighs 9.7gm. Shelter recommends loading all of its cartridges with 47k ohms.

Aside from the high build quality, attractive prices, and, of course, the well-balanced sonic performances, what makes this line particularly attractive is the ease of setup. The square body, its clearance of the record surface, and the mild stylus ellipse make alignment in all parameters particularly easy. Add low/medium compliance, non-fussy loading, and noncritical vertical tracking angle (again because of the stylus shape), which was best with the cartridge body slightly less than parallel to the record surface, and you have a line of cartridges that has become extremely popular for all the right reasons.

As I listened my way up the line, I found that the most expensive model, the 90X ($2700), and the least expensive, the 301 ($550), shared a basic "house sound" that was among the most tonally neutral and well-balanced of any cartridge brand I've listened to, competing on an equal playing field with Immutable's Temper line. However, beyond what was shared, there were significant performance differences among the various models, the most expensive being clearly the best—especially in terms of resolution.

**Shelter 301:** At $550, the 301 is the least expensive Shelter, but probably the poorest value. Not that it sounded objectionable or had any serious flaws—in fact, its overall sonic balance was exemplary. The problem was that it combined relatively low output with an old-fashioned conical stylus. A low-output budget cartridge is kind of like a low-efficiency, difficult-to-drive budget loudspeaker: What's the point of a bargain-priced speaker that requires an expensive, high-current amplifier to drive it properly? In the case of the 301, its 0.3mV output means you'll need a relatively high-gain/low-noise phono preamp to get the most out of it. Assuming you do, you then have a cartridge that's an inherently poor tracer. Not a poor tracker, mind you—the 301 tracked normal program material quite well. But what a round stylus cannot do is extract all of the information available harmonics, but not interested in getting the full measure of instrumental details, the 301 is a worthy product for casual LP listeners still interested in hearing a cartridge that had an elliptical stylus (for me, a Shure V-15 Type II), the improvements in detail, resolution, focus, and especially transient response, were revelations. Given that elliptical stylus are now commonplace, for most listeners, hearing a conical stylus will now be a revelation—in the opposite direction.

**Shelter 501 Mk.II:** Not surprisingly, Axiss's Art Manzano tells me that the 501 Mk.II (the Crown Jewel SE equivalent) is his best-selling Shelter cartridge. At $850, it hits the line's sweet spot: it has all of the attributes that made a very similar cartridge seem reasonably priced at $2650 seven years ago.
"I must create a system or be enslaved by another man's" — William Blake

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What I wrote in my original Crown Jewel review remains true today: "The Crown Jewel is a beautifully built, convenient-to-set-up, low-output moving-coil cartridge that delivers a level of performance commensurate with its high price. While its tonal balance leans slightly toward the warm, liquid, lush side of the spectrum, the Jewel offers a reasonably neutral overall frequency balance, combined with smooth high-frequency extension on top and solid, authoritative bass response on the bottom. Add a total absence of grain and glare and a very convincing portrayal of natural transients, plus an easy-to-look-at sonic picture free of artificial 'edge,' and you have an extremely attractive combination of refined attributes aimed at the sophisticated listener. Given the right associated equipment and a taste for well-recorded acoustic music, the Crown Jewel could be your ticket to long-term analog satisfaction."

The Crown Jewel SE was somewhat more open and "fast" on top while retaining all of the original's attractive attributes. That, for $850, is the sound of the Shelter 501 Mk.II. The only other cartridges I've heard at this price (that I can remember well enough) that can approach this level of performance are the Ortofon Kontrapunkt A ($600 reviewed in November 2001, Sam Tellig also reviewed the Kontrapunkt B, $950, in August 2002) and the Sumiko Blackbird ($750). I recommend the Shelter 501 Mk.II without hesitation. I recommended it at $2650 in a different analog environment; at $850, how could it be otherwise?

**Shelter 901:** At $1500, almost twice the price of the 501 Mk.II, the Shelter 901 is not twice as good. That will hardly surprise—the law of diminishing returns is strictly interpreted by the court of high-end audio, especially when it comes to cartridges. The 901 increases output to 0.5mV, lowers the channel-balance tolerance to 0.8dB, and weighs 1gm more than the 501 Mk.II.

With the 901 you gain increments in high-frequency extension, transient snap, transparency, macrodynamics, bass control, and image focus, and you lose one big thing: the 501 Mk.II's upper-midrange magic. Whether or not that tradeoff is worthwhile is entirely system dependent. The tradeoff was more than worthwhile in my system, which of late has included some expensive, high-resolution speakers and the Manley Steelhead phono preamp. Even $1500 is still more than $1000 below what the Crown Jewel Reference cost back in 1997. If your system can deliver it, the 901's increases in transparency, focus, overall dynamics, and soundstage width and depth will become easily apparent in a direct A/B comparison. (In my comparisons, I swapped the cartridges between the Immedia and Graham tonearms to remove the arms as variables.)

Still, depending on your system and sonic and musical tastes, the 501 Mk.II might be the better choice. Two truly outstanding cartridges: one below $2000, one below $1000. Analog in 2004 is a sweet place to play!

**Shelter 90X:** At the top of the Shelter food chain, the 90X ($2700) doesn't look all that different from the 501 Mk.II or the 901, and aside from another mV of output (up to 0.6mV) and an additional 0.6gm of mass, it doesn't seem to be different. It uses the same stylus and, apparently, the same cantilever assembly. Its channel balance and soundstage are much wider and deeper than the 901, and its overall dynamics are more convincing of reality.

**Wrapping It All Up:** Although I used dozens of different LPs, familiar and unfamiliar, in these comparisons, I found Classic Records' outstanding three-LP issue of Neil Young's *Green* particularly useful. It's a superbly recorded, very revealing, all-analog production that sounds very natural and features one of the finest drum recordings in all of rock, as well as equally effective acoustic and electric guitars. It's big on room sound, small on electronic processing.

All of the Shelter cartridges share a common heritage, and all of them had an admirably neutral, artifact-free sound and an overall liquidity that set them apart from other brands.

**ALL THE SHELTER CARTRIDGES HAD AN ADMIRABLY NEUTRAL, ARTIFACT-FREE SOUND AND AN OVERALL LIQUIDITY THAT SET THEM APART FROM OTHER BRANDS.**

and channel separation (>25dB) are also the same as the 901's.

Yet the 90X sounded quite different from the 901, especially in the midrange and upper midrange, where—right—the 501 Mk.II's magic was back, accompanied by all of the 901's attributes. The 90X had the 901's extension but the 501 Mk.II's refinement and grace. In direct comparisons, the 90X delivered cymbals and sibilants with great transient speed, detail, and clarity, but greater refinement and believability. The 90X is a luxurious

The Shelter 901.
The Shelter 301’s sins are of omission, which makes it a good choice for casual, less demanding analog listeners, but there are many other more exciting, more revealing choices for around $550. I’d opt for the less expensive Blue Point Special Evo III—greater musical excitement and, with its high output, easier to use. I’d also go for the Ortofon Kontrapunkt A—slightly more expensive, but, as I remember, a far better all-around performer.

Move up a notch to the Shelter 501 Mk.II and you have a cartridge with an addictive midrange and overall satiny finishes, sonic and physical. The Crown Jewel Reference was great at $2650; now, despite plenty of strong competition, the very similar 501 Mk.II is hard to beat at $850. No wonder it’s the best-seller of the bunch.

The Shelter 901 ($1500) loses some of the 501 Mk.II’s midband magic but adds transparency, image focus, soundstage size, and extension at the extremes. It’s a more holographic-sounding cartridge that would probably be particularly effective in a warm, tubey-sounding system.

The 90X is the most expensive and the best of the lot, combining the 501 Mk.II’s midband magic with the 901’s transparency, dynamics, and frequency extension. Its overall sonic refinement puts it in some very pricey company, but at $2700 it’s hardly expensive, given its sound and overall build quality. The 0.6mV output is a bonus, making the need for a step-up transformer an option with many low-noise/high-output phono preamps. While it lacks the technological sophistication of the Lyra or Transfiguration cartridges, the 90X maximizes the performance from more traditional motor and body designs; in the end, that’s what counts.

You’ll pay more if you want greater separation, electrical linearity, faster response times, and small improvements in a host of other parameters both measurable and audible, especially low-level resolution of inner detail. But in the end, when you listen to the 90X, you’ll have to ask yourself if it’s worth the considerably greater expenditure needed to get those things when you can get so much music for less.

Next time: Shun Mook, Locus Designs, and Hagerman record weights, phono cables from Audience and AudioQuest, and a $3000 set from MIT.

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What Makes the Linn Go?

It's a strange sort of progress: As culture and commerce evolve, most people look for simple, easy solutions to their needs. Enthusiasts, however, go out of their way to complicate matters, often choosing products that are expensive and difficult to use. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the world of home audio, where typical consumers have embraced the notion of smallish, self-contained music systems—yet audiophiles, who are surely as crazy as bedbugs, seem bent on parsing an ever-increasing number of individually distinct products from the basic concept of a music system.

Remember one-box CD players? They're hard to find these days, partly because most households already have at least one CD player as an integral part of some other appliance—computer, clock radio, boombox, DVD player, whatever—and partly because audio enthusiasts at the other end of the spectrum are increasingly interested in multibox digital front-ends, with separate transports, converters, upsamplers, and clocks.

I'm not letting vinylphiles off the hook by any means. I began my adolescence with a nice, neat record player that had a built-in tonearm with a built-in ceramic cartridge. Then I bought a Dual changer and a separate Audio-Technica ceramic cartridge. Then I bought a Dual transport and a separate Audio-Technica arm. Then I bought a Linn tonearm Grace and a series of different cartridges. Now I own a Linn arate Grace tonearm and a series of different cartridges. Of the six different LP12 power supplies I own, the big one is the Linn Ekos arm and Akiva cartridge. Support platform by Mana Acoustics.

The Linn LP12 in cherry, with Linn Ekos arm and Akiva cartridge. Support platform by Mana Acoustics.

The Tiefenbrunnian notion of phonographic hierarchy, whereby the machine that drives the record is of greatest importance, the thing that holds the transducer comes after that, and the transducer itself comes last. Surely the thing that drives the thing that drives the record belongs at the top of the pecking order.

And as for practice...

Of the six different LP12 power supplies I've used, two stand out in a commercial sense: Linn's own Lingo ($1600) and the Naim Audio Armageddon ($1550).! One is a very sophisticated product; the other is a simple product of sophisticated thinking.

Let's start with the one that's named first. Of the late 1980s, Naim Audio developed a pair of modifications for the Linn LP12: an onboard moving-coil phono preamplifier and an outboard turntable power supply, the latter intended to replace the LP12's then-current Valhalla motor-drive circuitry. Naim apparently didn't intend them as commercial products, but dealers and reviewers who heard the mods were so impressed that they convinced the company to offer them for sale, which Naim eventually did: In 1995 the onboard preamp was introduced as the Naim Prefix and the outboard motor supply got to keep the name that had originally been applied, half-jokingly, to the combination as a whole: Armageddon?—as in, the last turntable mods that you or anyone else will ever need.

The Armageddon is about as simple as they come. Apart from various fasteners and connectors, the chassis contains one resistor, two capacitors, and one transformer. That's four parts total, in case you weren't counting along.) The resistor and capacitors comprise a simple, passive phase-shift network, in-line with one of the motor's two phases: It tells the motor which way to turn. The real star is the tranny, a 500VA toroidal monster that accounts for most of the Armageddon's weight. Its job is that of an isolation transformer: Household AC travels through the primary coil, doubtlessly overlaid with noise products of the usual sort, and that current creates an electromagnetic field; the field cuts through the secondary coil and induces an identical current there—minus, it is hoped, the noise.

The new current isn't precisely the same as the old one. Because no product of human industry is perfectly efficient, not even transformers, one can expect to lose some voltage in the form of vibration.


2 But, as with the Naim Audio Tonearm, it was a long time before Naim officially gave the Armageddon a name: For years, it was simply called the NAPSa, for Naim Audio Power Supply, Analogue.
tional energy and heat. My measurements of the Armageddon, such as they were, bore that out: When I put in 123V AC, I got back a little more than 112V. Still not a bad rate of exchange—and evidence enough that Naim's tramme is configured as a unity device, at least in the US. (In the UK, with its 240V AC supply, it acts as a step-down transformer.)

The Naim Armageddon package also includes a small circuit board, designed to snap on to the fasteners that would otherwise affix a Linn Valhalla or similar board to the LP12's main support beam. This new board has solderless connectors for the four motor leads, and acts as the terminus for a hefty umbilical containing four separate conductors: two AC hot leads (one of which is phase-shifted), one AC neutral lead, and one electrical ground. In a typical setup, one would connect the electrical ground to the LP12's front-most support bolt, along with the tonearm and subchassis ground leads. (Keep in mind Naim's enthusiasm for star-ground schemes—in which sense that front bolt becomes the single, central grounding point for an Armageddon'd LP12.)

Did I forget to mention that Linn changed the Lingo circuit in June 2001? They did: That's the old one on the left, the new one on the right. But they sound the same, I think.

So much for a typical setup: In an American setup, the user must also acquire a 60Hz version of the LP12 motor, which you can buy from Linn. (The "60Hz" is a misnomer, of course: All LP12 motors are designed to work on 50Hz AC, but if you want to drive an LP12 direct from 60Hz household current and still run at more or less the right speed, you need to compensate by topping the now too-fast motor with a smaller-than-normal pulley.) Most LP12s come with a 50Hz motor as standard, because their power supplies create their own 50Hz reference—but an Armageddon power supply does not. Store all that away for later.

One other thing deserves mention: In addition to filtering out noise in a manner that neither impedes current nor adds any apparent new noise of its own, an isolation transformer like the one in the Armageddon has a unique advantage: the ability to drive an AC motor more efficiently, by being a better impedance match with the coils of the motor, much as a single-ended-triode enthusiast might try to match the voice-coil of a loudspeaker with just the right output transformer.
LISTENING

The technology behind the Linn Lingo is a great deal less obvious. As with its predecessor, the above-mentioned Linn Valhalla power supply, the Lingo is a motor-drive unit that synthesizes its own 50Hz reference signal, regardless of the country in which it's used. But removing that circuitry from the turntable proper and putting it in a separate box gave Linn's engineers an opportunity to do a bit more than just that—and they took full advantage of it.

Like the Valhalla, the Linn Lingo uses a crystal oscillator to generate its reference signal, but the active filtering used to strip the resulting squarewave of all its harmonics is much more sophisticated in the Lingo. The Lingo also feeds that signal to two separate class-A amplifier circuits, one for each of the motor's two phases. Doing it that way allows the Lingo to maintain a very precise 90° between the two signal phases, which goes a long way toward eliminating motor vibration—much more, Linn says, than a comparatively imprecise passive phase-shift network.

The Lingo has other tricks up its extruded sleeve. While designed to maintain a rock-steady output frequency, the Lingo actually varies its output voltage—and thus motor torque—in response to need. On startup, the Lingo's voltage is set for maximum, but once the platter gets to 33.3rpm, the voltage is reduced to produce only the amount of torque needed to maintain a steady speed. Also, pushing a single button can tease a 67.5Hz sinewave out of the Lingo—which is precisely what that 50Hz motor requires to spin the platter at 45rpm. Take that horrid old 45rpm pulley adapter and toss it in the dumpster.

If you buy a Linn LP12 with a Lingo supply as standard...well, there you go. But if you buy a Lingo upgrade for an LP12 that's already in service, then you'll get more than just the outboard box itself: You'll get a new on/off switch, a new power-supply umbilical cord, and a new turntable circuit board, too. The latter is similar to the one that comes with the Naim Armaggeddon, in that it serves only as a junction for connecting the motor, switch, and power supply together.

The things I listened to

A comparison of the Lingo and the Armageddon is something I've been working on in the background for about two years, during which time I've made dozens of pages of listening notes. And in the past month alone, I've done four full setups on my LP12, trying and comparing all the possible combinations that might affect my conclusions, the constants being the Linn Akiva cartridge and the LP12 itself. Good thing I bought that Linn setup jig back when they were cheap.

At first, I tried to limit myself to comparing only the Linn Lingo and Naim Armageddon power supplies and changing nothing else. But that proved impossible—not because it couldn't be done in a material sense, but because I just couldn't wrestle the 700-lb gorilla in one corner of the room without at least saying hello to the one in the other: The Lima Ekos ($3000) and Naim Aro ($2750) tonearms, which are as different from one another as can be, and which surely influenced the development of their respective companies' motor drives.

And try as I might, I couldn't escape the pattern that was emerging from all of my listening: At the end of the day—which it isn't, of course—the Linn tonearm and Linn power supply add up to more than the sum of their parts...
on the LP12 platform. So do the Naim tonearm and Naim power supply, albeit differently.

Heard on its own, so to speak, on an Armaggeddon'd LP12, the Ekos sounded competent, okay, decently musical—but no more. Heard on a Lingo'd LP12, the Naim Aro was about the same: pretty good. But when I put the Ekos on the Lingo'd Linn, the player opened up into a big-sounding, wildly dynamic, faultlessly tuneful player that held me utterly rapt. Likewise, when I combined the Naim Aro with the Naim Armageddon on the same platform, the player was, again, magical—but different: tuneful, but with more momentum and flow. It sounded smaller and less dramatic, but more natural and organic, and a shade less mechanical.

The Naim Armageddon was easy to listen to. The Linn Lingo was difficult to ignore.

There were hints, even before I began listening—things I observed during the long succession of setups. As I mentioned earlier, the Armaggeddon board has an electrical ground lead that's meant to connect with the record player's other grounds at a common point. The Lingo board does not—meaning that, when one uses a Naim Aro tonearm on a Lingo-powered LP12, the Aro's separate ground lead can no longer be referenced directly to the incoming AC ground, as its designer intended. Could that account for a difference in audible performance above and beyond that which you might associate with the inherent qualities of the products themselves? I don't see why not.

Another consideration: The Linn Ekos tonearm—not just the armtube but the counterweight, arm rest, and mounting base, as well—is a lot heavier than the Naim Aro. That's obvious during setup, when the lower mass of the Aro forces me to lower the right-rear spring adjustment to a considerable degree. And I can't ignore how differently the suspension bounce appears with one arm, as compared to the other, even when all the many adjustment variables are attended to in the 9th degree: Delighted Aro owner though I am, having bought one over a decade ago, to set up an LP12 with both arms is to see that it's truly designed for something closer in mass to the Ekos. The suspension is easier to displace with an Ekos onboard, and reader to move in response to disturbance—but just as fast to regain its composure. Given the choice between disturbing the relationship between stylus and groove, and displacing the suspended components as a unit, even if only temporarily, I'll take the latter any old day.

So again, in comparing just these different arms—forget the power supplies for a moment—I may know what I'm hearing, but I'm not so sure what's causing it. Is it the difference between the designs (unipivot vs. captured bearings), the difference between the qualities of the products themselves, or the difference between the frequencies at which the suspension springs are working?

I do know that an LP12 is a little harder to set up with an Aro tonearm than an Ekos—mostly because the Naim's signal cable is so difficult to dress—but that a Armageddon power supply is slightly easier to install than a Lingo. And while setting up an LP12 is no job for the inexperienced, I don't imagine there's any way you could get a dealer to jump through all those hoops for the sake of a comparison.

### And the things I heard

The differences were distinct enough to make the effort worthwhile. While I still believe it's difficult to get a bad sound out of a Linn LP12—difficult but not impossible—having now heard all these products at their best, I think it's safe to say that one combination will please a certain sort of listener, while another might disappoint them. The Ekos' performance of Ravel's Piano Concerto in G (Deutsche Grammophon SLPM 139 349, in a typically excellent Speakers Corner reissue) had greater color and drama with the Lingo-Ekos than the Armageddon-Aro. As with the Cohen track, the music popped out and away from the noise floor in a more captivating, electrifying way, and the subtleties of the indescribable Adagio in particular were more effective for it. With the Lingo driving the Linn's motor, listening to well-made piano recordings such as that and others, I simply heard a more convincing impression of a human touch setting an enormous instrument into acoustical motion.

But for all the stunning realism on tap with the Linn components, the Naim rig had a set of musical strengths that I found equally compelling. It pulled music out of the groove in a more rhythmically nuanced way, and in particular presented lines with more flow—more of a sense of continuum, rather than leaving each note to exist as an isolated event. On the Cohen number, that brought a greater sense of tension and anticipation to the listening experience. And the Armageddon-Aro had a similar effect on Argerich's piano, pulling me along with the unraveling lines and making me feel more involved, physically and emotionally. The thought that's kept popping up in my listening notes all this time: The Naimified LP12 sounded sexier.

I enjoy and appreciate both, for different reasons. And because I'm just as susceptible to marginal influences as anyone else, I can't ignore the fact that, after using the LP12 with the Armaggeddon and Aro for most of calendar year 2004, my current Lingo-Ekos setup sounds different and fun. I'm enjoying all my favorite music as much as ever—just differently. And sexy though the Naim may be, I can't deny the sheer carnal pleasure of playing my old 45rpm singles whenever I want to. Have you listened to John Lennon's ...
“Instant Karma” lately—the original single that says “PLAY LOUD” on the label? I haven’t missed a morning for almost two weeks, and I have no intention of stopping.

**Still there’ll be more**

Beyond all that, I’m not sure how to advise the record lover who’s choosing between the two. I can live happy as a clam with either. In fact, I have.

There are two more things I need to get off my chest before I stop yammering about LP12 setups. First, I keep hearing this little voice in the back of my head—not the one that’s picking up stray transmissions from the President’s suit jacket, but the one that says, There’s no way a Naim Armageddon can perform in the US quite as well as it can in the UK.

Here’s the reason: All other things being equal, a small motor pulley is more susceptible to run-out error than a large one. The 50Hz pulley can be machined with greater precision, meaning that a 50Hz Linn motor will probably drive the platter more smoothly. An Armageddon works perfectly well with that motor in the UK—which is, after all, what it was designed to do—but not in the US. Consequently, I wouldn’t be surprised if American audiophiles, myself included, have never really heard a Naim Armageddon at its best.

Second, the waters have now been muddied further by Linn’s brand new T Kable for the Ekos. It’s not so much a function of the T Kable’s ultrapure-copper conductors themselves—although I’m sure they’re nice in their own right—but rather that the new cable comes with a brand-new type of P-clip (called the P Klip) and clamp (called—get ready for it—the Klamp).

Anyone who’s set up an LP12 will tell you what a royal pain in the ass it is to clamp off the tonearm cable so that it neither fouls the suspension nor allows vibrational energy to escape the subchassis “loop.” The new design eases the chore considerably. Anyone who’s ever injured himself or his LP12 while tightening the old clip with a flat-bladed screwdriver wedged up against that damn oversized washer will appreciate that that step is no longer required.

I installed my new T Kable just a few days ago, and it made a subtle but worthwhile improvement in smoothness and detail. Or at least I think it did: The improvement might also have been caused by the Klamp, or the Klip. Or the smaller washer. Or the fresh setup. Or something else.

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Wine Country, Harpsichords, & the Esoteric X-01

John Marks

Home Entertainment 2004 Westin San Francisco might have been called off, but I wasn’t about to let that stop me from taking a trip to visit the wine country—except that the wine country in question turned out to be the wine country of Southern New England.

Way back during the Climatic Optimum, the Vikings came to America. The Climatic Optimum was a period of warmer weather that lasted approximately from the eighth through the 14th centuries AD. Warmer temperatures caused the crop surpluses and population growth that led to the breakout of the Norse from their home region. In addition to sacking monasteries in Britain and enslaving the Slavs, the Norse colonized Greenland and, around the year 1000, settled in America. (The Climatic Optimum is the single most salient fact suggesting that healthy skepticism is the best response to what in my opinion is some of the junk science surrounding greenhouse gases and global warming.)

The Vikings called the North American area they explored Vinland (pronounced "Winland"), because they found grapes growing there—at least in places. Without question, there was a Viking settlement at L’Anse aux-Meadows in Newfoundland. There is also geological evidence that the Vikings got at least as far south as Narragansett Bay in Rhode Island.

Chances are Newfoundland was too cold for grapes to grow, even during the Climatic Optimum. However, the southern reaches of Narragansett Bay, and the north and south shores of Long Island Sound, are several degrees of latitude south of the Burgundy wine region of France. The coastal regions of Rhode Island, Connecticut, and Southeastern Massachusetts all qualify as good candidates for the historical Vinland. Not surprisingly, over the past decade, there has been a veritable renaissance in winemaking in the area.

Stonington Vineyards (www.stoningtonvineyards.com) is located in green and gently rolling farm country between Long Island Sound and the Mystic River. Since 1987, the winery has specialized in European-style wines, especially barrel-fermented Chardonnays. I stopped by on a weekday afternoon for the 2pm winery tour, and afterward visited the tasting room.

The 2002 Chardonnay I tasted was definitely a French-style wine: crisp, clean, almost flinty, but with homey notes of baked apples and vanilla—altogether, quite different from California or Australian Chardonnays. At $17 it was good value for the money, and they do ship to most US states. You’ll be glad to know that Stonington Vineyards supports both the Salt Marsh Opera Company (www.saltmarshopera.org) and the Chorus of Westerly (www.chorusofwesterly.org).

Do it Yourself

But be assured that this little road trip did have on the itinerary a destination more substantially connected to sound and music. In addition to its eponymous Vineyards, Stonington, Connecticut, is home to the world’s largest harpsichord firm, Zuckermann Harpsichords Inc. (www.zhi.net).

The factor that led Zuckermann to its position of market preeminence is, in one word, kits. From the outset (in the 1950s), Zuckermann offered a variety of early keyboard instruments (virginals and clavichords, as well as harpsichords) as do-it-yourself kits. (They also sell fully assembled instruments.) The kit option allowed amateur musicians to acquire an instrument for the absolute minimum expense. It also meant that Zuckermann had to gear up to produce the inner workings of harpsichords on a scale much larger than called for by just one builder. They now supply components to other builders around the world.

The kits themselves are offered in various stages of completion. I would characterize the effort required as progressing from the daunting to the heroic. The “easy” kits require you to build and install the action (and string and voice the instrument), while the least-complete kits require you to start by building the entire case, then fitting the soundboard.

That said, all the major sawing has been done, so assembly is just a matter of some trimming and lots of very patient, very careful fitting. If you’ve always wanted an early keyboard instrument and can devote the time to it, perhaps building a Zuckermann kit will turn out to be not only rewarding, but also attitude-adjusting! (People kept asking when I was going to write about a kit. See? I just did!)

My tour guide at Zuckermann was general manager Steve Salvatore. The workshops are engrossing. As one of my favorite authors wrote, work fascinates me—I could watch it for hours. The workshops smell great, with all the fresh, clean fragrances of planed wood, paints, shellac, adhesives, varnish for gilding, and so on. The completed instruments are objects of art. Steve was kind enough to play a little Bach for me.

You may not live within driving distance of Zuckermann Harpsichords, but I would be very surprised if you do not
“LUCK HAS ABSOLUTELY NOTHING TO DO WITH IT!”

A number of companies manufacture products that provide either superb performance or great value. Once in a while they get lucky and deliver a product with both. But when one company turns out product, after product, after product, that consistently combine amazing performance with incredible value, luck has absolutely nothing to do with it. Here are just a few of the current critically-acclaimed Arcam products:

**Arcam AV8 Surround Processor ($4,999)**

“You can spend a lot more money on a controller, but until you get into the $15k+ range, you’re not likely to find anything that outperforms the AV8 by a substantial margin, if at all.”

The Perfect Vision, Dec. 2003

“There’s an instantly recognizable sonic difference between this system with these Arcam units and every other surround system we’ve heard. It’s a dramatic difference, so even ordinary non-audiophile listeners instantly hear it. And it’s a powerful difference... These two Arcam units are more than excellent. They have literally transformed our horizons of what home entertainment can be as an experience, and how it can move and affect you.”

Widescreen Review, Jan. 2004

**Arcam DVD Players ($999 to $2,999)**

“Arcam demonstrates that some digital pictures are more perfect than others... Arcam’s DV79 raises the bar to a new and record height.”

AV Tech, May 2004

“...the Arcam DV79 seemed to open up the mix and let me hear all the details, way down into the nether regions.”

Stereophile, Dec. 2004

“Send a signal from the DV29’s HDMI output and prepare to be mesmerized by the stunning images. The depth of field and realism that the Arcam portrays keep you riveted to your seat.”

What Hi-Fi? Sound and Vision, Dec. 2004

**Arcam Surround Receivers ($1,699 to $2,199)**

“The AVR300 is a stunner. We’ve been waiting in vain for a receiver like this to come along for over a dozen years - but finally, someone has done it.”

What Hi-Fi? Sound and Vision, June 2004

“In terms of picture and sound quality, the AVR300 can more than hold its own against the best receivers out there from Denon, Yamaha, Pioneer and others, some of which cost more than double its price.”

Custom Retailer Magazine, Nov. 2004

IMPRESSION?

You bet. But you’ve only seen the tip of the iceberg. In early 2005 Arcam will introduce four new products that continue in the same tradition of offering groundbreaking performance at surprisingly reasonable prices.

One of Arcam’s new products scheduled to be launched at the International Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas in January. As this issue goes to press, all details are still under wraps, but visit www.audiophilesystems.com in January for more information as it becomes available.
live within driving distance of some sort of business dedicated to the art and craft of musical instruments—anything from a piano rebuild to a bagpipe maker to a guitar shop. Why not look one up and arrange a visit? (Especially if you’re in a rut of visiting—or even haunting—hi-fi salons. Get out of that rut. Now.) In my experience, most workshops welcome visitors, as long as you’re respectful of their time and keep your hands to yourself. And the experience of hearing instruments up close is a wonderful way to calibrate your ears.

Trust Me: Just Buy It, Part I

While we’re on the subject of harpsichords and such, in Stereophile’s November 2004 issue, Robert Levine gave a glowing endorsement to the CD version of mezzo-soprano Lorraine Hunt Lieberson’s program of Handel arias (Avie 0030). “If you need proof that Handel was a great dramatist with a special gift for communicating emotion, all while listening to sublime sounds, this CD is a must.” I’m pleased to report that the SACD version is phenomenal.

Hunt Lieberson’s voice takes second place to none’s when it comes to creamy richness; comparisons to von Stade and Kanawa are not out of line at all. But LHL is not just another pretty voice. She sings with a penetratingly intense intelligence. Her dramatic characterizations verge on channeling. Indeed, in a couple of the photos in the generous trilingual booklet, her aspect does eerily resemble 1920s radio evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson. But I’m sure it’s just the lighting.

By going the logo on the tray card, this recording appears to be pure DSD (and is multichannel to boot). Engineering tasks were handled by the folks at Polyphony International (www.polyphony-int.com), Everett Porter, chief engineer. At a time when quite a few SACD releases leave one scratching one’s head and muttering “What were they thinking?” one listens to Hunt Lieberson’s Handel SACD should leave you with the conviction that what the production team was thinking was “This is very special music, and this moment will not come by again, so let’s just do the best job anyone possibly could!” Brava and bravissima. If you have an SACD player and don’t buy this SACD, it’s just your loss. I tell you: “Ombra mai fu” had me tearing up. (If you played in a school orchestra, you may know the melody of this aria as “Handel’s Largo.”)

Buy It If You Can

Playback honors for Lorraine Hunt Lieberson’s SACD fell to the Esoteric X-01 (www.teac.com/esoteric/NewEso\eriec/index.html). an SACD/CD player that supports multichannel playback but no audio-based formats. As I mentioned in my November 2004 column, it surpasses Esoteric’s D-70/P-70 digital separates, at least as far as CD playback goes. The $13,000 X-01 seems to be both a refinement and a simplification of the $14,000 D-70/P-70 combination, the processor of which made it into Class A+ of Stereophile’s “Recommended Components” list.

The X-01 is a refinement in that it uses a new generation of Esoteric’s VRDS descaling transport and supports SACD playback. It is a simplification in that it is one- rather than a two-chassis solution, and does not have selectable upsampling or filtering options. Esoteric’s design team apparently decided that, this time around, simpler was better.

Construction quality is excellent; the X-01 weighs about 55 lbs and rests on the same hardened-steel feet with captive spikes as did the D-70’s and P-70’s chassis. Industrial design is top-flight: restrained, and very classy all the way. In silver with a blue display, and with blue-lit peripheries around its front-panel function buttons, the X-01 is one of the most handsome pieces of gear out there. As I wrote before, just take everything I said about the D-70/P-70’s CD playback and intensify it just a bit. This is the most musically satisfying CD playback I have ever heard. And yes, I am going to send this thing along so John Atkinson can assign a full review. But it won’t be easy.

I can’t come to a conclusion as to the judgment of the X-01’s ultimate SACD playback capabilities (except that the music obviously sounds wonderful), because I have not yet heard the competing units from EMM and dCS. I will point out that the X-01 does incorporate bass management for multichannel playback, and necessarily involves a DSD-to-PCM conversion (apparently, regardless of whether bass management is engaged).

I’m not phobic about PCM, as long as the sampling rate is high enough, the operation is mathematical, and no brick-wall filter is used on playback.

Given that there’s a lot more great music on CD than on SACD, and will be for some time, I advise not letting rigid ideology or PCM phobia keep you from auditioning the X-01, if you’re in the market for a digital playback solution in the $10,000+ range. If I had the money, I’d buy it.

Trust Me: Just Buy It, Part II

If you’re not ready to make the leap of faith and get Lorraine Hunt Lieberson’s Handel arias SACD, here’s one that should be more of a no-brainer for a lot more people: Conviction, Mobile Fidelity Sound Labs’ SACD remastering of guitarist Jim Hall and colleagues’ superb reworking of the slow movement of Joaquín Rodrigo’s Concierto de Aranjuez for classical guitar (UDSACD 2012, hybrid, stereo only; www.mobilefidelity.com).

Here’s an SACD reissue where all involved did everything right. The original recording sessions were produced by Creed Taylor and recorded by Rudy Van Gelder, at Van Gelder’s studio in Englewood, New Jersey, where the X-01’s ultimate SACD playback was assigned a full review. But it won’t be easy.

1 Trivia bit: One of the late actor Anthony Quinn’s (The Guns of Navarone, etc.) first professional engagements was, as a 14-year-old, playing sax in Sister Aimee’s warmup band.

2 Creed Taylor was one of the most important producers of the golden age of stereo jazz recordings. In the early 1960s, he was recruited from a small label to lead A&R format at AJC/Paramount’s new jazz imprint, Impulse! At Impulse! he supervised, among others, the recording careers of John Coltrane, Ray Charles, and Gil Evans. From there he was recruited to revitalize Verve, and later, for several years in the 1970s, he ran his own label, CTI, which was distinguished by first-class sound and lavish production values, especially the album packaging. Unfortunately, CTI’s artistic results were mixed. Jazz was in a period of eroding market share, and not all the efforts at winning it back were successful. But Conviction was a winner.
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wood Cliffs, New Jersey. The 1975-vintage analog master tapes were transferred to DSD by MFSL's Shawn R. Britton. The liner notes state that the CD layer was down-converted from the DSD transfer. The liner notes include the original essay by Leonard Feather, as well as a new reappraisal of the music by Fareed Haque.

The original release of *Concierto* included Cole Porter’s “You’d Be So Nice to Come Home To” and two originals: one by Jim Hall, and one by Hall and his wife. However, the center of gravity of the album always was arranger Don Sebesky’s adaptation of the slow movement of Rodrigo’s famous guitar concerto.

Not incidentally, there’s a wonderful website commemorating Rodrigo’s life and work, www.joaquin-rodrigo.com. The site opens with a video clip of the composer playing the guitar concerto’s slow movement on the piano. Many pages I visited were graced by one or another of his pithy epigrams, such as: “How would I like to die? Under no circumstances.” Rodrigo, by the way, was blind from the age of three, and wrote all his compositions in Braille. To mark Rodrigo’s 90th birthday (in 1991), King Juan Carlos of Spain raised him to the dignity of the “Marquis de los Jardines de Aranjuez.” Just and fittingly, that was.

For my money, the most compelling reason to buy this recording is the contributions of trumpeter Chet Baker and alto sax player Paul Desmond. Both take extended solos that are models of understated but totally committed grace. Each solo is all the more poignant, given that Desmond would soon lose his battle with cancer, and Baker’s career would once again fall prey to his drug addiction. That is not to diminish Jim Hall’s tasteful work on both electric and overdubbed classical guitars, or the important contributions of pianist Roland Hanna, bassist Ron Carter, and drummer Steve Gadd. But Baker and Desmond steal the show.

Even if you already have a digital version of *Concierto*, the SACD is worth obtaining—assuming you own an SACD player. It is indisputably more textured and nuanced than previous CD releases. It also includes two additional tracks from the sessions that were left off the LP and the original CD, as well as three alternate takes. The sound is simply luscious, although audio purists may sniff that it is a multimiked and pan-potted recording rather than a minimally miked one. I also recognize that members of the jazz hard core may turn up their noses at Hall’s essential musical conservatism. That’s their loss.

**More Wilson Benesch**

Wilson Benesch (www.wilsobensch.com) is one of my favorite loudspeaker builders. To rebut any inference of monomania, I want to remind readers that I also greatly admire speakers from Aerial (20T), DALI (MegaLine), ESP (Concert Grand), Harbeth (all), Peak Consult (InCognito), Spendor (SS5), and Shahinian (Obelisk, Diapason). I have had experience with all Wilson Benesch speakers except the new Curve. Not being able to restrain my curiosity, I briefly waylaid a pair of them on their way to Sam Tellig’s house.

The Curve has the same driver complement as the ACT, which I wrote about in September, but in a less complex and lighter (yet still carbon-fiber composite) cabinet. The Curve weighs about 54 lbs, while the welded-steel inner structure of the ACT pushes its weight up close to 100 lbs. The ACT has a suggested retail price of $12,000/pair, the Curve $7300/pair.

The Curve’s sound has a strong family resemblance to that of the ACT: clean, coherent, uncolored, and musically involving. That said, I still think that the ACT is cost-justified (if you can afford a pair), because, in a word, they just have more finesse. The difference is not anything you have to strain to hear—all that fancy engineering does make a musical difference. But if the ACT is out of your price range, you should hear the Curve. It and the radical-looking Discovery, which I wrote up in January 2002 (Vol.25 No.1), are both extremely good.

Anything to discuss? jmrcds@jmrcds.com.
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It's really nice!
Last year, during a particularly painful moving experience, I had the opportunity to reflect in a very personal way on the virtues of our annual “Records To Die For” feature.

More than once in my life, records, be they LPs or CDs, have nearly killed me. Carrying those dense, heavy objects in a Bataan death march up three flights of stairs in August,
when New York City is climatically akin to Manila, had my life flashing before my eyes. I envied such folks as homeowner Michael Fremer, who has a bunker full of vinyl he'll presumably never have to move, and wondered what in God's earth keeps me so attached to these things that I'd drag them around like a dog refusing, beyond all good sense, to relinquish a bone.

Of course, once friends descended, records were played, and arguments over any number of esoteric musical knots had ensued, I had my answer. Equal to the toll that packing and hauling has exacted on my cardiovascular system are the joy and, yes, the life they've given me—endless hours of nearly inexpressible enjoyment. In some sense, they are my babies. So in future, instead of “Records To Die For,” I'm thinking this feature should be titled “Records We Live For.” It's the music that keeps us alive—and that we never want to move again. Can't someone please invent a credit card with the “White Album” on it?

As always for “R2D4,” the instructions to the writers were simple: nothing that's impossible for average citizens to obtain, and nothing the writer has chosen before.

The hard part of being attached to records is finding the time to listen to them—actively listen. My thanks, as always, to the writers who've done that here and all year long, and without whom Stereophile wouldn't be as heavy (sorry) as we hope it is! To everyone who's ever gazed at a shelf full of their records and wondered, “Why?”—or, more likely, “Why aren't there more?”—we hereby offer up R2D4 2005.

—Robert Baird

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

JOHN ATKINSON
BURT BACHARACH & RONALD ISLEY: Here I Am

Ever since I heard “Anyone Who Had a Heart” in 1963—growing up in England, it was Cilla Black's cover rather than Dionne Warwick's original, of course—Burt Bacharach's songs have played a major role in the soundtrack to my life. (See my July 2003 “As We See It,” www.stereophile.com/asweseet1/881.) And Dusty Springfield's “The Look of Love” is, of course, one of the brightest stars in the high-end audio firmament. But in all those years, I never envisaged what a rococo-ranged R&B singer such as patriarch Ronnie, of the extended Isley family, could and would do with these standards. Piling mordant upon ornament, swoop upon flourish, trill upon turn, Ronnie Isley takes these perhaps overfamiliar melodies on journeys of unexpected harmonic exploration. His “The Look of Love,” for example, begins with a melancholy figure based on the “don't ever go” and “I love you so much” tags from the chorus, overlying a stark electric piano vamp. After a fairly straight reading of the song, Isley and Bacharach construct from the opening raw material an inspirational vocal coda. Almost always, Ronnie succeeds in convincing the listener that this is how Burt intended the songs to sound, helped by the composer's lushly sparse scoring and a sound, recorded live in Hollywood's legendary Capitol Studios, that is to die for. It might verge at times on High Camp, but Here I Am is still High Art.

JOHN MITCHELL: Shadows and Light

“Every picture has its shadows and it has some source of light / blindness, blindness and light.” Thus goes the gospel-inflected, DaVinci-inspired launch of what may well rank as one of the best live concert recordings of all time: an all-grewed-up Joni Mitchell weaving her musical magic at the Santa Barbara Bowl in September 1979, with a blue-chip band of Pat Metheny on guitar, Lyle Mays on synths and Rhodes piano, Don Alias on drums and percussion, Michael Brecker on tenor sax, The Persuasions on backup vocals, and the incomparable Jaco Pastorius on fretless Fender bass guitar in what is one of the few filmed performances of his tragically short career. (The 1979 tour dates and set list can be found at www.threereviews.com/SNL.htm.) Mitchell stands revealed not only as an insightful lyricist and an eclectic melodist, but as a vocal technician fully worthy of fronting her virtuoso band as they play off of each other. Even when Jaco unleashes cascades of notes and harmonics, his contribution illuminates rather than darkens the music’s message.

The programs on the two-CD set and the rather clumsily directed DVD are not identical. Though both start with the mood-managing sequence of “In France They Kiss on Main Street,” “Edith and the King Pin,” and “Coyote,” the CD adds a drum solo from Alias that segues into “Dreamland,” and a coda of “Woodstock” and “God Must Be a Boogie Man” (taken from the PA mix), in which Pastorius playfully duets with Joni. On the other hand, the DVD includes a short but masterful solo from Pastorius, in which he sets up an ostinato figure based on the “don't ever go” and “I love you so much” tags from the chorus, overlying a stark electric piano vamp. After a fairly straight reading of the song, Isley and Bacharach construct from the opening raw material an inspirational vocal coda. Almost always, Ronnie succeeds in convincing the listener that this is how Burt intended the songs to sound, helped by the composer's lushly sparse scoring and a sound, recorded live in Hollywood's legendary Capitol Studios, that is to die for. It might verge at times on High Camp, but Here I Am is still High Art.
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Jascha Heifetz
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Berlioz: Requiem
Charles Munch
Boston Symphony Orchestra
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Ravel: Boléro/la valse
Charles Munch
Boston Symphony Orchestra
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Dvořák: Cello Concertos
Fritz Reiner
Chicago Symphony Orchestra
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This two-disc set (priced as one CD) offers the late Danish composer Vagn Holmboe's four string Sinfonias in two settings. On disc 1, they come as four distinct works; on disc 2, differently ordered, they form an hour-long tone poem, Chairos. Either way, the music abounds in melodic beauty, harmonic and textural richness, and rhythmic vitality. Alternately luminous and buzzing, Chairos manages to evoke both Bartók (for the often folk-like piquancy) and Sibelius (for the organic way the material builds on itself). The Danish Radio Sinfonietta shows transcendent concentration and timbral allure. Anyone newly exploring contemporary music could do far worse than to start with this nicely packaged, immaculately recorded set.

PINK FLOYD: Dark Side of the Moon

Yes, it's the all-time FM rock warhorse. Yet the SACD reissue sheds new light on Dark Side of the Moon. Arguably, there is no 5.1 surround-sound rock remix/remaster to rival Pink Floyd's disc for sheer sensory aptness. The sound effects pan around the aural picture with ear-bending immediacy, and the choir in "Us and Them" is separated to the rear for rare depth of field. But the widescreen sonic upgrade only adds luster to Pink Floyd's artistic achievement. From the opening heartbeat and sotto voce spoken word to the overwhelming climax of "Eclipse," this apothecary of 1970s album rock has never sounded better—or seemed more moving. (XXVI-6)

PAUL BOLIN
Brian Wilson: Pet Sounds Live

One of the genuine masterpieces of the rock era, Pet Sounds had never been performed live as originally conceived by its creator, the legendary Brian Wilson. In 2001, Wilson and his musical director, Darian Sahanaja, assembled a band capable of recreating the album's revolutionary, highly complex music and took it on the road. Recorded at the Royal Albert Hall, Pet Sounds Live finds Wilson and his amazing band creating the purest kind of magic. It's well recorded but no audiophile spectacular, and Wilson's voice occasionally sounds a bit worn, but to hear this eternally wonderful music being perfectly performed live by its visionary creator induces tingles.

FOTHERINGAY: Fotheringay

After leaving Fairport Convention following the epochal Liege and Lief, Sandy Denny formed Fotheringay with her husband-to-be, Trevor Lucas, American guitarist Jerry Donahue, and a crackerjack rhythm section. Like Fairport's,
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American pop has deep roots—the blues, jazz, folk music, field hollers, classical song, old-timey, Cajun, gospel, and about eight zillion other substrata. Wicked as America’s roots are, the music from which Mexico’s mariachi genre rises—the traditional son—is a relatively untapped wellspring of some of the most complex, whippin’ folk music ever recorded.

This 59-track, three-CD set is the mother lode in terms of both scholarly introduction and glorious examples. The culmination of 20 years of research and field recordings by a trio of Mexico’s foremost ethnomusicologists, this choicey curated collection, accompanied by a 36-page, finely illustrated book in English and Spanish, takes the listener on a fantastic aural tour of rural Mexico. But this is no dry thesis.

If the leaping falsettos, wild-eyed fiddling, wry wit, and intricate polyrhythms of the Son Huasteca, from Mexico’s northwestern coast, don’t make you a rabid addict, you are a soul-free human being.

LINDA RONSTADT: Conciencias de mi Padre
Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán, with members of Mariachi Los Camperos de Nati Cano and Mariachi Sol de México de José Hernandez

Linda Ronstadt’s record company thought she was nuts when they told them she wanted to record mariachi music. And more than a few eyebrows were raised when this country-rock diva and interpreter of American standards turned her powerful pipes to Mexican ballads, heart-tugging rancheras, vaulting huapango, and lusty drinking songs. Backed by the reputed best band in the genre, the Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán, Ronstadt turned in covers of tunes made famous by the likes of Lucha Reyes, Miguel Aceves Mejia, Lola Beltrán, and Pedro Infante with a just-right mix of reverence and personal interpretation. This disc of tunes, which Ronstadt first heard from her dad’s record collection on Sunday afternoons growing up in Tucson, Arizona, catalyzed the explosive rebirth of mariachi music among Mexican-Americans, and brought deserved recognition to an amazing living tradition.

Back when Ira Kaplan and Georgia Hubley were about the same age as the sound, they turned down the feedback, gathered up their favorite vinyl, and made as impeccable a covers album as you’ve ever heard—so good that five of the band’s own songs blend in beautifully alongside spirited, sweetly melancholy interpretations of (to name a few) NRBQ, the Kinks, the Flamin’ Groovies, The Scene Is Now, Rex Garvin, The Escorts, Peter Stämpfel, and Gene Clark. There’s only one thing flawed about it: there hasn’t been a Fakebook 2. (XIV-6, XVI-2)

THE WATERBOYS: A Pagan Place

Mike Scott’s ever-changing band is best known for the sweeping Eire folk of 1988’s Fisherman’s Blues, while 1985’s This Is the Sea is a more fully realized epic. But A Pagan Place is where Scott first erected The Big Music: grandly overarching post-punk bombast openly inspired by Springsteen and Van Morrison, and heaving with saxophones, soul, and metaphysics. It’s earnest, raw, and often pretentious, but even the record’s most unwieldy anthem, “Red Army Blues,” written from the POV of a 17-year-old Russian soldier, has a thrilling adolescent charm that never fails to take hold—in the same way you’d sometimes rather hear “Wild Billy’s Circus Story” than “Born to Run.”

THOMAS CONRAD
MINDY SMITH: One Moment More

Records, like women and wine, need to age to achieve true distinction. Rarely, if ever, should a new release and a debut album be named a “Record To Die For.” But One Moment More is not exactly a record. It is, in Mindy Smith’s phrase, “a diary of songs”—both a document of and a means to her survival. She gets inside your mind, does Mindy Smith, with quiet guitar lines that cut like razor wire, and that undefeated waif voice singing about love and hope and moving on, in words so stark and clear.

BRAD MEHLDAU: Anything Goes

Anything Goes is Brad Mehldau’s best record to date. Given the fact that he’s made some of the most important piano-trio recordings of the last 10 years, this is a large claim. Anything Goes contains five ballads that reveal: a) how far Mehldau’s gift for melodic and harmonic disassembly and elaboration and reconfiguration has evolved; b) how deeply below the surface he will search to find a great song’s unspoken truths; and c) the fact that truly listening to improvised music is a creative act. As ostensibly familiar songs such as “Smile” and “I’ve Grown Accustomed to Her Face” unfold in luminous procedures, we understand them anew at almost the same moment as Mehldau. (XXVII-8)
I’ve collected an extensive catalog of Tom Waits’ albums, and I’m never more than a day or two away from spinning one—yet I’ve never included one in R2D4. Mostly, it’s because I’ve never wanted to pick just one. But I must, so it’s Closing Time. I can’t say it’s his best or even my favorite, but, like most of Waits’ work, it’s beautiful, insightful, and evocative. The music and lyrics paint images and summon up bittersweet feelings that perfectly match the album’s title. The performances are letter-perfect, and the sound is clean, open, and natural.

AHMAD JAMAL TRIO: Ahmad Jamal at the Pershing: But Not for Me
Ahmad Jamal, piano; Israel Crosby, bass; Vernell Fournier, drums

I often play Ahmad Jamal at the Pershing for people who’ve never heard high-end audio. I sit them down, cue up the first cut, and watch them go from skepticism to curiosity to delighted amazement as they’re transported to Chicago’s Pershing Lounge and swept up in the performance. I’m still surprised by this classic LP, compiled from three sets recorded on January 16, 1958. The performances are incredible, and the sound...wow! It’s mono, but At the Pershing is still one of the most realistic recordings I’ve heard. The 1983 Chess/MCA CD reissue is okay, but find the LP if you can.

ROBERT DEUTSCH
THE NEW MOON
Music by Sigmund Romberg, lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein II
Rodney Gilfry, Christiane Noll, Brandon Jovanovich, Burke Moses, Alix Corey, Lauren Ward; Rob Fisher, conductor

“Lover, Come Back to Me,” “Softly, as in a Morning Sunrise,” “Wanting You,” “Stouthearted Men.” If these song titles mean nothing to you, then perhaps you should just forget about getting this record. No, that’s not right: If these titles are not familiar to you, then your musical experience has been sadly lacking, and you must buy this record. The New Moon is one of those operettas that features gorgeous tunes and a less-than-believable plot. As such, it’s ideal for a concert presentation—or a recording. This one is based on a City Center Encores! concert production, and features the same leads. Rodney Gilfry is an internationally known operatic baritone who started out in musicals, and has just the right voice and style for this material. Christiane Noll—who sings “One Kiss” better than I’ve ever heard it done—has been mostly in musicals, but she’s no stranger to the world of operetta: I saw her in a superb production of The Student Prince at the Paper Mill Playhouse. Tenor Brandon Jovanovich was her partner in that production; he does a great job here with the demanding “Softly, as in a Morning Sunrise.” The rest of the cast is similarly topnotch, including Burke Moses, who was a terrific Fred in Kiss Me, Kate! on Broadway. Conductor Rob Fisher knows exactly how this music should be played. The recording reflects an audiophile sensibility in the engineering, with the orchestra, chorus, and soloists in the same large studio, without the baffles that normally prevent the blending of different sections, and it sounds more natural as a result.

ROBERT DEUTSCH
THE NEW MOON
Music by Sigmund Romberg, lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein II
Rodney Gilfry, Christiane Noll, Brandon Jovanovich, Burke Moses, Alix Corey, Lauren Ward; Rob Fisher, conductor

WICKED: Original Broadway Cast
Music & lyrics by Stephen Schwartz
Stephen Oremus, conductor

At one of the “Ask the Editors” panels at the Home Entertainment 2003 show in San Francisco, we were all asked what was the best thing we’d seen or heard since we’d been at the show. My response was “Wicked,” which was playing in previews across the street at the Curran Theater. Wicked, a sort of “prequel” to The Wizard of Oz, is currently enjoying tremendous success on Broadway, with tickets almost impossible to come by. A major contributor to Wicked’s success is Stephen Schwartz’s score, which, while it has its share of take-home tunes, is more complex and subtle than may be apparent on first hearing. This Original Cast CD, although recorded with a more close-up balance than I like, fully captures that score’s subtleties. Wicked has great performances by its two leading ladies, Idina Menzel and Kristin Chenoweth. Just listen to Menzel’s “The Wizard and I” and see if you don’t have tears coming to your eyes. Chenoweth scores with “Popular,” a song with a catchy tune that has some clever observations on the nature of popularity. Their final duet, “For Good,” is a modern equivalent of “You’ll Never Walk Alone,” and is just as moving. My advice: If you haven’t seen Wicked yet, start calling for tickets now. (The North American tour begins in Toronto in March; although I’ve already seen the show four times, you can bet that I’ll be in the audience.) To tide you over, get this CD.

STEVE DOLLAR
MATTHEW SHIPP "STRING" TRIO: Expansion, Power. Release
Matthew Shipp, piano; Mat Maneri, violin; William Parker, bass

An apotheosis of chamber jazz as a formal concept, this spare and elegant session capped a remarkable decade for Matt Shipp, the most original pianist to emerge in jazz during the 1990s. The disc fits together, as Shipp’s albums often do, as a sequence of often fragmentary compositions that brim with improvisatory verve: each track is like a neuron sparking the cells that surround it. While the chemistry (with colleagues Parker and Maneri, here a wizardly firebrand: check out the noisier exorcism of “Connection”) is potent, what’s winning is the lighter touch that lends a dusky cinematic air to tracks such as “Waltz” and “Functional Form.” The album also stands as a grace note in the career of engineer Carl Seltzer, who recorded many memorable jazz sessions in his home studio in New York’s Chinatown before his untimely death in 2003.
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John Atkinson, Stereophile, July 2004

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Joanna Newsom writes and sings the most audaciously wise, playful, and utterly charming songs on The Milk-Eyed Mender—the title is a line from Newsom's extraordinarily moving "Sadie," her 19-year-old Newsom's childlike voice, others consider it an acquired taste. Be that as it may, nothing else in popular music could prepare you for the songs on The Milk-Eyed Mender—the title is a line from Newsom's extraordinarily moving "Sadie," which may or may not be about a deceased pet. If you're like me, you'll find it impossible to cue this up without listening to the whole album straight through. Extra points for rhyming master with disaster and poetaster. A brilliant record.

Dan Brownholz
AC/DC: Back in Black

Sometimes, it's not what a band accomplishes, it's what they overcome. In 1980, AC/DC was set to cash in on the success of their breakthrough album, Highway to Hell, when singer Bon Scott died of alcohol poisoning. The Australian band replaced him with the similarly leather-lunged Brian Johnson and went on to record their best album, Back in Black. From the portentous, pealing opening of "Hells Bells" through such hard-rock perennials as the title track, "Shoot to Thrill," and "You Shook Me All Night Long," Back in Black reveals a band that is irredeemably loud, justifiably proud, and startlingly unfazed by death.

Emmylou Harris' luminescent reading of Dolly Parton's "To Daddy" likely saved my job as a part-time country deejay in 1978. Once, I tried to spice up the format with a few of my own country-rock records. The program director called, barked "Play what's in the box," and hung up.

"The box" foamed over with the sort of crossover gloop that ruled the day. But it also contained Harris' hit, "To Daddy," and, soon after, "Two More Bottles of Wine." Spinning those songs—and sneaking in a few Quarter Moon album tracks, such as "Easy from Now On," "Leaving Louisiana in the Broad Daylight," and "I Ain't Living Long Like This"—made a lousy job somehow bearable. Well, that and the princely sum of $6 an hour.

The only rock album to convincingly target the absurdity of the Bush Administration, Radiohead's latest opus earned the group an overwhelming mandate as Commanders in Chief of Progressive Rock—no recount required. Already clear heirs to Pink Floyd, the Oxford quintet's electronica-tinged experimental Britpop continues to shatter the boundaries of rock in a remarkably intelligent yet accessible manner not achieved since the Fab Four. The single "There, There," with its heartbreaking lyrics, angular melody, lush orchestration, and enveloping Björk-inspired percussion, has my write-in vote for best song yet this century.

Glass: String Quartets 2-5
Kronos Quartet

While much of Philip Glass's large-scale work feels contrived, his intimate String Quartets, written from 1983 to 1991, find the American master at his most inventive and introspective. Glass had
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abandoned a highly reductive style in favor of a more expansive harmonic palette. Though motivic repetition certainly defines the structure of the Quartets, missing are the endless arpeggios and ostinatos that have become Glass's signature. Glass took a different approach in the Quartets, focusing on musicality rather than seriousness, and the result is organic, unpolished gems, here joyously played by the Kronos Quartet—the right group at the right time for this music. (XVIII-5)

MICHAEL FRENER

NEIL YOUNG & CRAZY HORSE: Greendale

Like Frank Sinatra and Nelson Riddle, Neil Young and Crazy Horse are one of those special, long-lasting, pleasure-giving musical synergies—despite being built on a flimsy foundation of three chords in wobbly time. Maybe it's the cumulative effect of seeing the brilliantly choreographed show live, reading Shakey, Neil Young's illuminating biography, and watching the bonus DVD that accompanies the special-edition CD, but this project is simultaneously as comfortable as an old shoe and surprisingly provocative. My musical love affair with Young began with Buffalo Springfield in 1966 and hit a new peak in 2004, especially on this superb-sounding, beautifully produced, all-analog, three-LP boxed set. Thanks, old friend!

J.S. BACH: Suites 1-6 for Unaccompanied Cello
János Starker

You don't have to know a Bourrée from a Gavotte to be moved by this music. You can listen without the annotation and appreciate both Bach's emotional power and Starker's prowess. Or you can read along and understand the music's intellectual and structural underpinnings. This Mercury release from 1966 has long been treasured by music lovers and audiophiles for both the performances and the sound. Thanks to Speakers Corner, this beautifully produced, three-LP boxed set—mastered by Willem Makke at Universal's Berliner mastering facility in Hanover, Germany, from the original tapes—restores this historic set to the catalog. The updated annotation includes new notes by the 80-year-old Starker.

LARRY GREENHILL

RAY CHARLES: Genius Loves Company
Duets with Natalie Cole, Elton John, Norah Jones, B.B. King, Gladys Knight, Diana Krall, Johnny Mathis, Michael McDonald, Van Morrison, Willie Nelson, Billy Preston, Bonnie Raitt, James Taylor

Back in the late 1950s, I would listen to Ray Charles' first albums while chilling after high school. Half a century later, in the year of his passing, I've encountered him again in television specials, a blockbuster biographical movie, and this CD. I purchased the album in Starbucks, thinking it was just a promotional piece for the coffee. Wrong! This album is selling everywhere, and with good reason. What talent! Charles' voice is rich, vibrant, raw, full of life—hardly the last murmuring of a dying man. He keeps up with and sometimes out-sings his vocal partners. Listen to how he blends and harmonizes with Norah Jones on the first track, seeming to push her voice an octave lower. Take in the hip, sophisticated path he carves for the rich, sultry huskiness of Diana Krall's voice to follow on "You Don't Know Me." By the time you finish listening to track 5, get someone to take your pulse if you haven't started snapping your fingers to Charles strutting through Little Willie John's "Fever," with Natalie Cole as his partner in the call and response. Bonnie Raitt and Charles harmonize on "Do I Ever Cross Your Mind," on which Raitt also plays an awesome slide guitar. She has never sounded better. "Sinner's Prayer" combines B.B. King on vocals and guitar, Billy Preston on Hammond B3, and Charles on piano and vocals, all of them pushing things over the limit. Wow! If any recording meets Stereophile's criteria for "R2D4," this is the one! 

HOLST: The Planets
Walter Susskind, St. Louis Symphony Orchestra

This is the second year I'm boosting the work of Paul Stubblebine at MoFi, because he's remastered another album of one of my favorite classical warhorses first recorded by Marc Aubort. The original master tape of Holst's The Planets captures the ambience of a wide, deep soundstage, delicate detail and tonalities, and raw power from a legendary 1975 performance by the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra under Walter Susskind. Stubblebine fed the signal from the master tape, played back on a specially modified ReVox deck with 60kHz bandwidth, into an A/D converter with a 2.8MHz sampling rate. Mastering of the hybrid SACD was accomplished using electronics in his Greater Ambience Information Network (GAIN) mastering system. Even when played back in two channels, this SACD of Holst's huge orchestra, including many percussion and wind instruments, gives a brilliant palette of orchestral tonal color. This is heard in the pounding ostinato rhythm of the first movement, Mars, the Bringer of War. Mercury, the Winged Messenger stresses ambience, a wide soundstage, and superb transparency in the bells and xylophone. The remastering captures the full, rich timbre of massed strings in Jupiter, the Bringer of Jollity. For the deepest bass, listen to Uranus, the Magician, which uses bowed double basses and the full pedals of the pipe organ to portray the giant's footsteps. The light, delicate suggestion of a female choir that ends the final section, Neptune, the Mystic, reveals the ability of this recording to capture the smallest, faintest sonic details.
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BOB GULLA

BOB MARLEY AND THE WAILERS: Burnin' (Deluxe Edition)

Made just six months after their first masterpiece, Catch a Fire, Burnin' is simply brilliant reggae, and arguably the Wailers' very best disc. Like every great (the adjective is not used loosely) album, this one succeeds on many levels, from its anhemic militancy to its sparkling melodies and rich performances. The call to arms here may at first seem at odds with the Wailers' usual jive vibes. But it's this urgency in, for example, "Burnin' and Lootin' " and "I Shot the Sheriff," that injects these melodies with impact and soulful potency.

SWEET SOUL MUSIC: Voices from the Shadows
Percy Sledge, O.V. Wright, Aretha Franklin, George Perkins and the Silver Stars, Laura Lee, Soul Brothers Six, Arthur Alexander, Otis Clay, The Invincibles, James Carr, Eddie Giles, The Enchanters, Solomon Burke, Judy Clay, Don Covay and the Good Timers

While it doesn't compare in breadth to the hefty soul revues from the Ace family of import labels, Sweet Soul Music, a listening companion to Peter Guralnick's fine book of the same title, is one of the very best, true-blue soul compilations available domestically. Among its 15 tracks, a handful of the genre's most sublime talents—Arthur Alexander, James Carr, and Solomon Burke—get a chance to belt it out. And there's nothing sweeter to these ears than the warm anomaly thump of a soulful rhythm section.

JON IVerson

CHÖYING DROLMA & STEVE TIBBETTS: Selwa
Chöying Drolma, voice; Steve Tibbetts, Marc Anderson, all instruments; Lodro Sangmo, Sherab Palmo, additional voices

Steve Tibbetts spends his time carefully assembling sonic landscapes that transcend the notion of a particular place or time. This release is his second collaboration with Tibetan nun and vocalist Chöying Drolma, whom he recorded remotely in Boudhanath, Nepal, then brought the computer files back home to Minnesota, where he wrapped them with his and Marc Anderson's trademark skins of ambient guitar and percussion. Tibbetts lends a great ear to all of his projects. Consider lending him yours.

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For R2D4 No.2, please allow me to bend the rules a tad and recognize the one resource that inspired more music appreciation than anything else in 2004: www.techwebsound.com. A blinkin' website?? Yup. The abovementioned URL is home to the Technicolor Web of Sound Internet radio station. Not only is www.techwebsound.com probably the one thing these ears listened to most last year, but it's responsible for literally hundreds of recent disc purchases. (Wait—I'm finding free music online, yet buying more as a result? That's not how it's supposed to work!) There are thousands of Web radio stations broadcasting anything that makes noise, and my "anything" is '60s psychedelic rock music. It's not all good, and the sound quality sucks big time, but I can't turn away. And it's free. The closest thing out there to my beloved ca-1960s KSAN. Find a Web station that you like, then hold on to your wallet.

KEN KESSLER

BILLY MAY & HIS ORCHESTRA: The Girls and Boys On Broadway
Capitol T1418 (mono LP). 1960. Dave Cavahalla, Tom Morgan, prods. AAA.

Keen collectors will note from the catalog number above that this isn't even stereo. But the post-WWII remnants of what once was called "big band" continue to yield surprises, and this gorgeous LP of Broadway tunes arranged by one of the all-time greats is full of them. Not least is its ability to make people forget that they're listening to mono. Play it for friends without telling them—see how few actually notice. Go straight to, say, "Guys and Dolls" and watch their faces: bass, dynamics, a sense of air to rival Casino Royale. And the performance? It swings.

DAVE CLARK FIVE: The Best of the Dave Clark Five
Regal/Starrline/EMI SRS5037 (LP). 1970. Dave Clark, Adrian Clark, prods. AAA.

Two remarkable details about this, especially when you consider that liking the DC5 is cause for humiliation. First, this is an obscure, UK-only budget-label pressing. Second, I'm recommending it for one track. According to my sources, this is the only way you can get a true stereo version of "Glad All Over" (the possible alternative is ever-rarer jukebox EPs). Why would I want you to spend all that on one track? Because it has lower registers that on one track? Because it has lower registers and impact in league with The Sheffield Track Record. Once they've discovered it, the Bass'n'Drums crowd will sample it to death. Oh, and it's a killer song, regardless of your hipness quotient.

DAVID LANDER

GRECHANINOV: Songs of Grechaninov
Georgie Resick, soprano; Warren Jones, piano

Whether you delight in classical recital singing or find the category intimidating, this CD is likely to enchant you. With many of its selections for children, about children, or on childlike themes, with its swirling snowflakes and meowing cat, it radiates charm. The Russian composer Alexander Grechaninov (1864-1956) masterfully depicted the Russian composer Alexander Grechaninov (1864-1956) masterfully depicted. For their part, Resick and Jones perform superbly, presenting this melodious bouquet of songs in full bloom. The pair actually recorded them eight years ago for a label that expired before a CD could be issued. Happily, Bridge principals David and Becky Starobin don't suffer from the non-invented-here syndrome.
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JESSIE MAE HEMPHILL: Get Right Blues

This earthy, northern-Mississippi hill-country artist learned music from her grandfather, Sid Hemphill, the folk virtuoso Alan Lomax called his "main find." Well past 40 before recording commercially, she earned three W.C. Handy Awards for singing her own blues tunes while accompanying herself on electric guitar. Jessie Mae Hemphill could hypnotize listeners with the short, repeated riffs characteristic of her locale, until a stroke curtailed her career in 1993. She still sings sanctified music—it's all here, flowing seamlessly, beautifully lush about this composition, so evocative of its time and place, that you buy into the whole thing. You can practically feel the humidity and breezes, hear the birds and smell the vegetation. The surge of the sea is omnipresent; the rhythm of the samba occasionally interrupts. Puccini, Ravel, Debussy, epic film music—it's all here, flowing seamlessly, beautifully sung and inexorably led by Patrick Summers, in vivid, Technicolor sound. If you don't resist this work's abundance, you'll be caught from the first notes, and on an incredible journey. (XXVI-6)

ROBERT LEVINE

MEXICAN composer Daniel Catán's Florencia en el Amazonas was first performed in Houston in 1996; from there it traveled to Los Angeles, Seattle, and Bogotá before returning, to great popular and critical acclaim, to Houston in 2001, where and when this recording was taped. Catán and his librettist, Marcela Fuentes-Barain, acknowledging a debt to the great Colombian writer Gabriel García Márquez, have fashioned an opera out of what is called "magical realism." Call it what you will; this story of a small group of people on a steamboat sailing down the Amazon in the early 1900s to hear a legendary opera singer—who, unbeknownst to them, is also on the ship and is trying to "rediscover" her real self and her butterfly-hunter lover, who has disappeared—somehow manages to make perfect sense. There is something so postromantically lush about this composition, so evocative of its time and place, that you buy into the whole thing. You can practically feel the humidity and breezes, hear the birds and smell the vegetation. The surge of the sea is omnipresent; the rhythm of the samba occasionally interrupts. Puccini, Ravel, Debussy, epic film music—it's all here, flowing seamlessly, beautifully sung and inexorably led by Patrick Summers, in vivid, Technicolor sound. If you don't resist this work's abundance, you'll be caught from the first notes, and on an incredible journey. (XXVI-6)

RICHARD LEHNERT

BRUCKNER: Works for Solo Piano

These recordings were originally released on LP in the mid-1960s. Julius Katchen, perhaps the greatest interpreter of Brahms in living memory, died a few years later, before his 50th birthday. These performances are by turns intimate and large-scaled without ever losing track of the smallest detail, as astonishingly precise as they are overwhelmingly powerful and unfailingly musical. Each work is taken purely on its own terms. Listening to these discs, I cannot tell which impresses me more: the genius and variety of Brahms or the penetrating passion of Katchen's intelligence, which matches Brahms at every point. The tempos may be a bit fast for some (Op.79!), but Katchen never loses control or slights the works in any way. London's famous ffis piano sound is big, close, and a bit harsh, with all the blackness, richness, and astringency of unsweetened chocolate—but I've been listening to these performances for 40 years and have wearied of the sound no more than I have of the music or of Katchen.

YSAYÉ: Six Sonatas for Violin Solo, Op.27

It has taken most of a century for these sonatas by the Belgian virtuoso and composer Eugène Ysayé to establish themselves in the standard repertoire, but they stand shoulder to shoulder with J.S. Bach's solo Partitas and Sonatas (one of which Ysayé quotes here, to hilarious and unnervingly postmodern effect). Ysayé's wit is searing, his passion white-hot, and his ability to imply multiple voices, times, and harmonies with a (mostly) non-chording instrument is at least the equal of Bach's. Thomas Zehetmair tears into these works with what sounds like barely contained fury, an edge almost desperate, and with absolute control. He sounds as if he is playing for his life; I can't help but think that, at the end of these sessions, the floor was littered with pieces of his violin. The disc was recorded in a small Austrian church, but the acoustic is that of the cathedral of the mind, the center of which is everywhere, the circumference nowhere. The music, these performances, and this recording are as intimate as thought and just as spacious as that greatest of all indoors. Do not miss this.
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These two works are among the most legendary finger-busters to come down from the late-19th-century school of devilishly difficult transcriptions and variations.

The recorded sound is excellent; the piano sound (a Stuart & Sons concert grand; see last month’s “The Fifth Element”) is rather stunning; and the playing is truly extraordinary. Stanhope plays with the same exhilarating, devil-may-care attitude that Boris Goldovsky used to exhibit. This is not note-perfect playing—I can hear one or two minor lapses—but the scope and sweep of the performances mean that you really get the feeling that you’re hearing a performance.

WINTER CONCERTS & NEW DISCOGRAPHY

**JOHN MARKS**

**BRAHMS: INTERMEZZI**

Intermezz, Op.117 No.2 in B-flat and Op.118 No.2 in A; other pieces by Mozart, Beethoven

Ivan Moravec, piano


The young Johannes Brahms began his musical career as a piano soloist and composer of pieces for solo piano. At the very end of his life, he returned to composing for solo piano. Brahms’ late piano pieces are among the most poignant utterances for any instrument, but there is an architectural exactitude beneath the autumnal emotion. Op.118 No.2 is particularly demanding in that, after a wistful and lilting opening, the middle section of the work (from 2:18 on) plays 3/4 meter in one hand against 4/4 in the other. Most pianists, even some very fine ones, tend to get a little metronomic in this section. Moravec, in contrast, manages to achieve a plasticity of pulse that allows the two meters to ebb and flow independently of each other (and not just speed up or slow down together). This, plus wonderfully shaded dynamics, in turn allows an otherwise-obscured tendril of melody clearly to be heard. Nearly unique in its approach Hunt Lieberson brings to this performance. (XXVII-11)

**Stefan Meijas**

**NICK CAVE & THE BAD SEEDS: THE LYRE OF ORPHEUS**


The Lyre of Orpheus—the quieter, somehow more intense and urgent side of Nick Cave’s new double-album—is a tribute to Love: the idea, the powerful sustainer. The first half of the pair, Abattoir Blues, while also excellent, lacks a bit of Lyre’s over-the-top mystery and wonder, not to mention its “little white clouds and gambling lambs.” Take, for instance, “Babe, You Turn Me On.” With its spoken-word verses riding gently against brushed-snare rolls, soulful wah-guitar, and plinking piano notes falling like a rainbow of fruit flavor, Cave breathes, “Babe, you turn me on / Like an idea / Like an atom bomb ... Boom!” I’m not kidding: “Boom!” isn’t actually written on the lyrics sheet, but it’s in there. The rest of the album only gets better. Or worse, depending on your point of view.

**SONIC YOUTH: SONIC NURSE**


Sonic Youth has never struck me as a shiny, happy band. Chaos and violence are inherent aspects of their music. And while their latest album certainly isn’t swinging slowly on anyone’s front porch—the fat, dirty, hypnotic dueling guitars in the abrupt free-jam of “Stones” make Led Zep seem like a boy band—there is an unmistakable peacefulness and strange happiness to Sonic Nurse.

More than that, or maybe because of that, this album seems to be alive in a way that no other SY album has ever been. With the exception of “Unmade Bed,” which comes in at 3:53, every song on Sonic Nurse is at least five minutes long: “Dripping Dream” tops out at 7:46. Yet no song is tiresome. These are broad, spaced-out, rocking, grooving strokes, and the band sounds very much in the moment, in love with what they’re presently creating. It’s not Daydream Nation, but it’s exactly what I need from Sonic Youth right now, which is to say: We’ve grown together.

**Paul Messenger**

**ENJOY EVERY SANDWICH: THE SONGS OF WARREN ZEVON**

Various artists; Jackson Browne, Bruce Springsteen, Bob Dylan, others


“Various artists” compilations are rarely satisfying, though this tribute to the memory of Warren
Zevon is one of the exceptions that test that rule. Zevon was an outstanding talent, both as singer and songwriting, and his 1978 album, *Excitable Boy*, has a permanent place in my personal Top 50. Lacking Zevon's own unique vocal delivery, this collection of many of his best songs, performed by a galaxy of colleagues and admirers in a bewildering variety of styles, emphasizes how effectively the songs stand alone. This, in turn, brings a perspective to the songwriting that no "Best of" collection can match. The recording quality is patchy but mostly adequate.

**MARI BOINE: Kallin**


Mari Boine is a member of the Sami tribe (aka the Laps), which spreads across the top of Scandinavia and has nomadic roots in reindeer herding. I guess four months of continuous darkness per year helps explain the extraordinarily high standard of musicianship on display here—a standard echoed in the equally brilliant recording quality of this live CD. You won't understand a word of what she sings, but that doesn't matter a jot—her voice and the other instruments communicate effortlessly, emotionally, and spiritually with uncommon purity and subtlety. Though ultimately rooted in folk culture, the music defies labels, pulling in eclectic and global cultural and instrumental influences to create a wondrously homogenous whole.

**FRED MILLS**

**SAINT ETIENNE: Tiger Bay**


Those late to the Saint Etienne buffet can check out the recent *Travel Edition 1990-2005* retrospective for evidence of the UK trio’s long-reaching grasp of classic pop styles. *Tiger Bay*, however, was an early peak, its melding of Brill Building and Phil Spector-esque girl-group, '70s disco, and '90s techno every bit the equal of anything Madonna had done by that point (or is doing now). On "Hug My Soul," luscious chanteuse Sarah Cracknell sounds like a chorus of Dusty Springfields as Saint Etienne’s two sound sculptors, Bob Stanley and Pete Wiggs, wrap things up in a jazzy, dance-floor–friendly cocoon so warming the tune literally does hug the listener’s soul.

**ROTOR CONNECTION: Rotary Connection**


When Marshall Chess told iconoclastic producer Charles Stepney to bring the venerable blues label into the present with a psychedelic “epic,” he got more than he’d envisioned. Rotary Connection’s debut (originally on the Cadet Concept imprint) boasted far-out reworkings of Dylan, the Stones, Isaac Hayes, and the Lovin’ Spoonful, plus Stepney’s “Amen,” a rousing, stomping, star-flecked slice of hippie gospel-rock. It also was dotted by Stepney-composed interludes that to this day sound outré, snatches of grand orchestinations more Broadway than 2120 South Michigan Avenue, and swipes of musique concrète that positively induce vertigo. Transocean alert: one of the multi-hued group’s members—all hand-picked by Chess—was a young vocalist named Minnie Ripperton.

**KEITH MOERER**

**IRON AND WINE: Our Endless Numbered Days**


On the list of people least likely to create great music would have to be a bearded film-studies professor who is also a Miami-based family man. But with *Our Endless Numbered Days*, Sam Beam, aka Iron and Wine, proved the extraordinary power of his finger-picked acoustic guitar and pure voice, as hushed and intimate as a lover’s whisper. The melodies are haunting or beautiful—sometimes both—and Beam’s lyrics approach poetry in the best sense of that word. This album contains many highlights, but two of them are “Naked as We Came,” the tale of an elderly couple facing death with grace, and the final cut, "Passing Afternoon," which captures the infinite possibility and fleeting happiness suggested by the album’s title. Beam is given just enough support—a slide guitar here, a sister’s harmonies there—but no more than absolutely necessary. (XXVII-3)

**THE CLASH: London Calling (remastered)**


*London Calling* was an exception—a two-LP set that deserved, practically demanded, every one of its 19 songs. Most everyone knows the call-to-arms title song and the hastily added final track, “Train in Vain,” which became a surprise US hit. Just as good are the touching confession of “Lost in the Supermarket,” the defiant fist-waver “I’m Not Down,” the ominous rumble of “The Guns of Brixton,” and half a dozen others. *London Calling* captures a punk band turning their love of reggae, rockabilly, and R&B into a masterful hybrid all their own. Soon the band members would stumble into the self-indulgent sprawl of *Sandinista!*, but with *London Calling* they produced a nearly perfect document that still matters today. (XVI-2)

**DAN OUELLETTE**

**MILES DAVIS QUINTET: 1965—68**


As the Beatles were establishing themselves as the all-time greatest pop/rock band, Miles Davis was overseeing the birth and development of the most distinguished quintet in modern jazz. This boxed set is a six-CD gold mine of tunes documenting Davis in his most fertile period, with an extraordinary band starring keyboardist Herbie Hancock, tenor saxophonist Wayne Shorter, bassist Ron Carter, and...
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drummer Tony Williams— all young and relatively inexperienced at the time, yet destined for greatness. The first three discs are Miles acoustic, while the next three find him entering the electronic realm, step by step. The leader's abstract, deeply personal playing commands center stage as he sketches on the fringes of the melodies. Equally captivating are the contributions of all the quintet members— especially Hancock, as he begins to experiment with various electric keyboard sounds— who thrive in these highly creative studio settings. (XXI-5)

PAUL SIMON: Graceland

This year's nine-CD brick, Paul Simon's The Studio Recordings 1977-2000 (Warner Bros./Rhino R2 78909), reveals him as one of pop's most artistic and imaginative singer-songwriters. His songs exude pathos and humor, romanticism and anger, paranoia and faith. Pivotal in the boxed set is the 1986 milestone, Graceland, which pioneered a revolution in pop and world music. Recorded when Simon's career was waning, Graceland proved to be not only his vibrant musical reawakening but also his masterpiece. This brilliant collection is indebted to South African township jive (mbaqanga), with dollops of Zydeco thrown in for spice. With a full cast of African musicians starring Ladysmith Black Mambazo, and such significant guests as Los Lobos, Good Rockin' Dopsie, and Linda Ronstadt, Simon cooks up an enthralling percussive party. There isn't a subpar song on the disc, which sounds as fresh today as the year it was issued.

STEVE SWALLOW/OHAD TALMOR SEXTET: L'histoire du Clochard (The Burn's Tale)
Ohad Talmor, tenor sax; Steve Swallow, bass; Gregg Tardy, clarinet; Russ Johnson, trumpet; Jacob Garchik, trombone; Meg Okura, violin; Palmetto PM 2103 (CD). 2004. Matt Balitsaris, prod., eng. DDD. TT: 48:13

Technically, this is the Steve Swallow Sextet playing Ohad Talmor's arrangements of six Swallow compositions— but that scants Talmor's achievement. The concept: Take Swallow's compositions and arrange them for a sextet inspired by Stravinsky's L'histoire du soldat, substituting Swallow's electric bass for the original's double bass and Talmor's tenor sax for bassoon. In the hands of these musicians, it's a hymn to timbre— Swallow's silky wail counterbalances a wash of woodwind sonorities and a dusky violin. Who could ever have guessed these instruments could work so well together? Ohad Talmor, obviously, which is why he deserves equal billing.

DOUG HILSINGER WITH CAROLEEN BEATTY: Brian Eno's Taking Tiger Mountain (by Strategy)

Hilsinger and Beatty, members of Waycross, so much liked Brian Eno's 1974 album, Taking Tiger Mountain (by Strategy), that they recorded it themselves— with Hilsinger playing all of the instrumen(s) (including "real" drums). At a Long Now lecture, the pair gave Eno a CD-R of their project. Eno describes listening to the Hilsinger-Beatty TTMBS as "an unexpectedly moving experience." I concur. This one rocks harder than the original and it sounds great, except for a small degree of that unmistakable ProTools glassiness. These days, I have a hard time deciding which TTMBS to play. Hilsinger, buoyed by Eno's praise, says, "Sometimes life works." So does this tribute.

ROBERT LEINA
THelonious Monk: Brilliant Corners
Thelonious Monk, piano; Ernie Henry, alto sax; Sonny Rollins, tenor sax; Clark Terry, trumpet; Oscar Pettiford, Paul Chambers, bass; Max Roach, drums

Here is my blanket recommendation of all of Analogue Productions' 45rpm jazz vinyl reissues. Record collectors always argue about the relative merits of reissues vs originals. With the Analogue Productions series, it is much more clear-cut. The 33rups sound damn close to the originals, only with quieter surfaces. The 45s, however, are in another league. Of the two dozen I've sampled, every one reveals drop-dead transparency, detail, and a sense of bloom that is reminiscent of a studio master tape. My favorite is this, Monk's third Riverside album. Although the recording emphasizes Monk's originals in horn-ensemble settings, I'm hooked on his solo reading of the standard "I Surrender Dear." Even on affordable speakers, Monk's right there in the room with me.

BRIAN WILSON: SMILE

After 37 years, Brian Wilson's three-part suite has finally been recorded on a top-notch band, as Wilson had originally intended. Beach Boys fans will appreciate the silky vocal harmonies and Van Dyke Parks' borderline-silly lyrics. Those who never understood Wilson's genius will discover a carefully crafted and ingeniously orchestrated jumble that coheres without a trace of rough edge, dead spot, or spurious fluff; just as the best classical and jazz orchestral works do. Prior to the start of a recent performance of SMILE at Carnegie Hall, a friend of mine asked me to describe the music. I said: "Imagine listening to Mozart, Varèse, and King Crimson simultaneously." He smiled as the piece progressed and he understood my point. I smile every time I play the CD. (XXVII-12)

CRAIG ROSEBERRY
MARIANNE FAITHFULL: Before the Poison

Legendary rock icon Marianne Faithfull re-emerges with her latest emotional exorcism, Before the Poison. A timeless collection of leventive euphoria, the set pairs Faithfull's signature slow-burning smoky growl and brooding lyrics with inspired collaborations from contemporary alt rockers PJ Harvey,
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Nick Cave, and Blur’s Damon Albarn. Such tracks as the lo-fi garage-rock opener, “The Mystery of Love,” the languid “No Child of Mine,” “There Is a Ghost,” and the seismic “Desperanto” showcase the enduring veteran in top form. This is easily her most lucid, resonant, assertive work since 1990’s Blazing Away and her seminal 1979 masterpiece, Broken English.

SIOUXSIE AND THE BANSHEES: Downside Up: B-Sides and Rarities

Alternative music icons Siouxsie and the Banshees finally deliver their long-awaited B-sides-and-rarities anthology, Downside Up. The exquisitely packaged 4-disc set features 55 remastered tracks (34 previously unavailable on CD) spanning the Banshees’ impressive career from 1977 to 1996. This comprehensive nostalgic journey documents the group’s metamorphosis from uncanny post-punk revolutionaries to innovative, pop-charting, modern rock vanguards whose trademarked bewitching, cabaret-styled sound oscillated among subterranean gloom, sumptuous melancholia, dizzying mania, and rabid fury. Standouts include “Pull to Bits,” the complete previously deleted The Thom EP, and “The Humming Wires” (which includes The Cure’s Robert Smith in the band’s lineup). A must-have for diehard and casual fans alike.

RICHARD J. ROSEN
THE REMAINS: The Remains

This record is archeological proof that in 1965–66, American rock ‘n’ roll wasn’t a commodity produced only overseas. Though the Remains were big in their native Boston, it’s a shame no one anywhere important took enough notice of this killer band at the time. They rocked like the Stones at their most raucous, or recalled a more profound Yardbirds. As the time. They rocked like the Stones at their most raucous, or recalled a more profound Yardbirds. As the time. They rocked like the Stones at their most raucous, or recalled a more profound Yardbirds. As the time. Their sound is balanced and seemingly inexorable, leading to a cathartic climax of splendid clarity.

KALMAN RUBINSON
MAHLER: Symphony 2, “Resurrection”
Isabel Bayrakdarian, soprano; Lorraine Hunt Lieberson, mezzo-soprano; San Francisco Symphony Orchestra & Chorus (Vance George, dir.); Michael Tilson Thomas SFSO 821936-0006-2 (SACD). 2004. Andreas Neubronner, prod.; Peter Laenger, eng. DDD. TT: 88:03

This, the fourth entry in Tilson Thomas’ Mahler series with the SFSO, is outstanding in every way. The first movement begins with less weight than some but builds to great intensity while avoiding exaggeration. Overall, the dramatic progression is balanced and seemingly inexorable, leading to a cathartic climax of splendid clarity. Lorraine Hunt Lieberson’s Urlicht is utterly seamless, vocally and dramatically. The recording values are balanced as well, with orchestra and chorus revealed with both transparency and power in a believable acoustic space. Details, such as the off-stage brass, are presented realistically, and the timpani and organ are impressive in their weight. Less manic than Bernstein, more consistent than Rattle, more passionate than Litton, and more subtle than Kaplan, MTT’s “Resurrection” is a great performance in glorious sound.

LELAND RUCKER
WORLD PARTY: Goodbye Jumbo

Listening to Goodbye Jumbo is like making your way through the detritus of an audio attic—stopping among old 45s, LPs, eight-tracks, and memorable riffs, bridges, and choruses. Though every Karl Wallinger song stands on its own, there are plentiful references to icons from the Beach Boys to Prince to the Beatles—and, yes, those are the
“whoo-whoos” from the Rolling Stones’ “Sympathy from the Devil” leading out “Way Down Now,” and the melodies of “Please Mr. Postman” and “Be Bop A Lula” underpinning “When the Rainbow Comes.” There is not a song here that you can’t sing along to.

JOHN HARTFORD: Aero-Plain

The record that changed the bluegrass landscape here that you can’t sing along to.

“whoo-whoos” from the Rolling Stones’ wonderful, enduring records. Some diehards has extended the influence of bluegrass far beyond dar hooked up with David Bromberg and some of the genre’s top guns, and tore the lid off traditional bluegrass. Together, they spilled out the contents, rolled them back up with some kinda bud, and let the tapes roll. Aero-Plain’s combustible jumble of old-time reverence and flower-power curiosity became an unofficial muse for a new generation of players (led by Sam Bush and New Grass Revival) that has extended the influence of bluegrass far beyond its original borders.

SCOTT SCHINDER
NRBQ: Tiddlywinks

Even those of us who revere NRBQ with near-religious fervor have to admit that the veteran combo often fails to capture on tape the gleeful ecclesicism and freewheeling spontaneity of their live shows. But that’s not to say that the band hasn’t made a passel of wonderful, enduring records. While some Q diehards might give the edge to Tiddlywinks’ major-label predecessor, At Yankee Stadium, I’d pick this short but sweet winner as the best and most representative sampler of the quartet’s deceptively casual-sounding genius, with roaring rock (“Me and the Boys”), sweet romanticism (“Beverly”), and a nod to history in a manic cover of the jazz standard “Music Goes ‘Round and Around.”

GENE CLARK: No Other

Gene Clark lacked fellow ex-Byrds Gram Parsons’ knack for self-mythology, not to mention Parsons’ career savvy in dying young. But Clark was an equally visionary talent, and an equally vital force in the birth of alt-country. The lavishly produced No Other is in many ways the crowning achievement of Clark’s frustratingly spotty solo catalog, a work of genuine poetic power that’s all the more compelling for its failure to reach a mainstream audience. Often interpreted as Clark’s elegy to the hedonism of 1970s L.A., the baroque song cycle aches with tarnished grandeur and irreconcilable loss, as manifested in such tunes as “Silver Raven,” “Life’s Greatest Fool,” and “From a Silver Phil.” Collector’s Choice’s no-frills reissue was followed by an expanded UK edition that adds seven alternate versions.

DAVID BERN & THE UBC: Fleeting Days

Dan Bern is a throwback: a singer-songwriter who marvels at life’s beauty, fragility, and complexity with a fresh, defiantly uncompromising style. In another era, he might have been as beloved as Dylan or Lennon (that’s good), but the times they have a-changed. A remarkably prolific songsmith, Bern is comfortable and convincing, funny and topical as a solo performer—but he’s even better with a band, and that electric palette is what you get on Fleeting Days. These joyously melodic songs are filled with heartache one minute, wonder the next; he references Hemingway and Paul Simon, Brownsville, Texas, and a Waffle House, and on the album’s closer, “Soul,” Bern looks to his soul and eloquently concludes how important it is to stay true to oneself in this dog-eat-dog world. “Are you gonna follow your soul or just the style of the day?” I’ve always believed that an album had to be at least five years old to qualify as a Record To Die For, but Fleeting Days is just too good to have to wait.

A MIGHTY WIND: The Album

... and so is this complement to Christopher Guest and Eugene Levy’s brilliant 2003 film, which lovably and hysterically creates an alternate universe to the folk scene of the 1960s. With new songs that echo but don’t mimic the classics of that time, Guest, Levy, and fellow troupers Michael McKean, Harry Shearer, and Catherine O’Hara nail it in all its political, poppy, and unctuously romantic glory. Sample lyric: “My daddy was the son of a railroad man from west of hell / Where the trains don’t even run,” from “Never Did No Wanderin.” And when was the last time you heard a sidesplitting song about a mining disaster? Or a folk-up version of a Stones song (“Start Me Up”)? The kicker is that these songs, as tongue-in-cheek and twinkle-in-eye as they may be, are beautifully crafted and performed, and as much fun to play on the guitar as on the living-room sound system.

BEETHOVEN: Missa Solemnis
Teresa Stich-Randall, soprano; Norma Procter, contralto; Richard Lewis, tenor; Kim Borg, bass; BBC Chorus & Symphony Orchestra; Jascha Horenstein

There comes a point where you close the book on particular artists from the past, having heard their studio recordings at every possible career stage, plus any number of live radio broadcasts. Yet the late, Russian-born conductor Jascha Horenstein continues to astonish from beyond the grave. The truly great recordings of Beethoven’s gargantuan, multi-layered Missa Solemnis can be counted on one hand, and this 1961 performance, now released in the US for the first time, is one of them—all parties concerned sound seized with near-superhuman fervor. In a live recording, that can also mean a loss of tech-
nical composure, but that doesn't happen here. The soloists are in particularly fresh voice, and the chorus copes with Beethoven's difficult vocal writing with exceptional resourcefulness. The sound has exceptional breadth for its time, considering that it came not from a concert hall but a radio studio. The second-disc fillers are Schubert's Symphony 8 ("Unfinished") and Wagner's Faust Overture, from concerts in 1971 and 1972, respectively; those performances are intense, too, though such music making is rather more common in this repertoire than in the Beethoven mass.

MONTEVERDI: Vespro della beata vergine da concerto (1610)
Roberta Invernizzi, Monica Piccinini, Anna Simbolini, sopranos; Sara Mingardo, contralto; Francesco Ghelardini, alto; Vincenzo di Donato, Luca Dordolo, Gianluca Ferrarin, tenors; Pietro Spagnoli, Furio Zanasi, baritones; Antonio Abete, Daniele Camovich, basses;
Concerto Italiano, Rinaldo Alessandini

Recorded in April 2004, this latest Monteverdi Vespers signifies yet another advance in the performance practice of this great work, one that explores all manner of vocal, spatial, and instrumental pairings. If the rediscovery of this sprawling piece over the past several decades has been a continual process of accepting it on its own terms (which are often remote and difficult to understand), this performance does so by not inflating the choral sonorities (there's just one singer to a part) and replacing the slam-bang rhythmic propulsion of other recordings with a communicative urgency based on the words—which are projected with exceptional vocal robustness. Many of the singers (eg, Sara Mingardo) have considerable baroque opera careers, so there's not the kind of vocal timidity that's sometimes heard from the early-music community, and much of that energy is spent on revealing the strength of the music's lyricism. Alessandini enjoys stretching the melodic lines for the sake of even greater effect. In preparing his edition of the piece and conducting the performance, Alessandini also refuses to impose any modern sense of unity, instead celebrating the music's vast diversity. The recording quality is crucial here; the Farnese Palace in Rome provided the right balance of radiance, spaciousness, and sonic focus.

CEDAR WALTON: Latin Tinge
Cedar Walton, piano; Cucho Martinez, bass; Ray Mantilla, percussion

Pianist Cedar Walton's 2002 look at the Latin side of jazz—an aspect of music the Dallas native has embraced since his early days in New York in the late 1950s—is luxurious, relaxed, and deeply musical. Working with conga drummer and bongosist Ray Mantilla, a former Walton colleague who has played with the likes of Art Blakey and Max Roach, and bassist Cucho Martinez, Walton creates dreamy renditions that result in the magical, hard-to-find blend of easy listening and high art. It all brims with quiet, alluring vigor, from the Latin standards "Besame Mucho," "Perfidia," and "Brazil" to the originals "Latin America" and "The Vision." In its modest way, a perfect recording.
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June 22, 1956, was a day when Rollins, already a monster at three months shy of 26, was on—when, as he’d put it, the music played through him. And what glorious music it is. This album, which I have listened to hundreds of times since buying it around 1960, never loses its glow. Rollins’ bravura tone, his driving, unshakable rhythm, his way of playing line after engaging line, lift everything. Four examples: the captivating “You Don’t Know What Love Is,” taken at three tempos, from slow to fast, the bubbling calypso “St. Thomas,” with a song-like Roach solo; the sturdy, speeding “Strode Rode”; and the surprising heft of “Moritat,” aka “Mack the Knife.” A truly remarkable document. (XVIII-2, 9, 12, XX-2)

My album of the year when it was released, this has become a party icon, a meeting of old-school R&B and hard rock that’s exhilarating in an infinite number of ways, particularly while driving in an old car. Maybe that’s because “Bring Me Back My Car Unstripped,” the ultimate garage-rock blaxploitation anthem, has a rhythm section that includes people playing auto fenders, brake drums, and car bumpers. Other anthems, such as “Aigle, Mobile & Hostile,” “Car With the Star,” and “I Wanna Be Your Favorite Pair of Pajamas,” make this an album for the ages.

Mary McBride is an American original equally at home in the vast expanses of the heartland and the homes running rampant. Not here. Alsop stops to smell the flowers, as it were, lingering over beautiful moments in the score, especially from the woodwinds. The orchestra, while not quite front-rank (ensemble playing is not up to Big Five standards), has many excellent soloists. Woodwind and brass players seem especially talented. Alsop takes 19:25 for the first movement—not that slow. Pletnev, on DG, takes 18:49, while Jansons on Chandos clocks in at 17:34. A must-have disc for lovers of Russian music.

Another surprise disc from Naxos, this from their American Classics series, which is becoming (in criticspeak) indispensable. The program is interesting. The Holiday Overture and Symphony 1 date from a period when Elliott Carter was writing “approachable” music more or less in the “populist” style of Aaron Copland or Roy Harris. The Symphony, whose original version premiered in 1942 (this is the 1954 revision), has its roots in the 1930s. I find it a most appealing work, especially the second movement. Scored for small orchestra, the work’s harmonics are mostly diatonic—a far cry from what we associate with the later Carter, and which we hear in the two-movement Piano Concerto (1964–65). That work is dedicated to Stravinsky, and sounds it. The rapid-fire, highly percussive sound of the piano is in stark contrast to what’s going on in the orchestra. Capconductors? Yes, a little—I hear distinct echoes of The Rite of Spring. But I find this work, too, more approachable than I might have two decades ago. A fascinating disc with excellent playing, and superbly recorded.

I never really liked this oratorio—until I heard Jacobs and this excellent choir and orchestra tear into the work, infusing it with compelling drama and vividly illuminating Haydn’s colorful orchestration. It was worth waiting for—now if they can just do the same for The Creation . . .

This joins my list primarily because of the sensational young mezzo-soprano Joyce DiDonato,

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whose rendition of the solo motet *Asende laeta* alone is worth the price of this CD. Everything and everyone else on the program is great, too—but even in a world containing some wonderful mezzos, DiDonato is something special. Whenever anyone asks for a recommendation of phenomenal singing, I tell them to listen to this.

**BARRY WILLIS**

**ANGELIQUE KIDJO: Keep On Moving: The Best of Angelique Kidjo**


Thank you, Sirius Satellite Radio. During a late-night drive, I discovered Angelique Kidjo on Sirius Disorder, the service's genre-free channel, and bought this disc the next day. A performer since childhood—as a preschooler, she was an actor-dancer in her mother's theater troupe—by age 20 Kidjo had become one of Benin's preeminent vocalists. Now based in Paris, she draws from a wide variety of influences for her deeply rooted African music, including sources as diverse as the Beatles, James Brown, Jimi Hendrix, Aretha Franklin, Fela Kuti, Miriam Makeba, and Carlos Santana. A distillation of Kidjo's first five albums, *Keep On Moving* is a gourmand's smorgasbord of vocal and rhythmic invention, haunting melodies, and compelling arrangements, all of it lushly recorded and lovingly rendered. “Summertime” and “Voodoo Child” are easy points of entry for listeners just beginning to explore the rich territory of world music.

**MARVIN GAYE: What's Going On?**

Motown 3746353392 (CD). 1971. Marvin Gaye, prod.; Lawrence Miles, Art Stewart, Joe Atkinson, James Green, engs. AAD. TT: 35:31

It's a rare work that both defines its time and proves timeless. That's the essence of *What's Going On?*, Marvin Gaye's groundbreaking 1971 masterpiece. Rejected by Motown executive Berry Gordy because it was conceived as a single piece rather than a collection of singles, the LP was first issued on the Tamla label. The outcome of a long period of personal and political turmoil—Gaye's singing partner, Tammi Terrell, had died of a brain tumor, he had gone through a divorce, and his brother Frankie had recently returned from combat in Vietnam—*What's Going On?* addresses the issues of war, poverty, environmental destruction, urban blight, and personal despair with an uplifting message of hope. The title song, “Mercy Mercy Me,” and “Inner City Blues” remain as vibrant and relevant today as they were 34 years ago. Gaye's own tragic end—he was killed in 1984 by his preacher father during a family squabble—only underscores the poignancy of this disc. As Nick Lowe and Elvis Costello would repeat years later, “What's so funny about peace, love, and understanding?” Reissued and remastered several times, *What's Going On?* is available in many editions, including, reportedly, a hi-rez version. All are worth investigating. (XXV-11)
The Krell KAV-400xi integrated amplifier has 5 line-level inputs (1 balanced, 3 single-ended, 1 single-ended tape loop) and 1 set of single-ended preamplifier outputs. Power output: 200Wpc into 8 ohms (23dBW), 400Wpc into 4 ohms (23dBW). Output impedance: 0.17 ohm. THD: 1kHz <0.04%; 20kHz <0.25%. Input impedance: 47k ohms. Input sensitivity: 644mV RMS. Power consumption at idle/standby: 20W. Dimensions: 17.3" (444mm) W by 3.5" (90mm) H by 17" (436mm) D. Weight: 36 lbs (16.4kg).


Manufacturers: Krell Industries, 45 Connair Road, P.O. Box 0533, Orange, CT 06477-0533. Tel: (203) 799-9954. Fax: (203) 891-2028. Web: www.krellonline.com.

How times have changed. When Krell first debuted its KAV-300i, in 1996, it risked having people question its high-end credibility simply for having considered producing an integrated amplifier, much less an affordable one. After all, Krell was the company best known for massively overbuilt—and, many claimed, overpriced—power amplifiers that were uniquely capable of driving speakers of ridiculously low impedance. In Martin Colloms' review of the 300i in the July 1996 Stereophile (www.stereophile.com/amplificationreviews/809), he asked the question on everyone's minds: "Is Krell risking its reputation?"

As it turned out, no. True, the KAV-300i wasn't designed to drive Apogee's 1-ohm Scintillas the way Krell's massive separates could, but Krell had designed an integrated that would test the proposition that a properly designed single-box component could rival or surpass the performance of more costly separates. It had just been so long since anyone had attempted such a feat that most audiophiles had never even imagined it possible.

Today, high-performance integrateds are, if not thick on the ground, common enough that no eyebrow is raised at the prospect. Krell obviously took this as a new challenge, and went back to the drawing board. The KAV-400xi outputs 200Wpc to the 300i's 150Wpc, and takes its cue cosmetically from Krell's sleek KAV Series, which uses stout corner posts and milled aluminum panels to create a bombproof chassis. It also sports a continuous-spin digital volume control, balanced circuit topology, and a slick little membrane credit-card remote—and, at $2500, costs just $150 more than the almost-10-year-old 300i.

It has always been a truism that Krell is serious about build quality; now we know they're serious about that value thing, too.

Truth! stark naked truth, is the word
That post-and-panel aluminum architecture isn't just window dressing—Krell wants the chassis to be rigid and nonmagnetic. And big: The amplifier's 17" depth enables the KAV-400xi to house its massive power supply at a distance from its audio circuit boards, which are stacked adjacent to the rear panel's inputs and outputs. The power supply itself, located in the front half of the chassis, consists of an 800VA toroidal transformer, a 55,000uF capacitive reservoir, and discrete regulators for the preamp and power-amp sections.

Krell says the KAV-400xi's gain stages are derived from the same ultra-high-bandwidth, low-noise, current-mode technology that the company developed for its KCT Class A Series preamp. The output stage uses six parallel-linked high-speed bipolar transistors for each channel's positive and negative legs (because it's a balanced design, that totals 24). This clever system trades on the rapid response of low-rated output devices without eschewing the brute force of their global output. And it works—the 400xi is specified as delivering 200Wpc into 8 ohms and 400Wpc into 4 ohms.

The audio circuits are symmetrical and differentially balanced. In keeping with Krell tradition, the circuit is class-A up to the output stage, and the output is DC-coupled to the speakers. The audio circuit board is flanked by two substantial internal heatsinks, and the amp's top and bottom plates are liberally vented to enable heat dissipation. My KAV-400xi got somewhat warmer than body tem-
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To precondition an amplifier before testing, I run it at one-third power into 8 ohms for an hour. For an amplifier with a class-B output stage, this thermally stresses the amplifier to the maximum extent. To my alarm, after 15 minutes of driving 67Wpc into 8 ohms, the top panel of the KAV-400xi above the internal heatsinks was way too hot to touch, implying a temperature well above 60°C; the chassis was also too hot to touch and smelled of hot insulation. More alarming, the distortion level, a good 0.05% when the amplifier was cold, had risen to 0.15% and was continuing to rise. Worried about the amplifier being damaged by thermal runaway, I concluded the preconditioning at that point.

The Krell is one of an increasing number of wide-dynamic-range amplifiers that do not have sufficient heatsink area to allow continuous high-power operation. This tradeoff may permit a product to be competitively priced—using appropriately sized heatsinks for a 200Wpc amplifier would significantly increase its cost—but it needs to be pointed out. While it is unlikely the Krell will overheat in normal use, it may well do so when used for a party.

The KAV-400xi's input impedance at 1kHz was a usefully high 47k ohms, double that for the balanced input. The amplifier was noninverting through both balanced and unbalanced inputs, and the maximum voltage gain was 35.7dB. (Assessed at the preamplifier output, which has a lowish source impedance of 198 ohms, the maximum preamp gain was a sensible 10.2dB.) The 152-position volume control operated in approximately 0.2dB steps at the extremes of its range, these increasing to 0.4dB steps in the middle of the range and 0.7dB steps around the unity-gain setting of "0." The "0" position mutes the output.

The output impedance was a little higher than usual for a solid-state design, at 0.35 ohm across most of the audioband, this rising slightly at 20kHz. As a result, there was a little more modification of the amplifier's frequency response than usual, 0.25dB, when driving Stereophile's simulated speaker load (fig.1, top dotted trace). Into resistive loads, the response was flat in the audioband, with a very slight rise below 20Hz and a high-frequency −3dB...
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That's where its credit-card remote comes in. I'm probably just stupid, but I had the dickens of a time figuring out the remote. It's a universal model that also works with other Krell components, and it has a pair of source switches at the top, labeled CD and Pre. It wasn't immediately obvious to me that I had to press Pre before every command or the 400xi wouldn't accept it. I suspect that wired remote input on the rear panel is the giveaway—Krell assumes its customers will be using a system remote or home automation system such as those made by Crestron.

If you've a yen for incorporating your two-channel system into a multichannel home-theater setup, the KAV-400xi's assignable Theater Throughput mode toggles the designated input into and out of unity gain.

I am as true as truth's simplicity

The KAV-400xi doesn't require any real setup. Just connect the inputs, speaker cables, and AC cable, and turn it on. It sounded pretty good straight off, seemed to blossom a bit after about 10 minutes, and that was that. I didn't notice much improvement with additional burn-in.

The Krell DVD Standard DVD player is fully balanced, so I used the B1 input on the amp and plugged the Musical Fidelity Nu-Vista CD player into S1. I couldn't detect a noticeable difference between balanced and single-ended operation, but the 400xi is...
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Stereo Times, 14 August 2002

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Stereophile, February 2005
balanced from input to output; if your most critical source offers balanced outs, there’s no downside to using it, and some theoretical advantages. So why not?

The KAV-400xi is hefty at 36 lbs, but not brutally massive the way Krell’s biggest components are, which means you don’t have to hire an architect to design a shelf that will hold it. It bounced along contentedly on Solid-Tech’s elastic-banded Feet of Silence (no, I didn’t make that name up),

which are not designed for massive loads. You do want to give the 400xi a lot of breathing room, however.

The amp appears to be fairly easy-going when it comes to speaker loads, too. I challenged it with Krell’s own $8000/pair Resolution 2s, a 4-ohm load with a claimed sensitivity of 89dB. Ignore the specs, however; I found the Rez 2s to be speakers that really wanted to be spanked by their amplifier—they sounded best when dominated by a big brute.

The 400xi was well up to task, demonstrating that it’s not just the sons of Krypton who hide their powers behind mild-mannered exteriors. Yes, the Krell was super—both of ‘em, actually. However, I felt that auditioning an amplifier solely with a loudspeaker born in the same stable was a tad too cozy, so I wired up a pair of PSB’s $4999/pair Platinum T6 Towers: 4-ohm speakers that don’t seem substantially more sensitive at 90dB, but that subjectively seemed to require less

Summing up the Krell KAV-400xi’s measured performance is difficult, as some of its odd behavior will not be an issue when it comes to playing back music at normal listening levels. It is also possible that our sample was defective, though the fact that both channels behaved similarly is evidence for that not being the case. But I would avoid pairing the amplifier with loudspeakers that drop below 4 ohms—such as Krell’s own Resolution 1—and would make sure it had adequate ventilation.

—John Atkinson

The B had ST on the edge of his seat: "I was astonished by how much musical information the B retrieved from record to record..." Kontrapunkt A "rich, extended bass that is very well-controlled and tune-full as hell." Even at twice the price, MF would call this "a superbly musical performer" and "a genuine bargain." -Stereophile Rec. Comp. Class B $$$, 10/02
Krell KAV-400xi integrated amplifier

Yes, it was easy to get all critical and right-brainy about that stuff, but the minute Miller began singing with his wife, Julie, the gospel duo of Regina and Ann McCrary (daughters of Rev. Sam McCrary, who refounded the Fairfield Four in 1942), or bandmate Emmylou Harris, I'd lose perspective, getting swept along by the sheer emotion, which completely pegged my meters. "Emotional overload" is not a charge many reviewers have ever leveled at Krell products.

And don't get me started on the interplay between drummers Brady Blade and Bryan Owens. Pace and rhythm are not areas where anybody's "affordable" products are expected to excel, but the 400xi broke the mold here. It aced the toe-tap, hip-wag, tripe-faced-boogie test.

I don't mean to give the impression that the doughty integrated made UUHoP sound any better than it was. The album was recorded in a home studio, and it doesn't have much breath to it—the proceedings have that homogenized digital workstation gloss, and your front wall is in no danger of "disappearing." On the other hand, the Krell didn't emphasize sonic flaws until I couldn't hear the music that lay beneath them.

An exaggeration is a truth that has lost its temper

Taken on its own, almost any high-fidelity component of a certain quality sounds better and better the longer you listen to it. Eventually, its sound becomes the "real thing"—or, even worse, becomes preferable to the real thing. This is why so many hi-fi buffs complain about the "rolled-off top end" when they hear a live orchestra in a big hall for the first time. It's why Stereophile reviews compare new products to components that have already been reviewed in its pages.

Fortunately, my office system is built around the direct-marketed, 100Wpc Portal Audio Panache integrated

2003 ( www.stereophile.com/ loudspeakerreviews/ 1103psb). The KAV-400xi was in complete control of both sets of loudspeakers, producing balanced sound from bottom to top.

I enjoyed the sound of the KAV-300i when it was released, but that was eight years ago, and since then, solid-state design has come a long way—at least, the best of it has. The KAV-400xi retained the 300i's best qualities—control and unpixelated timbre—while improving on it across the board, especially at the frequency extremes. The older integrated's bottom end, which I admired in its day, seems overemphatic compared to the 400xi's deep, taut, natural bass.

I hadn't expected this. I once joked to JA that the only newsworthy review of a Krell amplifier would be one that could scream "Krell designs component with no bass response!" The company has certainly not done that this time out, but neither does the 400xi have big bass sound. Its low end just sounds accurate.

Did I say "just"? That's not simply rare, it's a daring move for a company known for its big bass. I suspect that a certain number of consumers might misinterpret the accuracy of the 400xi's bass response for something else: excessive leaness. More on this anon, as one of my erstwhile editors was fond of saying.

The 400xi's top end, however, was the real revelation, exhibiting the sort of air and unhyped detail that I've heard from only a few other solid-state designs (most notably, some Krells with breathtaking price tags). I suspect that a certain number of consumers might misinterpret the accuracy of the 400xi's bass response for something else: excessive leaness. More on this anon, as one of my erstwhile editors was fond of saying.

The Krell interior.

for the Performing Arts in Owings Mills, Maryland, the disc places Russell's instrument some distance away within a large space, as opposed to the current trend in recording the guitar of crawling into the instrument's sound hole. This perspective emphasizes the intellectual rigor with which Russell approaches these delightful works, allowing us to luxuriate in the extended architecture of his phrasing, the delicacy of a note's decay, the velocity with which the sound of a plucked string flowers into full bloom . . .

That's the long way around the barn. What it really means is that the Krell got me lost in the whole music thing rather than in the whole audiophile emphasis on what music sounds like.

I assumed this would be less true with Buddy Miller's Universal United House of Prayer (CD, New West 6063 CD), because his albums usually don't exemplify an undue emphasis on audiophile purity (translation: he does like his compression). To a certain extent, I was right: I was able to approve of the righteous reedy wheeze of Phil Madeira's accordion and the churchy burble of the Hammond B3—and, as always, I was agog at Miller's guitar virtuosity and his signature tone, dripping with scads of compression, deep tremolo, and chiming Vox AC30 overdrive.

Russell's new CD of works by Llobet, Maldonado, Segovia, Pujol, and de la Maza (Telarc CD-80633), was impressive in its combination of delicacy and authority. Recorded in the somewhat dry acoustic of the Peggy and Yale Gordon Center

Yes, it was easy to get all critical and right-brainy about that stuff, but the minute Miller began singing with his wife, Julie, the gospel duo of Regina and Ann McCrary (daughters of Rev. Sam McCrary, who refounded the Fairfield Four in 1942), or bandmate Emmylou Harris, I'd lose perspective, getting swept along by the sheer emotion, which completely pegged my meters. "Emotional overload" is not a charge many reviewers have ever leveled at Krell products.

And don't get me started on the interplay between drummers Brady Blade and Bryan Owens. Pace and rhythm are not areas where anybody's "affordable" products are expected to excel, but the 400xi broke the mold here. It aced the toe-tap, hip-wag, tripe-faced-boogie test.

I don't mean to give the impression that the doughty integrated made UUHoP sound any better than it was. The album was recorded in a home studio, and it doesn't have much breath to it—the proceedings have that homogenized digital workstation gloss, and your front wall is in no danger of "disappearing." On the other hand, the Krell didn't emphasize sonic flaws until I couldn't hear the music that lay beneath them.

An exaggeration is a truth that has lost its temper

Taken on its own, almost any high-fidelity component of a certain quality sounds better and better the longer you listen to it. Eventually, its sound becomes the "real thing"—or, even worse, becomes preferable to the real thing. This is why so many hi-fi buffs complain about the "rolled-off top end" when they hear a live orchestra in a big hall for the first time. It's why Stereophile reviews compare new products to components that have already been reviewed in its pages.

Fortunately, my office system is built around the direct-marketed, 100Wpc Portal Audio Panache integrated

The Krell interior.
PrimaLuna® ProLogue One

“How does it sound? Bitchin’, that’s how it sounds.”
— Jeff Dorgay The Absolute Sound, December 2004

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— Ken Kessler Hi-Fi News (U.K.) July 2004

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Soft-start circuitry and conservative design provides extended tube life.
Premium parts featuring fully vented ceramic tube sockets, Nichicon and Reakap capacitors, WBT style speaker terminals, ALPS volume control, and gold plated input jacks.

EL 34 Output tubes, 35 wpc. Removable tube cage included.

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Njoe Tjoeb 4000

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Vacuum Tube CD Player, with a Tube Output Stage Made in Holland to ISO 9001 Specs.
T6s, the Panache sounded a lot happier
than the Stereophile, February 2005. 
unique sound—an integral part of Swallow's
richly resonant. Their zing, and Swallow's
taut bass sound was plumper. Okura's strings gained a lot more of
their three-dimensional, the 400xi didn't exactly reduce it to window.
the Krell's Reference Series) still do better.
Swallow's slightly nasal drawl. They might even call it "better"—
but that's confusing preference with reality. That's not what high fidelity is
supposed to be about.

Interesting, isn't it? Everyone knows that Krells have "good" bass: deep, rich,

WHEN JA PICKED UP THE 400xi FOR MEASUREMENT,
I CALLED IT "MY FAVORITE KRELL EVER."

Krell KAV-400xi integrated amplifier

I confess that I liked it that way. It's a
prettier sound than Swallow has had when I've heard him live, and I wouldn't be surprised if many audiophiles also
preferred it to the Krell's more accurate portrayal of Swallow's slightly nasal
drawl. They might even call it "better"—

You know how you feel about
that way.... But I digress.

I don't need to preach about the convenience of remote control, the logic of
adjusting volume and balance from your listening chair, or the exquisite
imagination of putting Eminem on hold to
luxury of putting Eminem on hold to
adjusting volume and balance from
in my office system, but I suspect I'll often wonder, "How much better
would this sound on the Krell?"

Memories are made of this.

Dearer still is the truth
Eight years after introducing its crowd-pleasing KAV-300i, Krell has followed it up with an integrated amplifier that
is more elegant, more powerful, and just plain sounds better. And for a scant $150 more, it's an even greater
garnish.

When JA picked up the 400xi for measurement, I called it "my favorite Krell ever." That surprised me, because
I've reviewed a whole passel of Krell components in my career: the KPS-
28c CD player; DVD Standard DVD player; KRC-HRt, KCT, and Krell KAV-280p preamplifiers; and the Audio Standard, FPB-300, FPB-300c,
and KAV-2250 power amplifiers.

None was as good, and some were sublime—I still wake up some
nights from dreams of the KRC-
HRT-Audio Standard system.

But what I blurted out to John unfeigned was the truth: Even though Krell has most assuredly built better
products, the KAV-400xi is special. Not because it's "affordable," not because
it's exquisite audio jewelry, not because it meets some watts-to-dollar ratio of
goodness, but simply because it's as faithful to the music as I am.

Well, to tell the truth, more so.

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

ANALOG SOURCE Polk XR12
Reference XM satellite radio tuner
(w/Musical Fidelity X-DACs)
DIGITAL SOURCES Krell DVD Standard DVD player, Musical Fidelity Nu-Vista CD player
INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER: Portal Audio Panache.
LOUDSPEAKERS Krell Resolution 2, PSB Platinum T6s.

—Wes Phillips

amplifier ($1795) Sam Tellig praised so highly back in February 2003
(www.stereophile.com/amplificationreviews/780). Like Sam, I rate the
Panache quite highly—it does rule the system I listen to more than eight
hours most days.

The Panache lacks a remote control—or a preamp section, really. Sam
described it succinctly as "a power amp with a volume potentiometer (ALPS),
a volume control, a balance control, and a selector switch." This isn't a
problem in my office system, because it sits beneath my computer monitor,
which puts it within reach for volume adjustment and source selection. In my
listening room, however, I found myself remarkably surly about having to
get up to make those changes. (Why, back in my day, none of us audiophiles
had remote controls, and we liked it that way.... But I digress.)

I don't need to preach about the convenience of remote control, the logic of
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goodness, but simply because it's as faithful to the music as I am.

Well, to tell the truth, more so.
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— Jimmy Hughes, Hi-Fi+, Issue 34, pages 88 to 91

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— Oz Fritz, Sound Engineer

Oz Fritz has worked as a sound engineer in both recording studios and live concert environments for more than 25 years. His credits include work with Tom Waits, John Hammond, Iggy Pop, Ginger Baker, Herbie Hancock, George Clinton and many more. In August of 2004, Oz spent a week at Blue Heaven Studios recording a to-be-released John Hammond record.

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Kevin Gray is a mastering and cutting engineer with more than 30 years experience. Gray has credits on multiple albums gone platinum and Grammy. Gray is the mastering engineer for and part owner of AcousTech Mastering in Camarillo, California.

Acoustic Sounds is the exclusive mailorder dealer for the famous "Harbeth sound."
PrimaLuna ProLogue One
INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER

My first reaction to the PrimaLuna ProLogue One was based solely on looks: For $1095, I might not have been disappointed had it sounded no better than a Bose Wave Radio. Its casework straddles the breach between vintage and modern in a way that little else does, at any price. The dark gray-blue finish, hand-rubbed to a tactile gloss, wouldn't look out of place on an Alfa GTV (the new one, which resembles a drop of oil). And for the first time in my experience, a high-end audio manufacturer has figured out a way to make a protective tube cage easy to remove and replace: with banana plugs and sockets. Why couldn't one of the high-price American brands have figured that out?

The theme continues inside, with point-to-point wiring that's carefully dressed and neatly soldered. All the hardware is bolted in place, not just stuck to the inside of the chassis with glue and hope, and well-finished metal shielding is installed wherever hum or RF interference might otherwise intrude. All the tube sockets are good ceramic ones, and the terminal strips are ceramic, too. Threaded parts are locked in place with a dab of red enamel. All the edges have been smoothed over. Inspectors' initials abound.

Here's where your music goes: Each channel's preamp tube is a 12AX7A dual triode, the two halves of which are tied together in parallel in the interest of current gain. From there it goes to the two halves of a 12AU7 driver, configured as a long-tailed pair. Then it's on to a push-pull pair of EL34s operating in "enhanced" class-A/B, with screen grids tied to the output transformer's primary so the tubes can deliver more power than if they were used in triode mode—yet also sound sweeter and exhibit a lower output impedance than if they were used in pure pentode mode. Tube-amp enthusiasts will recognize that as an Ultra-linear output circuit, which the great David Hafler first described more than half a century ago.

Sounds pretty simple, doesn't it? It is—for the most part. Then again, because the ProLogue One is aimed at the first-time owner of a tube amp, PrimaLuna wanted to ensure reliable performance in almost any setting, with no need for adjustments. So chief designer Marcel Croese devised a new way to bias the output tubes.

In a normal fixed-bias amplifier, the output tube's cathodes are referenced directly to ground, and an independent negative voltage is applied to the signal grid: It's that bias that the AC music signal modulates, continuously varying tube current as it travels from the cathode to the anode, and allowing the high-voltage output to mimic the low-voltage input. But because temperatures can vary inside a tube amp, and because tubes, like people, begin to deteriorate from the moment they enter the workforce, the bias will require periodic correction. The bias may also need to be altered in the face of unusually loud or bass-heavy signals, to prevent the higher voltage from functionally adding to the bias—and thus limiting tube current and compressing the output. Croese's solution, called Adaptive AutoBias, is a circuit that continuously adjusts the bias voltage in response to changing temperatures and input signals. (Neither the J-FET op-amp at the heart of Croese's circuit, nor its supporting parts, is in the signal path. Adaptive AutoBias, which is the only major
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It was 1994 when we introduced the TT, the first amplifier based on our proprietary technology Inpol. It was one of the most awarded audio components of all time. While the rest of the world kept reworking the same, obsolete circuits that have been around for decades, we spent the last ten years further exploring the potential of Inpol. The integrated amplifier Inpol² is the result. Deserves a listen.
portion of the ProLogue One that's laid out on a printed-circuit board, uses a reference signal derived from the amplifier's input.)

The result, according to Croese, is an increase in both performance and reliability—two things that don't always track one another in the minds of hard-core tube enthusiasts. And by taking the enthusiast out of the adjustment loop, the Adaptive AutoBias circuit ensures something else: moderation. "The adjustments made are very slight," Croese says, "within narrow margins, so that the tubes always operate in the parts of their range that are lowest in distortion."

For its part, the ProLogue One's power supply is as traditional as they come: High-voltage AC from the power transformer is straightened out by a smallish rectifier bridge, and the bumps and valleys are smoothed by a pi filter centered around a sturdy-looking choke. Additional secondary taps lead to a separate filtering circuit for the tube heaters.

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MY ASTONISHMENT AT THE LEVEL OF VALUE THE PROLOGUE ONE OFFERS COULDN'T BE MORE GENUINE.

MEASUREMENTS

I ran the ProLogue One at one-third power into 8 ohms from the 8 ohm tap for 60 minutes—not so much to thermally stress it, as I do with solid-state designs, but to make sure it was up to its working temperature. (I didn't notice the pleasant smell, Art!) I performed a complete set of tests from both its 8 ohm and 4 ohm output transformer taps, but have described the results for both here only when relevant.

The input impedance was usefully high, at 95k ohms at 20Hz and 1kHz, this dropping inconsequentially to 76k ohms at 20kHz. The amplifier preserved absolute polarity—ie, was noninverting—from both sets of outputs. The voltage gain was a little hard to assess accurately, due to the presence of very-low-frequency noise, which caused the level reading to bounce a little. But it appeared that with the volume control set to its maximum, the gain from the 8 ohm tap into an 8 ohm load was 37.5dB; from the 4 ohm tap into 4 ohms, 36.3dB. Because the amplifier does not have preamp or tape outputs, I could not assess how much of this gain comes from the preamp stage and how much from the power amplifier circuitry.

The output impedance was very high, at 5.8 ohms from the 8 ohm tap and 3.1 ohms from the 4 ohm tap. (These figures were measured at 1kHz; the source impedance was a little higher at 20Hz, a little lower at 20kHz, but inconsequentially so.) These high source impedances guarantee maximum power delivery into matched loads: approximately 6 ohms in the case of the "8 ohm" output, 3 ohms in the case of the "4 ohm" output. However, the downside is that there is a very audible modification of the amplifier's frequency response due to the manner in which the loudspeaker's impedance varies with frequency. This is shown graphically by the top traces in figs.1 and 2, which were taken with the amplifier's 8 and 4 ohm taps, respectively, driving Stereophile's simulated loudspeaker load. The response modification is as high as ±2.5dB and ±0.8dB, and cannot be discounted when auditioning the amplifier.

These two graphs also show that the ProLogue One's response into resistive loads is commendably flat across

Stereophile, February 2005 101
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AE-3 DH SIGNATURE

Whether you are a new Glass Audio reader, or a veteran tuber, rest assured, fellow potato heads, the AE-3 is an excellent choice."
— Glass Audio Magazine
Listening

Although I enjoyed every day I spent with the ProLogue One—my astonishment at the level of value it offers couldn’t be more genuine—you may want to keep in mind that my reviewing environment is almost a worst-case scenario: Quad electrostatics on the one hand, high-sensitivity Lowther horns on the other. I heard just enough evidence of uncontrolled bass with the former, and shoutiness from an overpowered whizzer with the latter, that I couldn’t help imagining that most real-world installations, centered around a dynamic loudspeaker of medium to medium-high efficiency, would sound even better than my own.

All right—let’s dispense with this product’s most notable shortcoming: Driving the Quad ESL-989s, the ProLogue One had a very underdamped bottom two octaves. The bass drum in the Prelude of Ives’ Symphony 4, performed by José Serebrier and the London Philharmonic (CD, BMG Classics 63316-2), was boomy, with an unrealistically long decay. Likewise the electric bass and the lowest-tuned floor tom on the Band’s “Smoke Signal,” from Cahoots (CD, Capitol 25391-2), which also sounded slow and rhythmically quite a wide bandwidth, particularly at low frequencies. At high frequencies, the rolloff didn’t depend on the load to any great extent, which can be common in designs using an output transformer, but did depend on the setting of the volume control. It varied from −1dB at 30kHz at the extreme volume-control positions to −1dB at 20kHz in the unity-gain position (8:00). The PrimaLuna’s reproduction of 10kHz squarewave (fig.3) shows some slowing of the waveform edges, as well as a faint hint of ringing. But not apparent in the graph, which was taken with a digital oscilloscope, is a very brief overshoot on each leading edge, which was visible with a 20MHz analog ‘scope. It is possible, therefore, that the ProLogue One’s circuitry is not unconditionally stable; but if so, the parasitic instability appears to be in the MHz region and is probably inconsequential.

The PrimaLuna’s channel separation was moderate, at better than 60dB below 2kHz, decreasing above that frequency at the usual 6dB/octave rate due to capacitive coupling between the channels. The separation at 20kHz was 47dB, which is merely adequate. Of perhaps more practical concern was leakage between adjacent pairs of inputs. Because the amplifier does not have a Mute button, I was using the input selector to switch to an unused input between tests. When I did so, however, I noticed that the oscilloscope was still showing some high-frequency activity. Inserting a shorting plug into the unused input didn’t make any difference; the leakage response in both the shorted and open-circuit conditions is shown in fig.4. If you’re playing a CD with, say, a switched-on tuner plugged into the next pair of inputs, you’ll hear a quiet treble ghost of the tuner signal in the background. The solution is to turn unselected sources down (not off), but it’s rare to see this behavior these days.

With the input shorted and the volume control set to its maximum, the ProLogue One’s unweighted signal/noise ratio (ref. 1W into 8 ohms) was moderate, at 64.9dB. This increased to 75.9dB when A-weighted. As expected from a design using a pair of EL34 output tubes for each channel, the ProLogue One’s maximum power is relatively modest. Fig.5 shows the percentage of THD+noise present in the amplifier’s output while its 8 ohm output transformer tap drives increasing power.
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unstirring as a result. Roxy Music's "More Than This," from Avalon (CD, Virgin 5 83871 2), never really took off.

But with the same speakers, the ProLogue One sounded consistently fine with smaller-scale music, and with music that didn't require so much in the way of quick, taut bass reproduction. The amp was engaging on good solo-piano recordings, such as the XRCD reissue of Thelonious Monk's Thelonious Himself (CD, Riverside/JVC VICJ-60170). The ProLogue One didn't smooth over the deliberateness of Monk's style, but neither did it sound unduly mechanical—a common enough failing, in my experience, with other pentode amps. It tracked the album's continuously shifting moods, from the playful to the serious and everything in between: The music got bigger when it had to, without strain, and Monk's touch was never lost in the process. And while other amps may do certain things better—the purr and sheer scale of the low B-flat in the bluesy "Fun-

I'VE NEVER HEARD ANOTHER COMPARATIVELY INEXPENSIVE AMPLIFIER GET THE HUMANNESS OF MONK'S PIANO SOUND THIS RIGHT.

eational," for example—I've never heard another comparatively inexpensive amplifier get the humanness of Monk's piano sound this right.

The ProLogue One's tonal balance and thickness, especially throughout the midrange: It was, without question, a sweet-sounding amp, but not one I considered unpleasantly colored. When I took my attention away from

levels into loads ranging from 2 to 16 ohms; fig.6 shows similar curves for the 4 ohm output tap. With the load

matched to the nominal output tap, the 1% points are 21W from the 8 ohm tap (13.2dBW), and 24W from the 4 ohm tap (10.8dBW). It could be argued that using our usual definition of "clipping" as being 1% THD would be misleading, as the amplifier is not actually in hard clip at that point, but is really suffering from waveform triangulation and compression of the peaks. So, relaxing the definition to 3% THD, where actual clipping is visible on the oscilloscope screen, the 8 ohm tap gives out 42W into 8 ohms (16.2dBW) and 14W into 4 ohms (8.45dBW). The 4 ohm tap delivers 25W into 8 ohms (14dBW), 47W into 4 ohms (13.7dBW), and 17W into 2 ohms (6.3dBW).

I plotted the manner in which the THD-noise percentage changes with frequency at 5V output, a level at which the distortion products emerge from the noise floor. Figs.7 and 8 show the behavior from the 8 and 4 ohm taps, respectively. Though it increases to moderately high levels at high and low frequencies—reflecting the relatively modestly sized output transformers—and into
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the music and focused on the sound, I heard that Norman Blake's voice was slightly chestier than usual on "Greycoat Soldiers," from *Fields of November* (LP, Flying Fish 70004), and his vintage Martin D-18 was one color swatch darker. But the amp made up for it with a nearly SET-like presence and spatial believability on voice and guitar alike, and an equally believable sense of the space between them.

Conductors all focus on different things in the same music, and so, I think, do fine audio components. The ProLogue One was acceptably good at conveying the scale and drama of orchestral music, and while it didn't pull subtle details from the mix as explicitly as I would have liked—as in the aforementioned Ives recording, which needs all the openness and clarity it can get—it was good enough that I could listen for hours at a stretch without frustration or boredom setting in. But this amp's strongest suit with good orchestral recordings was its tendency to find the color, substance, and textures of the instrumental sounds. Even on discs not known for their warmth, such as the 1962 Starker-Dorati recording of Dvorák's Cello Concerto (CD, Mercury 432 001-2), the ProLogue One brought out the best in massed strings, preserving well their rich texture and timbral complexity. Simply put, *this amp let that record sound beautiful.*

The ProLogue One brought those same strengths to well-recorded folk and pop music, too. It did a fine job with Tony Rice's guitar solo on the great Lester Flatt song "Why Don't You Tell Me So," from *Cold on the Shoulder* (CD, Rounder CD 0183), sounding especially twangy and right when Tony ventured down to the lower strings. And Ronnie McCoury and David Grisman's mandolins sounded real—and appropriately distinct from one another—on their fairly recent recording of Bill Monroe's "Roanoke," on *Bluegrass Mandolin Extravaganza* (CD, Acoustic Disc).

loads that are much lower than the nominal value of the transformer tap, the midband THD is quite respectable. In fact, when you take into account the fact that the main distortion component is the subjectively benign second harmonic (fig.9), it is not surprising that the PrimLuna sounds more powerful than its measurements suggest.

At low frequencies, the onset of saturation of the output transformer core adds odd-order harmonics to the amplifier's sonic signature (fig.10), but note that the 120Hz power-supply component is still 90dB down in this graph. Only when I measured the ProLogue One's high-frequency intermodulation at a power just below visible waveform clipping on the oscilloscope screen did the amplifier begin to run out of steam, with power-supply components joining the intermodulation spuriae (fig.11). Even so, the level of intermodulation is not catastrophically bad, as it can be with some single-ended designs.

Considering its $1k price, the nicely made PrimLuna ProLogue One offers relatively respectable measured performance. No, it will not rival a competent solid-state design on the test bench, but neither does it do anything to be ashamed of.
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Another plus was the timbral and spatial realism of Del McCoury’s backing guitar. On the minus side, the ProLogue One made that recording and others like it a bit dragy, rhythmically: It missed a lot of the bounce and momentum that other amps seem able to find.

**Conclusions**

In fewer words: This chunky little tube amp sounded like a chunky little tube amp, for better and for worse. That it’s so easy to buy and to use may steer you further from worse and closer to better.

Apart from its clever bias circuit, there’s nothing new inside the ProLogue One’s handsome chassis, technologically speaking. Economically, however—or geopolitically, or however else you want to look at it—there’s a much bigger story: An amp this good can’t be made to sell for this little in America, Europe, Japan, or even Mexico. So the PrimaLuna ProLogue One, while designed in the Netherlands, is manufactured in the People’s Republic of China. Its casework is fabricated and finished in China. Its components are wired together in China. And its original, Dutch-designed output tranaries are wound in China—apparently quite well. (The ProLogue One may not be at the very cutting edge of tube design, but it wouldn’t sound this good if its output tranaries were crap.)

1970s, when sequestering oneself with a record player was a way of turning one’s back on all other media, most notably television—I can’t help but feel that affordable or relatively affordable products are good for everyone: for dealers, for magazines, and even for people who make and sell music in the first place. Of course, I may whistle another tune if our economy tanks and I can’t even afford the Christmas-tree ornaments at Wal-Mart on December 26.

But for now, boy oh boy, can I ever recommend this amp! It’s not the liveliest-sounding thing, and if that’s more important to you than such things as texture and color, you’ll be better off considering something else. But if you’re new to the world of tubes and you want to see what it’s all about—and you’re on a limited budget, and rolling your own is out of the question—then it’s hard to see how you can go wrong with the PrimaLuna ProLogue One. Lustily, heartily, and enthusiastically (if conditionally) recommended.
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Lamm Industries M1.2 Reference

HYBRID MONOBLOCK AMPLIFIER

The "Reference" designation is thrown around a lot in the world of perfectionist audio. It's most often used to elevate the top of the line to a higher perceived status. Occasionally, as in the case of the VTL TL-7.5 line stage that we reviewed in October 2003, it genuinely denotes a component that is clearly superior to its competition in most aspects of performance.

While Lamm Industries has labeled preamplifiers and phono preamplifiers "Reference," it immediately struck me that the M1.2 is the first power amp to which Vladimir Lamm has applied the term. Despite the existence of the more expensive ML1.1 and ML2.1 tube amplifiers, this told me one thing: the M1.2 Reference is the best amplifier Lamm knows how to build. Lamm's press release describes it as "a pinnacle of its designer's professional career—a result of years of intensive research directed at attaining the most accurate reproduction of recorded music." Given that my past experience with Lamm amplifiers has taught me that they are consistently among the very best that can be had, this seemed to be a claim both audacious and plausible.

The main thing

The original ML1.1 was in production for more than 10 years with no changes, updates, or revisions. If that's not a record for a high-end amplifier, I don't know what is. Vladimir Lamm changes his products only when he feels he can offer a meaningful improvement in performance, not when it seems expedient to introduce a new model or variant. According to Lamm, the only reasons the ML1.1 has been updated are that better parts are now available, and that 10 years of collecting performance data justified a redesign.

Lamm's website states that the M1.2 features "totally redesigned high and low
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voltage power supplies for the front end" as well as replacement of "some critical parts...with higher quality ones which have appeared on the market recently." The output stage has been revised, and the quality of the main printed-circuit board has been substantially improved. The M1.2 is rated at 110W of pure class-A power into 8 or 4 ohms, up 10% from the M1.1. Lastly, a 230V tap has been installed on the power transformer.

What hasn't changed much about the M1.2 is its external appearance—it's still as straightforward, businesslike, and sensible1 as ever. As usual, all of the external hardware and switchgear is of impeccable quality. Unfortunately, it's not possible to update an M1.1 to M1.2 Reference status, as this "would require replacement of all key elements, with the exception of the left and right metal sides, heatsinks, and top and bottom covers."

The M1.2 is hefty at nearly 70 lbs, but it's not a pumped-up, immovable monster—it's built as heavily and stoutly as it needs to be. Nor is it styled or packaged to appeal to those who select components with their eyes rather than their ears. Look inside—everything is neatly organized and exquisitely built, bespeaking careful attention to every detail. The physical experience of a Lamm product is a manifestation of the Einsteinian dictum: Make everything as simple as possible, but no simpler.

The M1.2s proved themselves bulletproof in everyday use. Even pound-

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1 Why, oh why, do so few manufacturers of heavy, solid-state amplifiers not follow Lamm and Plinius in putting handles on the front and rear panels?

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**MEASUREMENTS**

Before I perform any tests on an amplifier, I run it at one-third power into 8 ohms for an hour. For an amplifier with a class-B output stage, which the vast majority are, this power level thermally stresses the amplifier to the maximum extent. At the end of that time, even with its heavy class-A bias both the vertical heatsinks and the chassis of the Lamm M1.2 were almost too hot to touch, implying a temperature of around 55°C. However, the measured distortion level had dropped slightly, from 0.065% when cold to 0.058% when fully warm.

The Lamm was noninverting when driven via its balanced XLR input, which appears to be wired with pin 2 hot, and via the red unbalanced RCA jack (with the other, white jack shorted to ground with the supplied plug). The input impedance was to specification at 41k ohms (unbalanced or each phase of the balanced input) across the audioband. The balanced voltage gain at 1kHz into 8 ohms was high, at 31.7dB in both the High Impedance (Hi-Z) and Low Impedance (Lo-Z) bias conditions. The unbalanced gain, with the other input shorted, was the same, instead of 6dB lower, as expected.

The output impedance was consistent across the audioband, at 0.26 ohm, regardless of impedance setting. As a result, the modification of the amplifier's frequency response by the loudspeaker's impedance will be relatively small. With our simulated speaker load (fig.1, top trace at 2kHz), the response variation remained between ±0.25dB limits. This plot also reveals the M1.2 as having a wide, small-signal bandwidth, the top-end response being down 3dB at a very high 164kHz. At the other end of the spectrum, the amplifier was flat down to below 20Hz.

This wide bandwidth is reflected by the sharp corners and short risetimes in the shape of a 10kHz squarewave (fig.2). Both of these graphs were taken with balanced drive and were identical for both impedance settings. I got a different result, however, when I repeated the tests with unbalanced drive signal. Fig.3 shows the M1.2's small-signal frequency response into 8 ohms with an unbalanced input (shorting the unused signal phase to ground with the supplied shorting plug). It is the same.

Perhaps due to the higher-than-normal gain, the Lamm's signal/noise ratios were good rather than great, at 72.2dB ref. 1W into 8 ohms (unweighted, wideband). Switching in an A-weighting filter increased this figure to 79dB. Fig.4 shows how the THD+noise percentage present in the M1.2's output varies with output power with the

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ing the stuffing out of them driving the
Inersound Kayas' electrostatic panels
(a wildly difficult load—see John Atkin-
on's measurements in the December
2004 issue) at very loud volumes with
techno-pop and electronica caused
them no difficulties.2

Flesh and blood
It would be an exercise in futility to try
to describe the sound of the Lamm
M1.2 Reference by running through a
checklist of sonic characteristics—its
effect on me couldn't be categorized or
quantified that way. I shall do my best
to explain what the pair of them did in
my listening room.

The M1.2's defining character trait
was unflinching honesty in conveying
the true nature of the music that passed
through it. It did not strip away veils so
much as it seemed to eliminate most of
the intermediate steps that lay between
the original performance and its repro-
duction. Try as I might, I could not
hear the M1.2 adding anything. And
while I can't be certain that it subtrac-
ted anything, it let as much—if not
more—through to the speakers as I
have heard from any other amplifier.

Dynamics and transient responsive-
ness were ideal and seamless. Many a
well-engineered amplifier can show
with a clear sense of contrast the differ-
ences between piano and mezzo-piano,
between forte and mezzo-forte. But if
dynamics could be measured on a
1-100 scale, the Lamm was just as
good at making clear the difference

2 Occasionally, a couple of hours of similar music
through the McIntosh MC501s and the Kayas caused
the Macs to go into thermal shutdown.

Hi-Z bias setting into loads varying from 2 to 16 ohms. The
amplifier comfortably exceeds its rated output power, giving
out 180W into 8 ohms (22.6dBW), 305W into 4 ohms
(21.8dBW), and 490W into 2 ohms (20.9dBW), all at 1%
THD. For comparison, the measured THD+N percentage at an output
power where figs.4 and 5 suggest the distortion spuriae
are starting to rise out of the noise floor. Fig.6 shows that
with the Hi-Z setting, the amplifier's good linearity is not sig-
nificantly affected by either frequency or output current with
loads of 4 ohms or above. In the Lo-Z conditions, the
THD+N trace into 2 ohms is as low as those into higher
impedances (not shown).

Of more important subjective importance, the distortion
at low levels or into higher impedances
is low-order, mainly second-harmonic
(fig.7). Dropping the load impedance
or increasing the power introduces
some third-harmonic content (fig.8),
but the THD+N is commendably free from
higher-order harmonics. This is graphi-
cally shown in fig.9, the spectrum of a
low-frequency tone taken at a very
high level into 8 ohms (Hi-Z biasing).
The third harmonic is a little higher
than the second, but both are below
—60dB (0.1%), while the fourth and
fifth harmonics are at or below —80dB
(0.01%). You can also see the 120Hz power-supply compo-
nent in this graph, though it lies at —100dB, which won't
worry listeners. Intermodulation distortion was also relative-
ly low, even close to clipping into 4 ohms with the Hi-Z bias
setting (fig.10).

As I have found with other amplifiers designed by
Vladimir Lamm, the M1.2 offers fundamentally good mea-
ured performance. I was a little concerned by the differ-
ence between the amplifier's behaviors when driven unbal-
anced and balanced, but this may have been due to a
grounding anomaly in my test setup. —John Atkinson
between 35 and 36 or 81
and 82 as it was at contrast-
ing 40 and 60. The wallap-
factor was plainly demon-
strated with "Kung Fu
World Champion," from
the dazzling young pianist
Hiromi's Brain (SACD,
Telarc SACD-63600). The
deep, commanding synth
bass and drum thunderbolts
had whiplash-inducing
force and clarity, an imme-
diacy and liveness that fully
engaged not only the ears
but the mind and heart. A
few tracks later, on "Green
Tea Farm," Hiromi paints a
lovely, Bill Evans-like pic-
ture of the part of Japan
where she grew up. Every-
thing about it is delicacy and nuance,
but even as the Lamm corre-
lated every intricacy, it perfectly articu-
ated Hiromi’s remarkable pianistic
technique.

In terms of timbre, the Lamm was
something of a walking contradic-
tion—or, perhaps, more of a perfect Hegelian
synthesis of seemingly contradictory
characteristics. It was bogglingly trans-
parent and had state-of-the-art resolv-
ing capabilities, but that was only half
the story. That resolution and trans-
parency were combined with a har-
monic completeness, timbral richness,
and glow reminiscent of Conrad-John-
son electronics from the mid-
to late 1980s, only without the slowness and
caramel coloration.

Anyone who has ever heard Mar-
shall guitar amplifiers up close knows
that they have a sound that cannot be
duplicated or faked. A guitarist friend
of mine was shopping for an amp not
long ago. I tagged along as he played
through a number of amps, including
hybrid and tubed Marshalls, and we
both swiftly came to one conclusion.
A tubed Marshall has the ability to
pop the overtones of a plucked string into
space with singular definition and pres-
ence, especially when overdriven and
distorted. It is a highly complex event
that occurs as one highly complex event.
Rock recordings from the 1960s
and '70s necessarily blunt this effect, as
do most audio amplifiers.

The Lamm M1.2 offered a different
view. Mountain’s Leslie West was a
master of what was called, back in the
day, the “woman tone”—a wailing, soul-
ful, yearning sound that came only
from a Gibson guitar played through an
overdriven Marshall tube amplifier. It
was not harsh or aggressive but plain-
tive and rounded, and generated a sur-
feet of compound overtones as the gui-
tar amp was overloaded. Even on the
abysmally recorded “Flowers of Evil,”
from the album of the same name (LP,
Windfall 5501), West’s guitar had
something very near the completeness I
heard in the music store when my
friend was auditioning amplifiers with
his Gibson. What struck me was the
way West’s chording was captured;
through the M12, it was no longer the
muddy mass of distortion I have been
hearing for so long. Now it was a richly
textured carpet of interrelated harmoni-
ics. Vocals were a special delight. Vikki
Clayton, Frank Sinatra, Sandy Denny,
the Sugar girls—all sounded more pre-
sent, more real, so easily believable
with the Lamm driving any of the
speakers I had on hand. Their midrange
was not lifelike—it was alive.

The Lamm were uncannily accu-
rate at expressing the way each instru-
ment or voice projected into space.
A voice, an acoustic guitar, a horn—all
have extremely different and distinc-
tive patterns of projecting sound. The
M1.2s’ ability to particularize each
rule of the day was speed and pitch defi-
nition devoid of artificial bloom.

One sonic characteristic set the
M1.2 apart from other Lamm amps I
have auditioned. The earlier genera-
tion of amps had a slight, residual dark-
ness in the top octave. For whatever
reason, that has been mitigated to a
great degree in the ML1.1 (see my
“Follow-Up” on the ML1.1 in the Jan-
uary 2004 issue), and seemingly ban-
teared entirely from the M12. There
was a bit more sparkle and extension
in the M12 than in the other Lamm
amps I’ve heard, adding the final touch
of realism to what was already exem-
plary performance.

Soundstaging performance was simple
to describe: What was called for by the
recording appeared in the room. Given an
enormous artificial environment, such as
that on Siouxsie and the Banshees’ Wheels
On Fire (UK 12” single, Wonderland
SHEK 11), the Lamm responded by
flinging a gargantuan space into my
room, within which every instrument

The Lamm ML2 offered a different
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room, within which every instrument

3 On Fairport Convention's The Cropredy Box (UK
CD, Castle Music CMETD815).
The JM Lab Utopia Be Series has established itself as the finest group of loudspeakers available today. At the heart of their astonishing performance lies two patented designs: The "W" technology midrange and woofer cone structure and the TCE Be pure Beryllium inverted dome tweeter. A wonder of mechanics and acoustics, this transducer, the world’s first pure beryllium tweeter, covers five octaves from 1,000 to 40000 Hz and enables the entire range of Utopia Be’s to reproduce music with a speed and coherence that would be impossible without it.

In August 2004, for its Twenty Fifth Anniversary, quietly and without much fanfare, Focal- JM Lab introduced the very special limited edition series (1000 pairs worldwide) of "Electra Be" speakers which incorporate the same pure beryllium dome and "W" technology in three models: the Electra 907 Be monitor ($3295 pr), and the Electra 927 Be ($5995 pr) and Electra 937 Be ($8995 pr) floor standing loudspeakers.

Very close in performance and significantly cheaper than the comparable Utopia Be models, the Electra Be’s have sold so quickly, and have always been so back ordered that, until now, we have been afraid to advertise them. Finally, there are a few pairs of each model Electra Be in stock. We thought you might want to know that, because we don’t expect them to last much past the end of February 2005. So, act now before the last Electra Be is gone and you miss a the opportunity to own a champagne quality speaker at beer budget price!
and voice was precisely placed. I could have sat and drawn maps of the shapes and layouts of the orchestras revealed by the Skrowaczewski/Minnesota Orchestra recording of Ravel's La Valse (SACD, Mobile Fidelity UD SACD 4002) and the Reiner/Chicago of Strauss's Also sprach Zarathustra (CD, RCA Living Stereo 61494-2), which perfectly reflected the very different shapes of the halls' stages.

What the M12 did that made it so endlessly fascinating was the way it presented the entirety of the musical picture as one unified, continuous, utterly coherent experience. Not sometimes and in some ways, but at all times in all ways, music was soulful, holistic, and organic through the Lamm. It was the rightest amp I have yet heard. Rather than acting as a mere "just the facts" reporter, the M12 probed much more deeply, to become a superlative teller of music's stories. Nor was it snobbish in the least. Its rightness and storytelling abilities were there just as much on such irresistibly charming piffle as Sugar's "Heart and Soul" (Japanese CD single, Toys Factory T FCC-89110) as on far more profound music, such as Ravel's Daphnis et Chloé (LP, Munch/Boston Symphony, RCA/Classic LSC-1893).

In fact, the Lamm's superb resolution allowed the complicated, overcompressed mix of "Heart and Soul" to show far more of its inner workings, and revealed that the girls can sing some very stylish harmonies.

The Lamm did not knock me off my feet when I first heard it because it wasn't designed to do so. Like a Mercedes-Benz, it is made to impress over and for the long run with sustained and systemic excellence. In a strange way, this is an amp that will select only those who respond to it on the deepest levels of understanding.

More than this
I sometimes wonder if it is a coincidence that a large percentage of the components I find most compelling are the results not of market research or strategic planning, but are instead the product of one bold thinker's imagination and creativity. The Lamm M1.2 Reference is a prime example.

Getting only chump change back from $20,000 for a pair of 100W amplifiers does not sound like much of a bargain, and in real-world economic terms, it isn't. The point of buying components such as the M1.2 is not maximizing economic efficiency but getting a piece of an artisan's vision.

The M12 is the latest embodiment of Vladimir Lamm's concept of what an amplifier should be and do. A "bargain?" No. The M12 is something more and better than that; for anyone who knows and loves the sound of live music, it is something beyond such parasimonious concepts—when doing what it was created to do, it is worth every last penny of its price.

Anyone who can recognize a piano knows that a Kawai or Baldwin grand has the same structural elements as a Steinway or a Bösendorfer. Anyone who knows and loves pianos will, if humanly possible, opt for the handmade instruments, even given their towering prices. Those instruments embody not just the basics of what makes a grand piano, they incarnate a unique musical and artistic vision—the bases of which are intangibles that cannot be quantified but are well worth paying for, or at least aspiring to.

Avalon
Utterly continuous and coherent in all respects from top to bottom, the Lamm M1.2 References always spoke with one voice, whatever the variables I confronted them with in terms of music, speakers, source components, or cables. There was nothing else quite like them— anyone who hears and falls for them will find no ready substitute. It may be the most universally recommendable of my three favorite amplifiers. Both the Halcro dms8 and the Atma-Sphere MA-2 Mk.III require some thought in system matching.4 The Lamm's simplicity did what they do regardless of their surroundings; if they speak to you as deeply and as truthfully as they spoke to me, your search is at an end.

Words are an audio reviewer's stock in trade, but each Lamm amplifier that I have reviewed has challenged my ability to describe its essence. At last, I admit defeat. Trying to explain the ultimate experience of listening to the M12 Reference and why it is so special is like trying to explain why you've fallen in love with someone; matters of the heart cannot be reduced to words on paper. There was a sense of lleness and theness with the Lamm—a feeling of complete connectedness with the music that can be conveyed only unsatisfactorily and by analogy. Hearing music through nearly any other amp after hearing the M12s was the difference between seeing a very good lithograph of a masterpiece after seeing the original, from two feet away, in a museum.

From their massive shipping crates to the standard-setting owner's manual, from their clean, uncluttered styling to their incredibly compelling, truthful, nuanced sound, the M12s speak to the value of getting all of the little things right. When every detail has been taken care of, greatness follows naturally. You can find different, but you cannot find better. For once, "Reference" is not only the most accurate, but the only appropriate descriptor. Quite something other than else.

---

4 The Halcro, for all its excellence, would not be my first choice to pair with bass-sounding speakers, the output-transformerless Atma-Sphere would not be an appropriate match with a speaker with extended impedance dips below 3 ohms in the bass.
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Mårten Design
Coltrane

Michael Fremer

Three-way, reflex-loaded floorstanding loudspeaker. Drive-units: ¾” inverted diamond-dome tweeter, 3.5” ceramic-cone midrange unit, two 9” ceramic-cone woofers. Crossover frequencies: 300Hz, 4kHz. Frequency response: 20Hz-100kHz, ±2dB. Sensitivity: 89dB/W/m. Nominal impedance: 4 ohms. Supplied accessories: polished-steel stands with Black Diamond Racing cones and pucks. Dimensions: 44.5” (1130mm) H by 12.3” (313mm) W by 24” (610mm) D. Weight: 104 lbs (47kg). Finish: High-gloss black with wood front panel in maple, cherry, oak, or walnut. Serial numbers of units reviewed: 5403261H, 540326V. Price: $50,000/pair. Approximate number of dealers: 5.

Description


"So what kind of music do you listen to?" I heard myself asking Leif Mårten Olofsson, designer of the Coltrane, Coltrane Alto, Duke, Miles II, Mingus III, and Monk loudspeakers, before I could take it back. The small company, headquartered in Göteborg, Sweden, was making Volvos, but it had been building and marketing loudspeakers for the past six years, though Olofsson confessed he's been building them for 30 years, ever since he was 12.

The Coltrane is the company's "statement" product, and at $50,000/pair, you expect more than a short riff improvised on a familiar theme. Olofsson went for top-of-the-line German Accuton drivers (known as Thiel and Partners elsewhere in the world, but not in the US because of Thiel Audio), including a custom version of Accuton's ultra-expensive, ¾", diamond-diaphragm inverted-dome tweeter, similar to the one used in Avalon's Eidolon Diamond loudspeaker.

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Eidolon. Making the synthetic-diamond tweeter's resonant frequency to well fits, not least of which is the raising of the channel heat yield many measured benefits demonstrating that, while the resonant frequency of B&W’s previous best metal-dome tweeter was also out of the audible bandwidth, the rise to the inevitable peak began within it. With diamond offering a much higher-frequency dome resonance than metal, the new tweeter’s response appeared to be remarkably flat to well beyond 20kHz; I trust Accuton’s will show similarly good behavior. For around $10,000 at retail, it had better! The Coltrane’s midrange driver is a 4” concave ceramic cone made by Accuton to Mårten’s specifications. Generating the bottom octaves are two off-the-shelf 9” ceramic cones, also by Accuton.

Adding to the Coltrane’s expense is its enclosure, made of carbon fiber and honeycomb Kevlar laminate by a Swedish company that supplies composite structures to the aeronautical and marine industries, and whose owner is an audiophile. A one-piece mold containing two carbon-fiber shells sandwiching a 1”-thick insert of honeycomb Kevlar is baked at 300° in a vacuum oven to produce a curvaceous, lightweight, ultrarigid enclosure weighing about 22 lbs—Mårten goes for stiff and light as opposed to dense and damped. Internal bracing...
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and a downward-firing 4" port are also incorporated into the molding process. The speaker's integrated structure allows the midrange driver—made of viscoelastic, constrained-layer-damped, 2"-thick hardwood and MDF—to be bolted securely to the enclosure in three places. The midrange driver is housed in a subenclosure attached to the front baffle but isolated from the composite structure, which is heavily damped with an asphalt-like material.

Given the enclosure's relatively low mass, I asked Leif Màrten Olofsson about its resonant frequency, which I suspected was in the midband. He confirmed that it was around 1kHz, but added that this was easily damped out by the Coltrane's extremely narrow Q factor. I'm as curious as you are to see what John Atkinson's accelerometer measurements show.

Crossover points at 300Hz and 4kHz ensure that fundamental frequencies generated by musical instruments and voices fall comfortably within the midrange driver's passband and away from the driver transition points. The crossover itself features point-to-point wiring, its components secured using a vibration-reducing viscoelastic adhesive. The crossover is inside the speaker, behind the port and close to the two sets of WBT binding posts, to which it is connected using internal cables by Jorma Design, also of Sweden. Márten recommends biwiring the Coltranes with Jorma cables.

A pair of heavy, polished steel crossbraces fitted with Black Diamond Racing pucks provide sufficient clearance for the port's optimal performance.

In short, there's nothing mysterious

resonances, as revealed by fig.2, a waterfall plot calculated from the output of an accelerometer fastened to the curved sidewall 12" from the base. As Celestion showed 20 years ago, this kind of construction is very effective at eliminating cabinet resonances in the critical midrange. What resonances are present tend to be much higher in frequency than usual, and because the low mass of the panels doesn't store much energy, they decay very quickly.

From right to left, fig.3 shows the individual outputs of the midrange/tweeter section on the tweeter axis, the two woofers (which behave identically), and the port. The latter is the broad peak centered on the 15-30Hz octave, but the absolute level is a little low to deliver the full extension promised by the port tuning frequency. A couple of lower-midrange resonant peaks are evident, but these are relatively low in level; their audibility will be ameliorated by the fact that the port faces the floor.

The woofers broadly peak between 30 and 300Hz (though the height of this peak will be exaggerated somewhat by the nearfield measurement technique), and cross over to the midrange unit higher than the specified 300Hz. The roll-off rate of the woofers is free from breakup modes. The high-pass slope of the midrange unit's roll-off is initially quite slow, but steepens to what appears to be a third-order slope below 250Hz. There is a lack of energy in the octave between 3 and 6kHz, and while the tweeter output is shelved down a little above 16kHz, its response extends smoothly above the 30kHz limit of this graph.

Fig.4 shows the Coltrane's overall response on the tweeter axis, spliced to the complex sum of the nearfield midrange, woofer, and port responses, taking into account acoustic phase and the distance of each sound source from the nominal farfield point. Note the excellent bass extension evident in this graph. The overall balance is flat, though it can be seen from this graph that the upper midrange is a little suppressed, the presence region a little boosted, and the mid-treble a little recessed. Which of these characteristics becomes dominant subjectively—i.e., whether the speaker will sound forward and detailed or laid-back and perhaps a bit recessed—will depend to a large extent on the music being played. However, I note that even after Mikey had optimized the Coltranes' setup, he still found the speaker "a bit bright and spotlit on top, slightly lean on bottom."

A loudspeaker's balance depends not only on its on-axis response, but also, to a large extent, on the room's reverberant field, which in turn will depend on the speaker's dispersion. The Coltrane's horizontal radiation pattern, normalized to the tweeter-axis response, is shown in fig.5. The tweeter has limited dispersion above 1kHz, which is why the averaged response shown in fig.4 is more rolled-off in the top audio octave than that in fig.3. There is also an off-axis flare at the bottom of the tweeter passband that will compensate for the lack of on-axis energy in the same region. Both these fac-
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going on here: just ultra-high-quality drivers and careful attention paid to enclosure construction, with an emphasis on rigidity and vibration control, plus computer-aided crossover design and execution. Like any other modern speaker designer who relies on computer programs such as DRA Labs' MLSSA, Olofsson's ears remain the final arbiters. The designer claims that the Coltrane’s frequency response is 20Hz–100kHz, -3dB, with the port tuned to 23Hz, though the specs on the Martin Design website claim ±2dB with the port tuned to 19Hz.

**Coltrane Time**

Despite its price and its promise of ultra-high performance, the Coltrane is surprisingly compact—not much bigger than my reference Wilson Audio Watt/Puppy 7s—and lacks sex appeal when compared with, say, the stunning-looking Sonus Faber Stradivari Homage. But then, most speakers lose out in that comparison. With its grooved wooden front baffle (available in maple, cherry, oak, or walnut), the Coltrane has an appealingly Scandinavian look. Still, after first reminding me of a sauna door, the baffle's shape then brought a surfboard to mind. Many observers see a resemblance to the Kharma speaker line. Between the carbon-colored enclosure, the grooved baffle, the black-and-white ceramic drivers, and the aluminum cross braces, the Coltrane sends a mixed visual message that some visitors to my listening room found attractive and others didn't.

The Coltranes fit comfortably in my room, where I first placed them on the masking-tape outlines of the Watt/Puppy 7s' positions—not far from the masking-tape outlines used for the just-departed Sonus Faber Stradivari and Krell Resolution Is (reviewed in, respectively, the January 2005 and November 2004 issues of Stereophile). Initially, I toed-in the rightens so that their tweeter axes crossed just behind my listening position. A multiposition switch next to the speaker terminals allows ±2dB of adjustability, in 0.5dB increments, in or near the usual "room

**Measurements, continued**

...tors will contribute to the sensitivity to toe-in that Mikey mentioned in his auditioning notes. But note how even the contour lines appear below 10kHz in this graph, which correlates with stable stereo imaging. In the vertical plane (fig.6), the speaker's output doesn't change much as long as you sit on or below the tweeter axis. However, sit with your ears level with or higher than the top of the cabinet and the top octaves shelf up a little, and a suckout eventually develops at the upper crossover frequency.

The Coltrane’s step response on the tweeter axis (fig.7) is marred at the 7.8ms mark by the floor reflection mentioned earlier. But looking at fig.7 more closely, the first, positive-going spike is the tweeter, followed by the negative-going midrange unit, the output of which lies very slightly behind the tweeter's negative-going overshoot. The slow, positive-going output at the 4.5ms mark comprises the overshoot of the midrange unit's output, which overlays the slower positive-going rise of the woofers. Not apparent in this graph are some small reflections of the tweeter's output, perhaps from the baffle edges, which give rise to some slight mid-treble hash in the speaker's cumulative spectral-decay plot (fig.8).

Overall, the Martin Design Coltrane offers pretty good measured performance. However, that low impedance in the bass region mandates use with an amplifier both capable of sourcing serious current and keeping those woofers under control. We almost never comment on packaging, but I must compliment Martin Design on that for the Coltrane, which made handling it easier than I had anticipated for such a large, bulky speaker.

—John Atkinson
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MÄRTEN DESIGN COLTRANE

bump" (or dip) region of 40–80Hz.

So positioned, the Coltranes were a sonic slap in the face compared to the easy-fit, Dockers-like performance of the Stradivari or the Krell Resolution 1. If those speakers were about delivering big, velvety pictures or—to make an automotive analogy—soft, luxurious, shock-absorbing rides, the Coltranes were more forward and about detail, powers of ultra-resolution, and the exhilarating, tightly sprung, road-hugging, steering-wheel-communicating handling of a European sports car.

The Coltranes drew a tighter, more compact picture than either the Sonus Fabers or the Krells, but one with astonishingly sharp focus and weighty image solidity. While those two speakers sounded slightly warm and tended to cushion images in velvet, the Coltrane tended to carve away adjacent space, leaving images free to float in dramatic three-dimensional relief. The Coltrane’s musical grip was firm and well-controlled from the midband up, and while it didn’t sound etchy or bright, the presentation was revealing of every flaw that preceded it in the recording and reproducing chains. If there was tape hiss, the Coltrane let me know about it. That was fine with me, but the lack of midbass weight wasn’t. It produced somewhat skeletal pictures of heads without bodies, orchestras sans venues.

Giant Steps

As originally set up, the Coltrane presented a lightweight picture exacerbated by the tweeter’s near-infinite high-frequency extension. Getting the speaker to sound good was relatively easy, but getting it to sing for its $50,000 supper was another matter. That’s not meant as criticism—any ultra-hi-rez, high-performance speaker will demand an equal amount of attention paid to precise placement and careful choice of associated gear.

Getting the Coltranes in proper tonal and spatial balance required a combination of tiny changes in the speakers’ distances from the front and side walls, as well as tweaking their 40–80Hz switch positions. Toe-in was also critical in balancing the tweeters’ contribution to the overall picture. While getting the bass locked in lessened the diamond tweeter’s overbearing personality, I had to toe the speakers out more than usual (the tweeter axes now crossed farther behind my listening position) to both open the soundstage dimensions and create a smooth, sweet, but still wide-open high-frequency presentation.

One final change was necessary to lock in the Coltrane’s sound: using Marten’s cable of choice, the Jorma Design #1. I’ve used Harmonic Technology’s combination of Magic Woofer and Tweeter cables for all of my recent speaker reviews, and have found their performance to be basically “out of the way”; the Harmonic Techs properly expressed the relative warmth and opulence of both the Krell Resolution 1 and the Sonus Faber Stradivari.

Yet when I’d optimized the Coltranes to the best of my abilities, I still found the sound a bit bright and spotlit on top, slightly lean on bottom. The issue wasn’t one of “personality”—every speaker’s got one—but of balance. A speaker shouldn’t impose an imprint on every piece of music it reproduces, or at least it shouldn’t be noticeable over time.
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Because both Olofsson and his US distributor, Sound Advice, pushed the Jorma Design cables on me and I'd refused the offer—wanna see a room's worth of cables?—I felt I owed it to them to at least try their recommendation, which anyway is what the speakers are wired with internally. The biwired pair of WBT spade lugs protruding from the Jorma Design #1’s cylindrical termination housing are marked Highs and Lows; I don't know if some kind of filtering is taking place, but with the Jormas in place, the Coltranes, which had already sounded impressive if somewhat brittle on top and lacking body below, cohered as they hadn't before. The top end, still ultra-extended and detailed, was now transparent and silky-smooth, the midbass more pronounced and fleshed-out, the bass fuller and more tactile. Given the Harmonic Tech cables' outstanding performance in all of the aforementioned parameters, its lack of synergy with the Coltranes remains a puzzle.

Impressions

There's a brassy-sounding big-band album by Ella Fitzgerald, arranged and conducted by Bill Doggett, called Rhythm Is My Business (LP, Verve V6-4056)—a great title, and a perfect description of one of the Märtens Coltrane's strongest suits. Get it optimized and you have a speaker that's fast, tight, and bristles with transient energy and detail, yet one that takes enough time to let the harmonic overtones develop. Rhythm and pace are the Coltrane's businesses—hardly surprising, given the designer's swinging musical tastes.

The Fitzgerald album can sound congested, hollow, and watery if a system can't sort out from the actual sources the boxy reverb that bathes her voice and the brass. The Coltranes separated the threads brilliantly, delivering as focused and three-dimensional an Ella as I've heard from this record. She appeared with great solidity and three-dimensionality between the speakers, the biting brass well behind, while the reverb applied to both her voice and the brass section was presented clearly as a separate element that didn't interfere with the main vocal and instrumental events. That takes great powers of resolution and stop/start speed.

UMG recently issued a new set of hybrid SACDs. Some, such as Herbie Hancock's gorgeous-sounding Gershwin's World (Verve 80001379-36), have been remixed for surround sound, but the one I grabbed first was John Coltrane & Johnny Hartman (Impulse! 80001126-16), remastered by Rudy Van Gelder in mono and stereo on the SACD and CD layers. I'm very familiar with it, having many stereo vinyl pressings and the original Impulse! CD.

Van Gelder ran both full-track and two-track recorders for the original recording session, but the mono tape had gone missing until recently; as his new liner note points out, in the new age of stereo madness, those original mono mixes were often thrown out. There was plenty of tape hiss on the mono mix, and it sounded convincingly smooth—as analog tape hiss should—but below it was a perfectly rich, smooth, coherent, focused mix of Hartman's velvety voice, Coltrane's tenor sax, and the rest of the quartet, which includes McCoy Tyner on piano. Especially notable were both the extension and nimble control of Jimmy Garrison's bass and the effortless and appropriate sparkle of Elvin Jones' brushwork.

In mono, the presentation pulsed and floated transparently and effortlessly
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World Radio History
between the speakers. As Hartman moved up and down through his vocal range, the Coltranes delivered his voice consistently sized, coherent, and utterly believable (though the original recording quality is anything but ideal), while revealing the touch of reverb that subtly tracks his voice. If you want to know why there’s a mono revival underway in the analog world, and why mono jazz albums from the 1950s fetch bigger bucks than their stereo counterparts, check out this disc. But buy it for the music: Hartman was a mesmerizing, honey-throated, refreshingly restrained vocalist; the backing band wasn’t half bad either.

The Coltrane’s rhythmic agility and transient snap had me pulling test discs out night after night. One impressive performance led to another, as it does with any great piece of audio gear. The 45rpm edition of Dave Brubeck’s *Time Out* (Columbia/Classic) demonstrated the speaker’s musical grip, its smooth, detailed high-frequency extension, and its spectacular yet effortless resolution of musical detail without added etch, grain, glare, or brightness. “Snap” did not come at the expense of body. While the speaker emphasized attack, it did not shortchange body, so cymbal strokes had nice stick pop, plus crackle, shimmer, sizzle, and chime. You’ll like the way well-recorded cymbals sound through the Coltrane.

The Coltrane was not afraid of placing 3D instruments both forward of the baffle plane and, when appropriate, way behind. Joe Morello’s cymbals on the Brubeck disc rang convincingly, yet never sounded hashy or splatty. This tweeter managed to be ultrafast, detailed, and extended, and at the same time supple and smooth. If a recording was brash or bright, the Coltrane let me know but didn’t confuse extension and resolution with brittleness or edginess. Next to the tweeter in mbh’s 101E Radi-alstrahler (reviewed in the October 2004 issue), Accuton’s diamond dome could be the smoothest, fastest, most resolving, most extended tweeter you’re likely to hear—yet it was never in my face, and never sizzled or beamed.

If the Sonus Faber Stradivari Homage is on the rich, velvety, voluptuous side, the Coltrane was on the leaner, faster, more detailed side, with pinpoint three-dimensional imaging, holographic focus, and sensational though compact soundstaging. For instance, the Mårtens’s presentation of “Sweet Black Angel,” from the German Electrola pressing of the Rolling Stones’ *Exile on Main Street*, was nothing short of amazing—the acoustic guitars had tremendous visceral presence, texture, and elasticity, while the woodblock “popped” with utmost round clarity well back in the soundstage. The marimba in that track can easily get buried, but through the Coltranes it was both clarified and appropriately woody-sounding and three-dimensional. The Mårtens managed to be ultrafast and full-bodied at the same time, though they were more about content than context.

The only area where the Coltranes were somewhat disappointing was in the lower octaves—but not so much in terms of extension as of control and, ultimately, believability. Bass was never sloppy or bloated. If that were the case, the speaker’s tightly focused midband and highs would have meant that its overall presentation would have fallen apart.

Rather, I occasionally heard generic “bass” instead of a clearly defined musical instrument—as if the speaker were.
slightly underdamped, or the thin, rigid enclosure’s resonant frequency hadn’t been sufficiently tamed. But if forking over $50,000 is on your musical horizon, take that observation with caution; this could have been a function of how the Coltranes coupled to my room.

**My Favorite Things**

What I liked best about the Coltrane was its effortlessness at all volumes, but most notably when I played the pair of them quietly. Then, they managed to delineate small-scale level changes with remarkable dynamic breadth. Cranked up really loud, they maintained their composure and transparency, the tweeters never registering any hard, edgy, or glassy objections, the woofers showing no signs of dynamic compres-
sion. What they did with Classic Records’ edition of Muddy Waters’ *Folk Singer* (Chess/Classic) was staggering—they delivered Waters’ voice with believable body and perfectly drawn sibilants, and the acoustic guitar with rich body and attack—yet floating above was that old tape’s hiss. I’ve heard other highly regarded speakers deliver the music spiked with brightness, yet *missing* the hiss!

Equally impressive were the Coltranes’ macrodynamic scaling, holographic imaging, and vivid three-dimensionality. Play something like the three-LP box of Neil Young and Crazy Horse’s *all-analog Greendale* (Vapor/Classic) and you’ll hear a drum sound as close to live as you’re likely to hear from a pair of speakers. Nor are you likely to get a more vivid sensation of hearing Neil Young singing *in your* listening room than you can through the Coltranes, which are more about bringing the event to you than about bringing you to the event.

**Conclusions**

Like Karl Rove, the Märten Design Coltrane is about attack, attack, and more attack. Its ability to reproduce the piano’s transient attack was among its most notable achievements, and it did so without producing a glassy or tinkly sonic aftertaste or shortchanging the instrument’s rich harmonic structure. Its other strong suits are clarity, focus, transient snap, resolution of low-level detail, image three-dimensionality, and, especially, transparency.

Those who don’t respond to the Coltrane’s sound might find it a bit drab or lacking in richness, romance, and bloom. Maybe so, but it does give you the straight poop. It doesn’t produce the most expansive soundstage $50k can buy, and some other speakers might offer greater dynamic slam and sheer sonic shock value, but the Coltrane’s compact size makes it a great fit in a room of modest size.

Then there’s the issue of bass. The Coltrane’s bottom-end extension is formidable, but in my space at least, it was a bit loose; sometimes, there was a one-note rolling roundness that announced “bass” rather than the specific instrument producing it. That could be the way the speaker couples with my room, but it’s something worth listening for, lest the impressive weight divert your attention until it’s too late.

That caution aside, and taking into account the critical care with which you must choose associated components, including cables—and, of course, the speaker’s high price—the Märten Design Coltrane is the real McCoy. I have a Jones for it. If it didn’t cost so much that I’d need a Garrison to guard me if I paid with cash, I’d consider buying a pair. Or a quartet, for that matter.
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How To Dismantle An Atomic Bomb

Unmistakably reminiscent of The Unforgettable Fire in its size and snap, the new album has been kick-started thanks to an exclusivity deal with Apple’s iTunes for the first single, “Vertigo”—a smart marketing move to some, proof of a sellout to others. Atomic Bomb will find favor with fans of U2 being U2—the band that made War, The Unforgettable Fire, and The Joshua Tree, pop albums every one. If you’re a fan of the more experimental records, then this one may sound tired and rehearsed. For me, the driving, punk-edged “Vertigo,” which will undoubtedly become a monster rocker when the band tours arenas later this year, is a killer opener; The Edge and Bono channeling just enough “Teen Spirit.”

Bono, whose vocal dramatics are sometimes so similar to the late Freddy Mercury’s that it’s scary, is back to being the band’s soulful, politically committed face and full-on rock star. In the ballad “One Step Closer” or the album’s other rock tune, “All Because of You” (which opens with a gorgeous skronk of feedback), he proves again that he’s one of rock’s finest vocalists. Bravo and grandiloquence, the twin demons of arena rock, are again his weapons, and he’s in no mood not to use them. He sings about war in “Love and Peace or Else” (he’s against it), about omnipotence in “Yahweh,” (he’s a believer, sorta) and wails about love in perhaps the album’s laziest effort and most egregious lyrics, “A Man and a Woman” (“How can I hurt when I’m holding you”). While Bono may be the band’s most visible member, the musical cohesion evident here suggests that all four have decided that being cool is less enthralling than being real in the way they know best.

If Bono is back to being U2’s face and throat, The Edge is back to being the band’s driving force. In “Sometimes You Can’t Make It On Your Own,” which Bono sang at his father’s funeral in 2001 (“Where are we now? I’ve got to let you know / A house still doesn’t make a home / Don’t leave me here alone”), the guitarist’s layered, wall-to-wall riffs and stylized plucking have never been more rhythmic or panoramic.

It remains to be seen whether U2’s current fire is ungettable or, better yet, the beginning of a new golden era for the band. Whatever the future, it’s rare to see such a long-lived band return from uncertainty, pull together, return to the inspiration they once had as a club band, and find in it not only more to say, but the passion with which to say it.

—Robert Baird
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Innersound Kaya
Editor:
In your review of Innersound's Kaya speaker in the December issue, I was identified as the designer of the Kaya speakers. While it is true that I was Innersound's designer and did the engineering for the Kaya, I no longer work at Innersound. I have not been involved with Innersound's products or day-to-day operations since July 2004.
Roger Sanders
Sanderssoundsystems@wispertel.net

PrimaLuna ProLogue One
Editor:
Thanks to Art Dudley, John Atkinson, and Stereophile as a whole for a great writeup on the PrimaLuna Prologue One. I know Art is a tube-head, so I was thrilled that someone with so much experience got to review it.
A couple more features need mentioning. The PrimaLuna has a SoftStart turn-on, which extends the lives of tubes and other components by bringing them online gently. In addition, the amp is protected by a fuse in case of a tube failure (many amps are not, and use a resistor, which requires soldering). I demanded these features during the design phase to make sure that customers can plug in and groove with confidence. ProLogue integrateds are sold all over the world, and there may not be repair shops in Inyokern or Wagga Wagga. The best way to give service is to avoid needing it!

If someone needs more juice, the ProLogue Two upgrade model boasts KT88 power tubes, Solen capacitors, and fast-recovery diodes for another $250. But I will say I have run the ProLogue One here using the $40,000/pair Sonus Faber Stradivaris with great results.
Art is correct that affordable products are good for everyone. It allows the unfamiliar to dip their toe in the tube pool and see what all the hubbub is about: well-engineered, dependable, premium-build gear with no hassles at a low price. It spreads the joy that has kept me as excited about this hobby now as I was back in the '70s.
Kevin Deal
Upscale Audio

Lamm Industries M1.2
Editor:
About 10 years ago (April 1995), Stereophile published the very first review of our M1.1 amplifier. That became a door-opener for Lamm. Paul Bolin's review of the M1.2 has come just at the end of our 10th anniversary year, and is a hallmark of sorts: a comprehensive exploration of the product and, we hope, a tribute to our efforts.
Mr. Bolin's experience with these amps resembles more the dynamics of a person's exploration of another person than of a piece of equipment. His vivid language is proof of that: "In a strange way, this is an amp that will select only those who respond to it on the deepest levels of understanding." He concluded his review with this statement: "Hearing music through nearly any other amps after hearing the M1.2s was the difference between seeing a very good lithograph of a masterpiece after seeing the original, from two feet away, in a museum."

In miniature, Paul Bolin's developing "relationship" with the amps is a reflection of the relationship that has been developing between the outside world and Lamm over the years. It has taken time for people to start appreciating the seeming simplicity and inner beauty of our products, and we are grateful to all who have made our recognition possible—magazines and reviewers, dealers and distributors, and, of course, our customers—whose feedback and appreciation provide continuous encouragement, satisfaction, and occasional challenge!

Our special thanks to John Atkinson for the measurements and his comments. One of the unique traits of Stereophile is that practically every reviewed product is accompanied by a set of detailed measurements conducted in a highly professional manner. This helps readers form a more comprehensive opinion about the product, and in many instances becomes their tool for "separating the wheat from the chaff."

Elina D. Lamm
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Somewhere Beyond the Sea

There was an interview here in the L.A. Times," Steve Blauner began, "where Neil Young said that he thought Bobby Darin was crazy, jumping from [musical] genre to genre like he did. But he also said thank God he did. Neil said Bobby gave him the strength to not stay in one place musically.

What makes Bobby Darin worth listening to again was his ability to belt out rock'n'roll tunes like "Splish Splash" and standards like "Beyond the Sea" with the same stylistic verve and vocal prowess he later brought to bear on protest songs like "Simple Song of Freedom," and folk numbers like Tim Hardin's "If I Were a Carpenter."

To paraphrase the last line in his most famous cover, "Mack the Knife," Bobby Darin is back. Thanks primarily to the new film Beyond the Sea, in which Kevin Spacey plays the singer, Darin's recorded musical legacy is again showing up on record via the film's soundtrack album and two compilations, The Legendary Bobby Darin (Capitol) and Aces Back to Back, a CD/DVD set released on the independent Hyena Records label.

The latest venture of former Atlantic Records producer Joel Dorn, Hyena, which currently also has Dr. John and James Blood Ulmer on its roster, has come up with a set that repeats none of the versions of Darin's Atlantic hits that you've heard a thousand times. For his material, Dorn went to Jimmy Scalia, official archivist of the Darin Estate, which is currently overseen by Darin's son, Dodd, and his former manager, Steve Blauner. Dorn was given 50 CDs and 25 hours of film footage, from which he chose 20 musical tracks and 11 film cuts. The sources were varied: Darin's television show, the 1963 radio show he did for the American Dairy Association, live recordings, his nightclub act in Las Vegas, etc. The sonics are variable but generally acceptable. Aces Back to Back is hamstrung by notes that list neither the sources of the individual tracks nor any of the relevant session information. Still, it's the largest batch of unreleased Darin material to be released in many years.

"For the first time since his death," Joel Dorn says, "there's a window opening on Bobby Darin. If there was ever a time to make your point about him, this is it."

"I wanted to add to his body of work. These are things that have never been on CD and should be. He's lost in the traces protest songs, folk rock—he did it right." Blauner, who first met Darin when he was "one step out of the mailroom" at a New York talent agency, says he felt too young and too dumb to manage a rising star. Darin was having none of it. After managing Darin, Blauner went on to be part of the company that produced such film masterpieces as The Last Picture Show and Five Easy Pieces.

"He believed in me before I believed in me. I can never forget him for that. I made him my life." When Darin retired from show business in the early 1970s, ostensibly to work on his music publishing (he also had surgery to try to correct the heart trouble that had plagued him since a childhood bout with rheumatic fever), Blauner moved on professionally, but returned in the last year of Darin's life, 1973, to manage him once again. He feels that the revelation in 1967 that Darin's "sister," Nina, was really his mother—and that his mother, Polly, was actually his grandmother—is the blow Darin never recovered from.

"When people ask me what he died of, I say 'a broken heart.' I firmly believe in your state of mind and emotions affecting your health, and that revelation about his mother, he never got over it."

Before Kevin Spacey made Beyond the Sea, he approached Blauner about the idea. The manager's response was simple: You're too old to sing and you'd be crazy to direct a picture you're starring in. Having recently seen the results, Blauner says that while he salutes Spacey for "bringing Bobby back to life" and spurring a resurgence in interest in a singer who died 31 years ago, he cannot quite get past the fact that it's Spacey and not Darin singing on the film's soundtrack. Still, he's impressed with the honesty of Spacey's passion for Darin and his music. Honesty, he says, is what he remembers best and respects most about his beloved former client.

"Bobby was the most honest person I ever knew. I used to think my ex-wife was, until I caught her cheating. Then Bobby moved up to No.1."
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