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Although you’re reading this in October, I had to write it in the middle of summer’s dog days—what Washington journalists used to call “the silly season,” not so much because there’s anything inherently funny about August, but because, in pre-AC DC, all the legislators went home then to escape the heat and humidity, leaving the press corps with little to write about other than “man bites dog” stories.

This summer we’ve raised a bumper crop of legislative inanities, judicial decisions, international treaties, and business scandals. I’m starting to believe the old adage: Just because you’re paranoid doesn’t mean they’re not out to get you.

First, we had the Supreme Court’s decision in MGM vs Grokster. Justice David Souter wrote: “We hold that one who distributes a device with the object of promoting its use to infringe copyright, as shown by clear expression or other affirmative steps taken to foster infringement, is liable for the resulting acts of infringement by third parties.”

I’m not a Constitutional scholar, so I can’t weigh in on whether or not the Supremes were acting according to the Founding Fathers’ intentions on this one, but it certainly seems to me that this decision could have far-reaching effects on new inventions—not to mention opening a whole can of worms for existing ones.

Apparently I’m not the only one troubled by this. “The President believes that the manufacturer of a legal product should not be held liable for the criminal misuse of that product by others,” said White House spokesman Scott McClellan. That seems clear enough—so that makes it a bad decision, right?

Not so fast. President Bush wasn’t talking about digital copying, but about a different industry altogether. MGM vs Grokster is, apparently, a good decision when it keeps evil hackers from copying CDs or DVDs. It’s apparently a bad decision when it can be used against the manufacturers of firearms, legal products that are frequently used by third parties in “acts of infringement.” Just before the Senate slunk out of town for the August recess, it voted 65-31 for S397, “The Protection of Lawful Commerce in Arms Act,” which shields firearms manufacturers and dealers from lawsuits resulting from gun-related crimes.

I’m not arguing that Grokster is good and guns are bad. I’m merely saying that I fail to see why one invention should be treated differently from the other. I think everyone ought to play by the same rules—or at least on the same field.

It would, I’m sure, be politically naïve of me to point out—as many others have—that the gun lobby gave close to $2 million in political donations in 2004, while the combined record and movie industries ponied up a whopping $32 million ($32,016,389, to be precise, according to the Center for Responsive Politics).

No, I don’t think all that money bought those decisions—I think all that money bought access to the decision makers. Buying access is something the recording industry knows more than a little bit about, as Sony BMG Entertainment’s settlement in New York State Attorney General Elliot Spitzer’s payola investigation illustrates (www.stereophile.com/news/080105sony/). In case you missed that, Sony BMG confessed to paying DJs and radio-station programmers in exchange for their playing or “charting” Sony records on their broadcasts. How does this hurt anyone? Basically, it gives an advantage to the players who have the most money.

We audiophiles like to believe that it’s all about the music, but when artists have to buy their way onto radio station playlists, it’s obvious that it’s really all about the Benjamins. The same hurdles confront the garage inventor, who must now worry about how his invention might be used somewhere down the line. If the playing field isn’t level, it isn’t the biggest players who suffer; it’s the smallest.

You might conclude from this that I believe the government is supposed to protect small businesses at the expense of the big ones, but I’m not convinced that that is such a great approach either. I think we need innovators and popularizers. Of course, big companies can be both, but history has also taught us that big firms, if left to their own devices, can also stifle innovation.

For an example of this, we need look no further than the struggle between the Radio Corporation of America (RCA) and Edwin Howard (“Major”) Armstrong, the father of FM radio. Armstrong was one of the most creative minds of the 20th century, inventing FM (frequency modulation) radio, the regenerative circuit, and the Super Heterodyne receiver. Armstrong successfully lobbied the FCC to establish the FM band, which was set between 42 and 49 MHz, and even established a line of products and a broadcasting network based on that spec. However, in 1945, RCA convinced the FCC to reallocate the FM spectrum to 88–108 MHz—which not only made all of Armstrong’s radios useless, but also assigned television channels to the frequencies Armstrong’s network had formerly inhabited. It also consolidated RCA’s stranglehold on AM broadcasting and set back innovation in FM broadcast technology by about 20 years. To add insult to injury, RCA even managed to claim—and to end up owning—the patents on FM radio, denying Armstrong any royalties from the fruits of his labors. Broke and broken, Armstrong killed himself.

Had the playing field been level, Armstrong’s better mousetrap would have won the day.

Innovation has been the growth engine of high-end audio from the beginning—on both the music and the hardware sides. There are no “major” audiophile record labels—even the largest is tiny by Big Four standards. That’s equally true of high-end manufacturers: Name the most successful high-end company you can think of and compare it to a Sony, a Panasonic, or a Yamaha (all of which make some very respectable, even high-end products).

Yes, it took Sony and Philips to develop the compact disc, but it took Meridian’s Bob Stuart to make it sound better. I’m against anything that might have made him have second thoughts about even attempting such a feat. Let’s keep the playing field level for all the players.
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A Portrait of the Artist as His Own Man
David Lander talks with composer and record producer David Chesky.

Recommended Components
500 top audio components recommended by our writers and editors.

Les Paul
At 90 years young, Les Paul says he's tired of reassuring people he's very much alive. But that doesn't keep the guitar legend from playing beautifully and sitting down with Robert Baird to talk about the newly released tribute album meant to celebrate his 70 years in music.

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FOLLOW-UP

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As We See It
Wes Phillips dreams of a "level playing field" for all inventors and manufacturers, regardless of the depth of their pockets or the weight of their name.

Letters
This month it's ALL about the double-blind testing and Jon Iverson's "diatribe" against it.

Industry Update
High-end audio news including dealer-promoted seminars, plus: DK Design Group purchased by LSA, JAG with new Audiolab products, US Supreme Court MGM vs Grokster verdict, hi-end audio on-line buying trends, news on Focal-JMlab products and interesting B&W parallels.
Want to know more? Go to the "News Desk" at www.stereophile.com for up-to-the-minute info.

Sam's Space
Sam Tellig walks along the Thames and muses about the reproduction of art and music; the latter with Musical Fidelity's A3.5 integrated amp and CD player.

Analog Corner
This month Michael Fremer listens to Locus Design Group's Damp- and Bass-Clamp, Shun Mook's LP clamp, the Hagerman UFO Strobeclamp, and the Eastern Electric MiniMax and Ray Samuels Emmeline XR-10B phono preamps.

Listening
Art Dudley on the gems of Russian recordings: Water Lily's Russian SACDs.

The Fifth Element
John Marks goes looking for value-for-money products and finds them with the Harbeth HL-3P-ES2 loudspeaker, Audio Analogue's Primo integrated amplifier, and Magnum Dynalab's MD-208 FM tuner and integrated amplifier.

Record Reviews
October's "Recording of the Month" has given us the rare pleasure of trumpeting a record we thought we'd never have the pleasure of hearing, a newly discovered 1957 concert featuring two of jazz' greatest voices, Thelonious Monk Quartet with John Coltrane at Carnegie Hall. In classical music this month we have new recordings of music by Debussy and Haydn. In Rock/Pop, we have Charlie Poole, Son Volt, and Stars. In Jazz, the great Keith Jarrett's latest session gets a listen. And finally, in Etc. a bachelor pad classic from Turkey comes to America.

Manufacturers' Comments
This month we hear from Locus Design Group, Eastern Electric, Cary Audio, and Peak Consult about our reviews of their products.

Aural Robert
Everyone's heard of recording engineer Tom Dowd, but how about Jim Malloy? Robert Baird talks with this less well-known but no less influential engineer about his new book and his life in the studio.

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Bizarre!
Editor:
After some bizarre anti-New York remarks ("where women use dogs as jewelry and men who've never thrown a punch taunt paupers from the safety of their cars") and his professed enjoyment of "meeting Stereophile's supporters and even our harshest critics, some of whom no longer wear women's clothing"), Art Dudley, in his August report on the 2005 Home Entertainment Show (p.41), gets down to business.

Dudley tells us that he enjoyed "a good LP of Mahler's Symphony 4—was it the Reiner?" played on a Clearaudio-Graham-Clearaudio front end, feeding what?—"An Aesthetic Callisto Mk.II line-level preamplifier," followed by Pathos amplifiers and Vandersteen speakers. But have I missed something? Has Dudley, excited by "critics, some of whom no longer wear women's clothing," forgotten the presence of a phono stage in this rig? Surely the line-level preamp was not handling the Clearaudio table. Or was Dudley listening to a CD, not "a good LP"?

A critic who can't get the equipment right may not be the best observer of New York's mores.

David Denby
ddenby@earthlink.net

Bizarre though my observations may seem, I could have expressed this one in 17 words: "Art Dudley neglected to mention the phono preamp in the Audio Connection room. What was it, please?"

I would invite Mr. Denby to write back and explain how it is that an insult directed at people walking/driving through midtown Manhattan is "anti-New York" (I had assumed that careful readers would catch the meaning hidden in the super-secret code words midtown Manhattan), or why he considers a less-than-exhaustive list of components in a show report to be a matter of a critic not getting the equipment right, or why the thing about women's clothing stuck in his craw so badly he felt compelled to quote it twice—but an allocation for "Letters" seldom numbers more than two.

—Art Dudley

Amazing
Editor:
It is amazing how these things come back around after all these years. The letters generated by the "Blind Listening Test" debate rage on, and yet there exists one indisputable fact, which I mentioned in a handwritten letter to Stereophile 16 years ago (never published, probably because I rambled on back then). When I first read the debate in the forms of letters, responses, and editorials in these pages 16 years ago, I wondered how this fact could escape the editorial staff. I wondered again today, after reading Jon Iverson's August "As We See It," how it could possibly be that I have never heard anyone at Stereophile mention the word validation.

It just escapes me that no one has ever asked the question (at least in print): Where are the positive controls? When has a blinded listening test ever been shown to consistently demonstrate a difference? Any good test must be validated before it can produce any meaningful information. Have blind listening tests ever been validated? Can anyone show us a positive control for blind listening tests?

When are the kind folks (and we know they are kind) who wish to judge equipment via blind listening tests ever going to come up with a positive control and validate this test? As soon as we have this accomplished, perhaps we can then use the test for something besides trumps of wasted opinion. If it can't be done, then let's just drop it as the same kind of poor judgment that leads us back to tequila despite the previous hangover. As of now, blind listening tests have demonstrated only one thing: They are unreliable at testing for differences.

John Markley, MD
Columbia, MO

Diatribes
Editor:
Jon Iverson's diatribe against blind listening tests ("The Blind Leading the Blind?", August 2005, p.3) is yet another example of the high-end audio community's phobic reaction against truly objective testing. Blind testing, and the more rigorous double-blind testing, in which both the reviewer and the administrator of the test do not know the identity of the object under test, are the basis of the most trustworthy forms of experimental design. As an example, the FDA requires pharmaceutical research, where possible, to conduct all clinical trials under a double-blind protocol. The foundations of probability sampling, hypothesis testing, and the analysis of variance that are used to determine whether two or more objects are really different, as developed by Ronald Fisher beginning in 1924, were one of the major accomplishments in statistical science in the 20th century.

But the audio industry and audio press are afraid of truly objective testing because of what it might disclose—expose might be the better verb. It is analogous to the "theological" debate that some sectors of society have against evolution. Although the preponderance of scientific evidence proves it is true, religiousists refuse to believe it because, in doing so, it calls into question the existence of God. In the case of high-end audio, the fear discloses the poor relationships among cost, engineering competence, and actual performance.

Iverson's riposte undermines the method by intentionally designing bad experiments. Iverson notes (correctly) that because different listeners have different levels of discrimination, the results of blind testing are suspect. But the point of testing is not to test the tester, but to test the object! The first step in designing a proper blind test is to assemble a panel of testers who have the same discriminatory power, and then to submit the object to this prequalified panel. Only this way can the analysis of variance distinguish differences in the quality of the objects from the quality of the reviewing panel.

The bottom line is that if no differences can be heard between two objects in a properly conducted blind test, then their performance quality (of lack thereof) is the same. It doesn't matter whether one...
object is produced by a “darling” of the high-end community and the other by some anonymous corporate assembly line; it doesn’t matter whether one object uses some exotic technology and the other uses off-the-shelf componentry; it doesn’t matter whether one object retails for $5000 and the other for $50,000. Most important, it doesn’t matter whether one object advertises in the audio press reporting the test and the other does not.

Mr. Levine and Dr. Markley, we must simply let go of the belief that blind audio tests reveal any objective information about audible differences between components. This is because such tests are fundamentally subject to the listener’s abilities. However, blind tests can be used for an audiophile Olympics. Mr. Levine notes, “The first step in designing a proper blind test is to assemble a panel of listeners who have the same discriminatory power, and then to submit the object to this prequalified panel.” And I’m suggesting that blind audio tests are a great way to create this panel of superlisteners. We can pit the Indonesian panel against the German panel. In fact, we can identify the single most highly trained and sensitive listener on the planet.

But here’s the thing: If that listener or panel then failed a series of blind audio tests involving, say, two brands of speaker cables, would we therefore conclude that there are no audible differences? And what happens if five years later, a new champion or panel takes the same tests and passes? Do we now agree that there are audible differences?

Sorry, this is not a sufficiently objective test of equipment, and brings me back to my original point: The only thing a blind audio test can help you conclusively determine is the ability of the listener(s). That’s it. I agree with Dr. Markley that blind audio tests must first be validated, but obviously I don’t think they ever will be. These tests are not useful enough to satisfy my objective criteria, and the audio equipment in the room simply becomes the apparatus being used to test the humans.

I do not condemn blind testing in other fields, such as medical science. Let’s start by pointing out again that all of us can learn to improve our scores on blind audio tests. If we could do the same thing with medical blind trials, they would be considered worthless. But blind audio tests engage different attributes of a human being than does the typical medical drug trial. Listening is both an innate ability and a skill that, as in an Olympic sport, can be enhanced with proper training. Practice improves your ability to score well in blind audio tests, as far as I’m aware, this is not true with blind drug studies. You cannot train some humans to react differently and therefore skew the drug studies based on who was used in the panel.

Let’s face it: Whatever differences that do or do not exist between two components are fixed and, in some cases, can even be measured objectively beforehand. But a blind listening test reveals only who among us can detect differences to various degrees of subtlety. Fun to play around with, yes, but useless for my objectivist needs.

—Jon Iverson

Pandering

Editor:

Jon Iverson’s supposedly heartfelt diatribe against blind product comparisons (August 2005) smells more like dutiful pandering to Stereophile’s advertisers. Bet they hate comparisons that might show up one product as better than its competitors. Stereophile loves the subjective response to audio gear—but here’s Iverson arguing that blind comparisons are bad because they might expose some subjective evaluations as being worthless, even embarrassing.

Bill Murphy
Sacramento, CA
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With all due respect, Mr. Murphy, you couldn’t be more wrong. The reason I don’t like blind audio tests is that they give everyone too much wiggle room, advertisers and critics alike. I much prefer the kind of tests John Atkinson did on the Harmonic Technology cables in the August issue, which were balanced against MPS’s subjective impressions. This approach brings us both sides of the story. By contrast, blind audio tests can easily be rigged to prove the points of manufacturer or critic. At the end of the day, however, they help us measure only the listening skills of the listener, not the performance of a product, whether good or bad. They bring us a highly suspect story. I’m sure we both want more.

—Jon Iverson

Coconuts

Editor:

I began skimming the Harmonic Technology review in August (p.123) without first noting who was doing the reviewing. As the article poured on more and more accolades and finally got to the business of claiming “most significant single technological breakthrough,” I was thinking, Okay, who is doing all this gushing? I flipped back a few pages, expecting to see some guest contributor, because no one at Stereophile puts their coconuts that far out on the chopping block and then dares the technical community to feed him crow.

You have got to hand it to Michael Fremer. You gotta hear something pretty special to be in this business as long as he has and [still] get behind a new product so completely. With all the recent talk about double-blind testing and measurements vs listening, I have to say that I respect Mr. Fremer’s decision to look past the wall warts, pigtales, and “horrendous thumps” of this emerging technology and say, “Hey, we’ve really got something here.” Good for you, Michael. And good for us.

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INDUSTRY UPDATE

US: KENTUCKY & CALIFORNIA
Wes Phillips

At Home Entertainment 2005 last April, DK Design Group’s brawny VS-1 Mk.2 hybrid integrated amplifier (150Wpc, $3000) had the crowd buzzing with its bang-for-the-buck price and the expansive sound it produced through Von Schweikert speakers. When we spoke with founder Daniel Khesin, he seemed passionate about breaking into the high-end big leagues. It therefore came as a surprise to learn, on July 8, that DK Design Group had been purchased by LSA Group LLC of Louisville, Kentucky.

Khesin stated that his primary financial interests are not related to the audio industry and that LSA, which is about to release a line of high-performance loudspeakers, “will handle the company in a manner befitting our corporate culture—taking the company into the other areas, which would be considered a natural outgrowth of our efforts to date.”

LSA is headed by audio veteran Larry R. Staples, an audio-store owner and former director of sales for Thiel Audio. LSA was poised to launch two loudspeakers in August: the LSA Model I bookshelf ($995/pair) and the floorstanding LSA Model II ($1995/pair). Also included in the line will be the X-Dream floorstander ($25,000/pair, and until now marketed as the DK Design Group X-Dream F7), as well as a center-channel loudspeaker (TBA). Staples also announced that LSA will add to its electronics offerings with Mk.3 and Signature versions of the VS-1.

Staples said, “We have two companies with virtually identical corporate philosophies. We both offer products that are tremendous values in their respective categories in the marketplace, and this was such a natural fit, we could hardly contain our enthusiasm when we became aware of DK’s availability.” DK Design Group has a network of 80 North American dealers and distribution into an additional 12 countries.

On the other side of the country, Laun, LLC, of Carlsbad, California, announced in July its acquisition of Niles Audio Corporation, the Miami, Florida–based company best known for its whole-house audio and video products.

Linear is a worldwide supplier of residential security systems, intercoms, garage-door and gate openers, long- and short-range remote controls, and medical/emergency reporting systems. The company has been engaging in an aggressive acquisitions program over the last few years, picking up Channel Plus, Elan Home Systems, OmniMount, OpenHouse, Panamax, SpeakerCraft, Proficient Audio Systems, and Xantech—all companies that make products for the growing whole-house entertainment-distribution and custom-installation market.

Niles Audio Corporation, established in 1978, began by manufacturing switching systems for audio retailers and later began offering simpler switches for residential use. The company now offers more than 500 products covering “every aspect of whole-house audio distribution and the integration of audio/video systems.”

UK
Paul Messenger

Audiolab was one of Britain’s favorite hi-fi electronics brands in the 1980s and 1990s, but in 1997 it effectively disappeared. In the most surprising takeover in hi-fi history, racing-car company TAG McLaren bought Audiolab and used it as a platform to launch a new venture, TAG McLaren Audio (TMA).

While TMA used the Audiolab designs as bases for a number of its own branded F3-series products, the Audiolab name disappeared, and the re-engineering of the cosmetics and components of former Audiolab designs led to substantial increases in price. Although there were successes—most notably the AV32R surround processor, which TMA developed from scratch—the company was too ambitious and made mistakes that alienated sectors of the trade.

TMA lost money big time, decided to pull out of high-end audio, and in March 2004 sold the business to IAG, a Chinese-owned company also based in Huntington, near Cambridge, and which also owned Quad and Wharfedale (and has since acquired Mission). The TAG McLaren name was available only for the transition period, but IAG felt there was much to

CALIFORNIA

Friday, October 7, 7–9pm: AudioVision San Francisco (1603 Pine Street) will host an evening seminar with Costa Koulisakis of Simaudio and Maurice Schmir of Raidho to introduce and demo their latest products. For more info, visit www.audiovisionsf.com. RSVP: (415) 614-1118.


COLORADO

Friday–Sunday, September 30–October 2: The Rocky Mountain AudioFest ’05, sponsored by the Colorado Audio Society, Audiology, manufacturers Welbourne Labs and Red Rock Audio, and webzines six moons.com, enjoythemusic.com, and positive-feedback.com, will take place at Denver’s Marriott Tech Center. For more info, visit www.audiofest.net.

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Audio (104 Thornton Drive, Newington) will host an evening seminar with Richard Vandersteen to introduce the Quatro and discuss the importance of waveform preservation. RSVP: (860) 561-1045.

ILLINOIS
Thursday, October 27, 5–8pm: Quintessence Audio (5701 West Dempster, Morton Grove) will host Garth Leerer of Musical Surroundings to demonstrate new products from Aestheticx, Benz Micro, Clearaudio, Graham, and Pathos. RSVP: (847) 966-4434.

MARYLAND
Wednesday, October 11, 6:30pm: Soundworks (10526 Connecticut Avenue, Kensington) will host an evening seminar with Richard Vandersteen to introduce the Quatro and discuss the importance of waveform preservation. RSVP: (301) 929-8600.

MICHIGAN
Tuesday–Sunday, October 15–16, 12–6pm: Superior Sight & Sound (West Bloomfield) will conduct a seminar to present the dCS single-box CD player and new transport-DAC combo. For more info and to RSVP: (248) 626-2780 or e-mail soundsuperior@hotmail.com.

NEW JERSEY
Saturday, October 8, 2pm: Audio Dimensions (31968 Woodward, Royal Oak) will host an evening seminar with Richard Vandersteen to introduce the Quatro and discuss the importance of waveform preservation. RSVP: (248) 549-7320.

NEW MEXICO
Monday, October 3, 6:30pm: Absolute Audio (95 Vista del Oro, Cerrillos) will host an evening seminar with Richard Vandersteen to introduce the Quatro and discuss the importance of waveform preservation. RSVP: (505) 424-9333.

NORTH CAROLINA
Thursday, October 6, 5pm: Audio be gained in resurrecting the Audiolab brand (sold as part of the package), especially if it could cut costs by relocating manufacturing to its own large factory in Shen Zhen, southern China.

It took a bit longer than expected, but this fall, 18 months after signing the original deal, IAG has returned to market with a wide range of Audiolab models, all at competitive prices. The main differences between the old and the new are that all components are now finished in silver, incorporate where appropriate improvements that TMA had already implemented, sell for less than half the prices of their TMA equivalents, and for rather less than their pre-takeover Audiolab incarnations cost in 1997.

The new range includes the 8000S remote-controlled 60Wpc integrated amplifier (£500), the 8000Q remote-controlled preamp (£600), the 100Wpc 8000P stereo power amp (£400), and the 125W 8000M monoblock power amp (£400 each). An all-new one-box CD player, the 8000CD (£600), has been developed to augment the range, and two of TMA's key home theater components have been resurrected under the Audiolab name: the 8000AV line-level A/V processor (£1000) and the 8000X7 100WX7 multichannel power amplifier (£1500). In the near future IAG also hopes to resurrect Audiolab's highly regarded phono stage, and anticipates introducing an FM tuner later on.

US: WASHINGTON, DC
Wes Phillips
As the Senate Commerce Committee began hearings July 28 on issues related to MGM vs Grokster (see this issue's "As We See It"), Consumer Electronics Association (CEA) president Gary Shapiro issued a masterfully constructed statement (www.ce.org/press_room/press_release_detail.asp?id=10798) reminding the Committee of the stakes involved. Why masterful? Essentially, we were struck by the concision of the CEA argument and its gentle reminder that a significant American industry will be crucially affected by the final resolution of this issue—and not the one that first springs to mind, either:

"While we are pleased that the Supreme Court left the Betamax ruling in place, the Court's introduction of an 'inducement' standard has decreased the legal clarity necessary for manufacturers and innovators to develop and market new technologies and services. "The risks are real: copyright law allows plaintiffs to collect statutory damages based on a standard of 'per work infringed.' Thus, a copyright claim filed against a mass-market product such as a CD burner, which is used by millions of consumers to make copies of millions of works, could bankrupt even the largest company.

"Copyright holders say that the Grokster decision gives them the critical tool they need to fight piracy. We will be watching closely to see if ensuing litigation is aimed solely at wrongdoers, or if it also encompasses the legitimate products and practices and innovations commonly found in American homes.

"We look forward to working with the full Congress as it considers issues regarding copyrights, fair use, technology, and intellectual property."

We salute Shapiro for this timely reminder. We, too, will be watching closely.
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True “status” must be earned. Classe Audio doesn’t like to boast, so we’ll do it for them. Classe Audio’s new Delta Series firmly establishes them as the leading full-line electronics company in high-end audio. If you’ve been considering purchasing or upgrading from well known brands like Krell or Levinson, you owe it to yourself to audition Classe Audio’s new Delta Series. We think you’ll reach the same conclusion we did... Classe is simply better!

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From the world’s finest multichannel amplifier, to the world’s first 1080P DVD player and state of the art processors, to the awe-inspiring CA-M400 monaural amplifiers, the new Delta Series firmly establishes Classe as the industry leader in a full line electronics company. Classe offers extraordinary performance, superb build quality and design, and unbeatable value. Please drop by or call 1.800.838.1812 for more information.
ics Shoppers,” the most popular places for home audio and video equipment are mass-market retailers (62%) and general big-box electronics stores (57%). (Unlike the CEA polls, Stereophile polls skew toward audiophiles only.) Only 15% of consumers report shopping for audio and video equipment at specialty, high-end stores.

The CEA also found that while specialty, high-end electronics stores draw a smaller percentage of consumer-electronics shoppers than larger retail outlets, “consumers who do frequent specialty stores report the quality of available product as the primary driver. In comparison, the strongest motivations for shopping at other types of stores are price and convenient store locations.”

The CEA’s Joe Bates said, “Our research has shown that as consumers find more and more choices in the electronics retailer space, price and convenience become paramount in their decision making. Having said that, specialty store shoppers are uniquely focused on quality and value, and place less emphasis on price. In fact, we’ve found that specialty, high-end store shoppers spend more on home audio and video equipment annually than consumers who shop at mass-market or general CE stores.” The CEA research finds that the average US adult consumer spends $1178 on home audio and video products each year. By contrast, those who shop at least in part of the time at specialty, high-end electronics stores annually spend $1985 on similar equipment.

John Flanner, chair of the CEA’s Professional Audio-Video Retailers (PARA) division, concluded, “This study confirms what we have long known. The specialty retail community offers consumers a unique shopping experience and a wealth of information. With an improved focus on promotion of our myriad strengths, this channel has the potential to increase customer satisfaction exponentially.”

**INDUSTRY UPDATE**

**FRANCE**

Paul Messenger

When it comes to true hi-fi speakers, Focal-JMlab is one of the biggest manufacturers. So the opportunity to travel down to southeast France to catch up with their latest developments is always welcome. My flight from London was on July 7, and when we landed at Lyon it was a shock to discover that, while we’d been in the air, London had been bombed by terrorists. It was a rather subdued group that traveled the 30 miles to St. Etienne, on the outskirts of which Focal’s factory complex occupies an increasingly large part of a quiet industrial estate.

The Focal-JMlab facility is bigger each time I visit, and while the firm is still a lot smaller than B&W, it’s hard not to draw parallels between the way these two major players operate. Competition is a powerful stimulant, and I’ll wager neither B&W nor KEF would have reached its current prominence had they not competed fiercely during the 1960s and 1970s. Today, B&W comfortably dominates the hi-fi speaker market. Of its dozens of rivals, Focal-JMlab is the one that’s currently taking on B&W directly at most price points, as well as in the development of drive-unit technology.
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esting enough, but the lower models have tended to be rather prosaic rectilinear boxes—until now. The two new ranges for 2005 both feature radical and distinctive styling, as well as some new engineering solutions. While the budget Chorus and Cobalt ranges and high-end Utopias remain as before, the new Profile and Electra 1000 Be models slot into the mid-to-upmarket sector—arguably where design and presentation matter most—at UK prices that range from £1400 to £4000/pair.

The Profiles—three two-channel models plus assorted home-theater extras—are the less costly and the more attractive, with a shape likely to appeal to those who prefer loudspeakers that look discreet and nonthreatening. Curved cabinets are very much in vogue these days, offering potential acoustic and structural advantages over rectilinear boxes, and the Profiles take this to a logical conclusion. Viewed from above, the enclosure forms a complete ellipse, albeit one sliced away to form a flat baffle on which the drivers are mounted. This baffle is a tapered, back-tilted slice that (in the case of the floorstanders) chops the top surface in half while leaving the base ellipse virtually complete.

The Profiles' outlines look simple enough, but building the cabinets proved difficult. Unhappy with the lack of rigidity caused by the common technique of slicing deep grooves into the inside edge of a sheet of wood or MDF in order to bend it into a curve, Focal takes the more costly route of gluing together six layers of 3mm-thick MDF to form the curves. With additional internal bracing, the result is a very stiff enclosure with superior acoustic properties and good inherent damping from the laminations.

The grille, which somehow manages to make the front baffle look concave, can be left in place as it doesn't cover the tweeter. This new version of the Profiles' aluminum-magnesium inverted-dome tweeter is mounted on a little alloy shield that protrudes a little above the top of the enclosure in order to assist time alignment. The bass and midrange drivers use new versions of Focal's W-sandwich cone. So far there are just two Electra 1000 Be models: the 1007 Be two-way stand-mount and the three-way, floorstanding 1027 Be. These are altogether more assertive in appearance, and more enthusiast-oriented in engineering and technical content. The Electras actually get close to providing Utopias on the cheap—each costs half the price of its Utopia equivalent and features a newly developed beryllium-diaphragm tweeter.

The Electras' enclosures feature a strongly convex front panel highlighted by a shiny, full-width cast-alloy tweeter front plate set into a heavy, 50mm-thick front baffle, with plenty of internal bracing. Focal has been busy discovering the best recipes for its W-sandwich cones, to achieve the best blend of stiffness, mass, and damping for a given application. The midrange cone used here, for example, has an "open sandwich" construction for better damping and transient behavior, with just one layer each of woven glass fibers and structural foam.

Much of Focal's presentation concerned its tweeters and the advantages of using pure beryllium. I won't debate here the relative virtues of beryllium and diamond diaphragms: both are clearly very-high-performance materials that can extend a tweeter's response well into the ultrasonic region. But it was good to see that Focal is bringing down the entry prices of its beryllium-tweetered models with a major investment in larger-scale manufacturing equipment.

Built into a cast chassis, the new Electras' Infinite Acoustic Loading (IAL) tweeter has a generous cavity free from obstruction behind a slightly smaller inverted dome (beryllium is very costly) than that used in the Utopias. A stable, tough new foam called Poron forms the surrounds for both the IAL and aluminum-magnesium tweeters, and lowers the fundamental resonances (to 680Hz for the IAL).

Another interesting parallel: B&W also lowered the frequencies of the tweeter resonances in its latest 800 series. However, both execution and application are quite different: B&W opted for a new roll surround, not a foam, and used the lowered resonance to employ a simpler, gentler, first-order crossover network. Focal, in contrast, is using its reduced resonant frequency to lower the crossover point and hence reduce the dispersion discontinuity that occurs between a 6.5" midrange and the much smaller tweeter. As the French might put it, "Vive la difference."
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-- Paul Balin, Stereophile Magazine

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"Adding them (Hydras) to an already high-performance system may well prove to be a more cost-effective upgrade than replacing components." 
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On my way home from France, I found myself with a free day in London. What to do? Arrange another factory tour? Visit a few hi-fi shops? I mulled the matter briefly and decided to instead take in some of the sights and cultural attractions of London.

The weather was warm and sunny—more like that of Nice or Rome than London. (This was two weeks before the July 7 bombings.) I took the tube to St. Paul's Cathedral, then crossed the Thames on the Millennium footbridge. My aim was to spend the entire day in Southwark, on the river's South Bank.

I arrived at the Tate Modern Art Gallery in time for its 10am opening. General admission to the museum is free, but there's a charge for special exhibits and I wanted to see the Frida Kahlo retrospective. (It runs through October 9; you might still catch it.)

I heard an elderly couple ask about "concessions," which is Britspeak for discounts. If you're under 18 or over 60, you can ask about concessions at museums, historic houses, and theaters, even St. Paul's. I saved £2.

Remember the film Frida from a couple of years ago? It may be one of the best films ever made about an artist's life—it's out on DVD and worth renting. Frida Kahlo was married to the even more famous Diego Rivera, but she was famous in her own right. She was also, briefly, the mistress of Leon Trotsky, who lived in exile in Mexico City. Stalin had him eliminated with an ice pick to the back of the skull. It's in the movie, as are many of Kahlo's major paintings. This is one of the things that makes the film remarkable: there's lots of art in it.

You could spend an entire day at the Tate Modern—the upstairs restaurant has a superb view of the Thames—but I had other things in mind. After lunch with a couple of journalist chums at nearby Vmopolis, a trendy wine bar, I hied me over to Shakespeare's Globe for a matinee performance of The Winter's Tale. But not before I paid a quick visit to what remains of The Clink—that's The Clink Prison Museum, on Clink Street.

The Clink did a brisk business in Shakespeare's day. Heretics were held and frequently tortured in the below-ground dungeons. The prison dates back to the middle ages, and the original jailer may have been a chap named Clink.

The main hall is for hire. What a place for a hi-fi manufacturer to hold a demonstration, press conference, and banquet! I quote from the official website: "The Clink makes an excellent and unusual venue for functions and parties. All tastes and preferences are catered for." (I laugh my evil laugh.) "Up to 250 volunteers can indulge in temporary imprisonment and will be tortured with dinner, a wide range of entertainment, and music of their choice to guarantee a memorable evening."

Footsteps away at Shakespeare's Globe, I considered paying £5 to stand in the central courtyard among the groundlings. I'm a groundling at heart, after all. Groundlings stand for the entire performance—no seats, no shelter. "You don't want to do that," advised the friendly woman at the box office. "It's all right for the younger folk, as they can stand right in front of the stage and see the actors close-up. I'll find you a nice single ticket."

Good that I heeded her warning. The theater has "stewards" posted by the exits, one of whose tasks is to assist fallen groundlings—those who've passed out. I paid my £25 to sit upstairs, under the shade of the Globe's thatched roof.

Shakespeare's Globe is built on or near the location of Shakespeare's original Globe theater. It looks more or less the same, too—once you get past the lobby, toilets, and gift shop. Where did the original Globe's playgoers ease themselves? Not next to the gift shop, that's for sure. Did they shit into a pit? Piss into the Thames?

I never saw the original Globe—I'm not that ancient. But drawings and maps of the period mark the spot, more or less, and make a plausible replica possible. The present Globe combines the atmosphere of a theme park with excellent theater and serious scholarship. Incredibly, the combination works—perhaps because the original Globe combined a carnival atmosphere with serious theater. There's music, too—as there was in Shakespeare's day.

The idea of Shakespeare's Globe is to re-create Shakespeare's plays (and those
of his contemporaries, such as Christopher Marlowe) as the original audiences might have seen them. There are no sets—only costumes and props—so a performance can move at lightning speed. Better pep up the pace of the performance lest the groundlings turn unruly. Actors hadn't cleared the stage before a new scene began. Was this rapid-fire presentation what Shakespeare intended? It works very well.

Shakespeare's Globe is open from mid-April to mid-October. If you make it over to London this fall, you can catch Measure for Measure before the season ends.

"When a man is tired of London, he is tired of life; for there is in London all that life can afford." So said Samuel Johnson in 1777. (You can visit Johnson's house, not far from St. Paul's.) "All that life can afford" now includes hi-fi shops, but there are far better things to do in London than shop for hi-fi or dive for vintage vinyl—but don't say that to certain readers of Stereophile, or some of those who hang out at the Audio Asylum.

Speaking of that Internet forum, I was appalled to read a posting from an "inmate" who said he had a free day in London and wanted advice on which hi-fi shops to visit. I suspect this is the type of person for whom a change in interconnects and speaker cables might prove a life-altering experience. A pox on audiophiles!

Antony Michaelson, of Musical Fidelity, heard I was in town but knew better than to lure me out to Wembley, where his factory is located. Sorry, but I don't think the factory has an olive tree outside. Or a wine cellar. Or a café and bar. This is not Italy.

"Why not view the Wallace Collection, on Manchester Square, tomorrow morning?" Antony suggested. "I'll pick you up and we'll have lunch near the airport."

Few tourists know about this marvelous museum—I certainly didn't—and its assemblage of largely second- and third-rate landscape and portrait paintings from the 18th and 19th centuries. I love the Wallace, which is so unfashionable as to be the perfect respite after a visit to the popular and trendy Tate Modern. The

CONTACTS

Musical Fidelity's A3.5 integrated amp: fit and finish far beyond its price point

The closest thing to the Wallace I've seen in the US is the much smaller Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, in Boston. Just after noon, I checked out of my hotel and Antony and I drove to a Chinese restaurant just a stone's throw from Heathrow. The restaurant was a time warp. The décor was 1958. So were the menu and the music. Tommy Edwards was singing "It's All in the Game" from a jukebox. Our hostess appeared to have Tourette's syndrome; she choreographed her way toward us with a finely tuned tarantella of neurological twitches, having turned her affliction into an art form. Fascinating. How had Antony found this place?

"I have something interesting in the boot," said Antony after lunch. "Care to take a look?" Outside, he popped open the trunk of his car and took out an A3.5 amplifier. "I'd say take it back on the plane, but it's the wrong voltage. You can have one in a few days if you fancy it for review. Here's the matching A3.5 CD player."

"You could get arrested for this," I observed.

"You mean soliciting the sale of stolen goods from the boot of one's car?" Antony laughed, but not before a twitch of his own: a quick glance over his shoulder. I could imagine the constable: "'Ang on there, mates—what might you two blokes be doing with them pieces of eye-fye kit?"

Musical Fidelity A3.5 integrated amplifier and CD player

I'm writing up these pieces as a pair because that's the way most people are buying them, according to Musical Fidelity's Antony Michaelson. Each is priced at $1600. Figure a "concession" from your dealer for buying the pair and you might walk out for under $3000.

Like many other manufacturers, Antony has been moving steadily upmarket, with his A5 and kW series of components. At least he hasn't forgotten us groundlings. The A3.5 series consists of three products: the integrated amp, the CD player, and an FM tuner (not yet available). No separate preamp or power amp is planned.

The appearance of the A3.5s is almost jewel-like, their styling similar to that of MF's more expensive A5 and kW models. Gone are the excesses of some earlier MF gear. No gold-plated volume control. No platinum trim for the silver faceplates. No illuminated feet that turn from red to orange to blue. I especially like the faux rack-mount handles, which give the gear a mere hint of masculine audiophile menace.

I listened to the amplifier and CD player together, as Antony had suggest-

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ed. Speakers were the new Focal-JMlab Electra Beryllium 1027s, just arrived chez nous from France. The speakers retail for $5000/pair. Do you really need to spend $10,000, $20,000, $40,000 for a pair of outstanding full-range loudspeakers? Je ris mon mauvais rire. I’d like to take some hi-fi manufacturers—and writers—and readers—and... well, lock them in the Clink.

The A3.5 integrated amp is rated to deliver 150Wpc into 8 ohms and 240Wpc into 4 ohms. Current is rated at 50 amps, peak to peak. There are two pairs of Sanken bipolar output transistors per channel.

“The circuitry is basically the same as our more expensive [[$2500]] A5 integrated,” declared Antony, “with 3dB less power and without dualmono construction. The preamp section and the power-amp section have separate power supplies, however, and this is very important for the performance.”

There are five line-level RCA inputs. There is also one pair of RCA connectors for a direct home theater connection (not controlled by the A3.5’s volume adjustment). There are one pair of speaker binding posts per channel. The nuts are plastic, so please don’t be a nut and overtighten and strip them.

There are preamp-out sockets, controlled by the A3.5’s volume setting, which is useful for biamping or connecting a powered subwoofer or two. There is also a fixed-level tape output. Does anyone tape stuff anymore? No, in steamy July. The same remote controls the amp, CD player, and FM tuner.

Musical Fidelity provides a high-quality, 1m interconnect with a 3.5mm stereo jack on one end and two RCA-plug audio leads on the other. What’s this for? My iPod? I don’t have one. I think I’ll swipe the interconnect before I send back the review sample. (I use it to connect my Tivoli Audio PAL for casual FM listening.)

When you audition the A3.5 pair at your dealer, you might also listen to the larger A5 integrated amplifier and matching A5 CD player, which uses mil-spec tubes in its analog output stage. The A5s will set you back $2500 each or $5000 for both. But who knows? Your dealer might deal. I heard this combo in our living room—fantastico. Unfortunately, I no longer had the A5s when the A3.5s arrived.

Antony would tell you that you...

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probably need the A5 with its rated 250 Wpc into 8 ohms. Antony would probably also tell you that you need the kW integrated, with 500 Wpc into 8 ohms. He's a big believer in big power—not because you always need so much juice but because the added power gives you more dynamic headroom, a greater sense of ease, an even tighter grip on your speakers' bottom end. I love to grip bottom ends.

"The A3.5 pieces offer our Musical Fidelity sonic signature at an approachable price," Antony declared. There's the characteristic Musical Fidelity sound—which he describes as "neutral." Yes. Of course. All components are neutral. But some are more neutral than others, and into this category I would place Musical Fidelity gear. It's designed not to impose itself on the music.

The A3.5 has no built-in phono stage, although Musical Fidelity does offer an outboard phono stage, the X-LPv3, which is very good indeed. The A3.5's active line stage is a honey, too. Very often, a solid-state line stage will impose a slightly metallic glare on the music—a certain hardness or upper-midrange glare. None of that was present with the A3.5's line stage.

How do I know? With some integrated amps, you can't know because you can't easily dis-integrate them. But the A3.5 integrated has those preamp-out jacks. One afternoon I received Roger Modjeski's new Music Reference RM-10 Mk.II tube amp for review. I used the A3.5 integrated as a line stage and compared it to a passive controller. The A3.5's line stage appeared to have no character of its own. I detected no loss of fine detail—although if I listened longer and compared the A3.5 to expensive, standalone line stages, I likely would have found something to fault. The A3.5's line stage was very quiet. This was impressive performance from the line stage of a $1600 integrated amp. As for the power-amp section, it also had that neutral, get-out-of-the-way quality. I noticed the tight grip that the A3.5 got on the woofer of the Focal Electra 1027 Be speakers. The midrange was silky smooth and the treble was sweetly extended; the A3.5 got on swell with those superlative, inverted-dome beryllium tweeters.

Grigory Sokolov is one of Antony's favorite pianists, so I put on one of his discs: Brahms' Four Ballades, Op.10, and his Sonata 3 in F Minor, Op.5 (reissued as Opus 111 OP 30366; Berkshire Record Outlet recently had cutouts of this recording's earlier catalog release for $5.99).

Sokolov is a big, powerful, Russian bear of a pianist. Think of the late Lazar Berman—er, Berman, who actually looked like a bear. The dynamics of Sokolov's playing are superbly captured on this CD, and the combination of A3.5 CD player and integrated amp did an excellent job of recapturing them. There was a point, however, at which the amp couldn't quite cope.

I can just imagine Antony's reaction: You see? I told you. You need at least 500 Wpc. Why don't you audition a kW500 integrated?
You could just back off on the volume control.

The Dutch pianist Ivo Janssen is another Antony favorite. He recommends the four-disc set of Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier, issued on Janssen's own label, which bears the unfortunate name of Void Classics (www.voidclassics.com). This is very fine playing indeed. I certainly wouldn’t want to void Antony’s recommendation.

I tried the Janssen discs with the A3.5 CD player and the line stage of the A3.5 integrated amplifier into the Music Reference RM-10 Mk.II, which is rated at 35Wpc into 8 ohms. I can imagine Antony’s reaction to 35W. Ha! Not enough power! But the tubed power amp gave me a richer, fuller tonal palette. This is what tube amps tend to do, and some tube amps tend to do it better than others. I could get my ears around the individual notes in a way that I have trouble doing when the preamp and power amp are both entirely solid-state, missing some of the “indefinite magic of tubes” (Antony’s phrase, on another occasion).

Inspired by my visit to Clink Prison, I decided to torture the A3.5. I whipped out my CD of Mahler’s Symphony 5 with the Boston Symphony conducted by Erich Leinsdorf (RCA Silver Seal 60482-2-RV, out of print). The original recording is a killer RCA Red Seal release from 1963. I’ve never heard any conductor do such a superb job of sorting out Mahler’s tempos. And that opening trumpet call! Of course, I cranked up the volume; I always do with this disc.

Predictably, I ran out of power. It’s not so much that I heard obvious distortion as that the sound became congested, the midrange lost its magic, and the soundstage shrank. There are places on this recording where the treble turns up, the midrange lost its magic, and the soundstage shrank. That opening trumpet call! Of course, I cranked up the volume; I always do with this disc.

I raced upstairs and tried the disc with my headphone setup. Sure because I wasn’t taking notes and I was trying to wipe duck sauce off my shirt. But it went something like this: The equipment you own may affect how you listen—especially at what levels. And it may affect what you listen to, whether or not you’re conscious of the change.

In short, the gear you buy can change your listening habits. Something to consider when you’re thinking about moving up from the A3.5 components to the A5s, or even up to the kWs.

Meet the Musical Fidelity A3.5 CD player

Actually, you’ve met this player before—last December, in this column, when I reviewed Musical Fidelity’s X-Ray3 CD player. The A3.5 can be seen as an update of the X-Ray3; same drive mechanism, same DAC, same upsampling, same circuits. Both models use a Philips CD transport mechanism, a Crystal chip upsamples the CD data to 24 bits at 96kHz, and a Burr-Brown DSD1792 DAC changes the bits back to analog. However, because the A3.5 has a normal-width chassis (the X-Ray’s is half-width), the circuit layouts are different—better, according to Antony Michaelson.

One thing’s for certain: I find the A3.5 CD a lot more attractive than the X-Ray3, which was discontinued in May. (Some dealers may still have stock.) Here’s part of what I wrote in last December’s column about the X-Ray3: “I do know that I’ve heard nothing better for under $1000. In fact, I’m not sure I’ve heard anything better for under $2000.”

The plain-Jane X-Ray3 sold for $999; the very-good-looking A3.5 CD goes for $1600. I thought at the time that the X-Ray3 was underpriced. If you’re looking for a standalone CD player, not a new cluster of components, run out and try to find an X-Ray3.

The A3.5 CD is one of the few moderately priced players that can perform way out of its league. You could use this player with very expensive separates and speakers and lose little in the way of overall system performance, compared to some much more expensive players. What’s the best CD playback I’ve heard from a single-box player, in my system? The Musical Fidelity A5 CD, the one with mil-spec tubes in its analog output stage.

When considering the A3.5 CD, you have two things to think about: Do you want to try to find an X-Ray3 and save $600? Or do you want to antony up another $900 and get yourself one of the remaining A5 CD players? The A5 is a limited edition because of the mil-spec tubes, of which limited supplies exist. Production may have ceased. At least you can’t complain about having too few choices.

The A5 CD brings to the table several things: upsampling to 192kHz (instead of 96kHz), bigger power supplies, more sophisticated circuitry, and those miniaure mil-spec tubes. The A5 sounded more dynamic, even more detailed, with more body and treble sweetness. There was greater finesse, more authority, greater retrieval of low-level detail. (This is from memory; I didn’t have the A5 CD and A3.5 CD in-house for a head-to-head comparison.)

This is not to disparage the smaller, less costly A3.5, an accomplished CD player in its own right. As I wrote about the X-Ray3, the A3.5 had an easy way with the harmonic structure of voices and instruments. Not too easy, mind you—the A3.5 CD let the nastiness of some recordings come right through. Transients were presented clearly and cleanly, with no splash. The bass was surprisingly full. (Many less expensive players skimp on their analog output stages, thus crumbling the sound.)

Fortunately, I still had the X-Ray3 on hand, but I wasn’t sure I could detect any meaningful differences in sound quality between the two players. It’s possible the A3.5 was a tad quieter, a shade more dynamic.

I have not heard CD playback this good from any SACD player or so-called “universal” player. Maybe if you spend $10,000 or more on a combination player. But what’s the point, given the paucity of hi-rez software and the hi-rez nature of today’s best CD sound? I think a player should be optimized for a single format—unless it’s a very expensive player indeed. Even if I wanted to replace my favorite CDs with SACDs, for the most part I can’t. I can’t even find most of the new recordings I want issued on SACD. Again, what’s the point—buy an inexpensive SACD player and sacrifice performance on the thousands of standard CDs I own? Nyet.

SACD is for the fellow who would give up the Tate Modern, Clink Prison, and Shakespeare’s Globe—and Vinopolis—in favor of touring London’s hi-fi shops or digging in dirty bins for forgotten vinyl. It’s for the person whose biggest kick in life is getting a new pair of speaker cables or set of interconnects. It’s for audiophiles. A pox on all of them.

The rest of you can look into Musical Fidelity’s A3.5 combination. This may be entry-level gear, but it’s as good as entry-level gets.
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Record weights and clamps cause a sonic difference that’s difficult neither to hear nor to explain. A stylus coursing through the grooves stamped on a slab of vinyl releases a tremendous amount of mechanical energy, some of which does not exit the system as it’s supposed to: up the cantilever. Instead, it gets reflected back into the vinyl, where it can cause the record to resonate unless it’s damped in some way. There is also potential vibrational energy coming the other way—from the tonearm, the motor, and the bearing—but the better your arm and turntable, the more likely that the problem that needs solving is that of vibrations coursing through that thin slab of vinyl.

Putting a weight on the spindle or screwing on a clamp damps the vinyl and causes it to make better contact with the platter or mat, which can also help with damping. The frequencies damped and the efficacy of the damping change depending on the weight and the material used in the clamp, and that will change the resulting sound. It’s a mystery to me why some people find this mysterious.

I’ve been playing with a bunch of record weights, including the beautifully machined DampClamp from Locus Design Group and its lighter cousin, the BasClamp; the Hagerman Technology UFO Strobeclamp, a do-it-yourself project that works without weight; and the (in)famous Shun Mook LP Record Clamp.

The gleaming Locus Design Group DampClamp ($399, www.locus-design.com) has two weights CNC-milled from billet aluminum and constrained-layer-damped with a layer of IsoDamp, a visco-elastomer compound. The designer claims that vibrational energy is turned into heat because the IsoDamp between the two weights literally shears, ever so slightly, from the absorbed energy, turning it into heat.

The DampClamp is designed to cover most of the record label, meaning if you don’t lift the stylus at the end of the tonearm before buying. Tall spindles can also be a problem. The BasClamp ($99) is just a weight: half a DampClamp with no elastomer damping sandwich.

Which works best for you will be a matter of taste and associated equipment, especially platter and mat material. The DampClamp made an enormous difference on my Simon Yorke turntable with Bluebird mat: it damped, producing blacker backgrounds and greater overall clarity, but in my setup it overdamped, creating a thicker, heavier sound than I like. Bright setups and those in need of some rhythmic discipline and bottom-end weight may benefit greatly. I preferred the $99 BasClamp on my rig, but the DampClamp may be your ticket to analog paradise. You’ll surely hear a difference with either of them—or with any weight or clamp.

The Hagerman Technology Uniform Frequency Orbiter (UFO) Strobeclamp ($39, half-kit, www.hagtech.com) is a DIY kit that’s relatively easy to build: a three-speed, crystal-controlled electronic strobe using blue LEDs powered by two 3V camera batteries. Hagerman recommends using an aluminum “slug,” which you have to drill with a ½” bit (a drill press is highly recommended) and then epoxy to the strobe. Or use a hockey puck (!), which is what my prebuilt sample came with. The UFO is not elegant and is surely not for every taste, but it’s fun. It can be used to check your table’s speed (though its small scale makes it somewhat difficult to read) as well as damp it with the material of your choice. A hockey puck is cute, but neither heavy nor dense enough to make an effective damping material. I didn’t do a double-blind test of the Strobeclamp, and maybe it was my imagination, Arnie, but the sound seemed kind of glary and disorganized compared to the BasClamp, and the bass was, er, rubbery (I swear!). An aluminum slug probably would work better with Hagerman’s useful outer-space strobe.

As for the Shun Mook LP Record Clamp, it produced the most consistent results, especially with the Bluebird mat. Its price ($279) makes it a bit expensive, but if you’re after the ultimate in damping, it might be worth it.
clamp that just plain made it come alive. For $1701 less, the Locus Basiclamp was a good if very distant second. I'm happier to report that.

While I didn't do "scientifically sanctioned" double-blind tests on these weights, I did have a friend alternate the two Locus weights and the Shun Mook on the fly as I listened, not knowing which was which. (The Hageman hockey puck required too much downward pressure to take part.) Then I did the switching while my friend listened. We both preferred the Shun Mook; the Basiclamp came in second, the Dampclamp third because it sounded "too dead"—even though killing off all secondary parasitic resonances in the vinyl would seem to be the ideal.

Tonearm weirdness
How about a pivoted tangential-tracking tonearm? Sounds like an oxymoron, but apparently the young Swiss designer Michal Huber has built one. An English-language explanation of the design was not available at press time, but I figured you might like to have a look (above).

Eastern Electric MiniMax phono preamp
The Eastern Electric MiniMax, a tubed moving-magnet, moving-coil phono preamp designed in Hong Kong and built in China, hits all the right chords in terms of audiophile eye candy (www.eeaudio.com). While the Eastern Electric brand name is a bit cute—even the logo's typeface apes Western Electric's—the MiniMax has that soothing gray "Air Tight" look. The all-tube design by Alex Yeung, whom I've been told is well known and respected among Asian audio buffs, is quite serious. It features 6X4 tube rectification and three factory-matched 12AX7s for gain and buffering, the central shielded tube providing the first gain stage for both channels and the outer ones the second gain stage and output buffering. Substituting your own choice of tubes is not only possible but encouraged by the instruction manual—but, as is my practice and Stereophile's policy, I reviewed the unit with the supplied stock tubes.

The MiniMax's build and parts quality seem quite high, especially at its price of $1499. Key to the design, I was told, were the high-quality transformers: one for the power supply, plus an equally large choke, plus a pair of larger Permalloy-core MC step-up transformers. Add point-to-point signal-path wiring, what appear to be high-quality circuit boards for the rest of the power supply, and hardwired, chassis-mounted, gold-plated RCA jacks, and you have what appears to be a sumptuous piece of kit, as they say in the UK. The MiniMax is imported by Morningstar Audio (www.morningstaraudio.com), which offers a two-year warranty on parts and labor, 60 days on tubes.

Dual taps on the MiniMax's MC transformer provide 40 and 100 ohm inputs to better match cartridge internal impedance with transformer impedance for maximum power transfer. Gain is said to be 42dB (MM) and 57dB (MC), which should be sufficient for all but the lowest-output MC cartridges, while the claimed signal/noise ratios are a respectable 90dB (MM) and 87dB (MC). The input sensitivities are 15mV (MM) and 4mV (MC), the maximum output a healthy 20V.

To test the MiniMax's MM input I installed Sumiko's superb-sounding, high-output MC Blackbird ($750). The MiniMax's first obvious quality was the 12AX7 tube's midrange magic—which I'm sure would be only
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WHEN I DROVE THE MINIMAX WITH THE LYRA TITAN CARTRIDGE, THE PREAMP OPENED UP DRAMATICALLY ON TOP WHILE MAINTAINING ITS ADDICTIVELY SWEET MIDRANGE.

more pronounced with some new old stock (NOS) Telefunkens or some other vintage tubes. Vocals were fleshy and palpable, and images had satisfying weight, body, and three-dimensionality on impressively deep, wide, and believable soundstages. Acoustic instruments were rendered naturally with no hint of etch or artificial electronica. String tones were rich, full-bodied, and well textured. Brass and percussion were somewhat muted and softened, however, with rounded transients.

I pulled out an original Parlophone pressing of the Beatles’ A Hard Day’s Night and compared the MiniMax’s performance with both the Manley Steelhead ($7300) and the Graham Slee Era Gold Mk.V ($925, MM only) phono preamps, the latter my benchmark MM preamp. The MiniMax’s midband performance was stellar without regard to price. Compared to the other two preamps driven by the Blackbird, the MiniMax’s slight midbass warmth—right where it’s needed with small, honest, two-way speakers—pleasingly brought out the bongos on “You Can’t Do That,” though not to the point of turning the picture soggy or limp. The MiniMax’s high-frequency performance in MM mode was slightly muted, and transients were somewhat soft compared to the Manley and Graham Slee, though neither of those had the MiniMax’s special midrange glow. Whether that quality will swamp your system or complement it, I can’t say. But if I were running an MM or a high-output MC, when I drove the MiniMax with the Lyra Titan cartridge, which costs three times its price, the preamp opened up dramatically on top while maintaining its addictively sweet midrange.

The Lyra Titan’s 3 ohm internal impedance suggested that it might sound better connected to the transformer’s “low” (40 ohms) tap, which it did; why the 100 ohm tap sounded so much brighter I don’t know. The Steelhead’s higher-impedance taps choked off the highs, which makes sense: efficiency was hindered. The Eastern Electric’s input choices behaved more like resistive loading than transformer matching. Perhaps the designer or importer can explain.

In any case, when driven by a topshelf MC phono cartridge, the MiniMax sounded laughably good—be prepared to give up the dynamic scaling of far more expensive phono preamps such as the Steelhead. And while the MiniMax’s bass was well-controlled and taut, it wasn’t nearly as extended or as fully developed as you’ll hear with far more expensive phono preamps. But I don’t think most buyers will use the MiniMax with a +$4000 cartridge or the super-revealing Wilson Audio MAXX2 loudspeakers.

Eastern Electric’s MiniMax phono preamp is on the mellow side, addic-
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Balanced and unbalanced outputs are provided, with both available simultaneously and no pins to ground. The maximum output is claimed to be 18V, with AA accuracy "around" 0.1dB from 15Hz to 20kHz. (The XR-10B's input sensitivity, overload margins, and signal/noise ratios were not listed in the specs.) All of this is contained in two relatively small boxes 9" wide by 6" deep by less than 2" high. The XR-10B is built and hand-assembled in the US using hand-matched components, and all units are burned in before shipping. The price is $4500.

The first things the buyer needs to ask when considering such a product is Do I need this much switching flexibility? and Do I need three inputs? Because that's a lot of what your $4500 buys. A reviewer will find both indispensable, but unless you have multiple tonearms and/or turntables, you're buying options you don't need. But if you're concerned that all that switching circuitry will degrade the signal, let me allay your fears: However Ray Samuels has configured it, and despite all its switches, the XR-10B's resolution, dynamic range, and frequency extension—especially its low-bass depth and grip—were astonishing. I can get 20Hz and below from my Wilson Audio MAXX2 loudspeakers, and the XR-10B was well up to that task. I was reminded mostly of the overall presentation of the more expensive, battery-powered Friedrich Schaeffer ASR, and that's high praise indeed. (The ASR is actually two complete phono preamps on a single chassis. Both are IC, op-amp based.)

The Emmeline XR-10B's transparency and resolution of low-level details were about as close to "in the studio" as I've heard from a phono preamp. While it wasn't quite as suave as the far more expensive Boulder 2008, it generated the same level of excitement in terms of immediacy and, especially, rhythm 'n' pace. Backgrounds were jet-black, though there was audible hiss at moderate volume with no signal. Transients were crystalline pure without sounding hard or etched, though I preferred the Lyra Titan cartridge loaded down to 100 ohms through the XR-10B; otherwise, it tended to sound a bit bright.

When I again played the Beatles' 'A Hard Day's Night' using the Lyra Titan, it sounded like a different album from how it had sounded through the warm Mini-Max. It wasn't nearly as lush and rich, but instrumental and vocal separation and the ability to hear all of the studio tricks and moves in the mix—particularly the artificial reverberant field in which the group was placed—were revelatory. Especially noticeable were the clarity and articulation of the tambourine in "I'll Cry Instead." The vocals were laid out with the unforced delicacy and palpability I'm used to hearing from the far more expensive Manley Steelhead, though the XR-10B lacks the Steelhead's slight tubey bloom.

When I compared the 180gm and 200gm Quiec SV-P pressings of Classic Records' vinyl reissue of Crosby, Stills & Nash (Atlantic SD-8229), the differences were exposed with ease: the 200gm version, pressed from the same mastering, offered far tighter, deeper, and more expressive bass. Dynamics were noticeably better, transparency was increased, and the top end was other and more transparent, yet transients were sharper and faster. I'd never heard CS&N sound this good before. Recordings with more natural reverberation proved equally revealing. The XR-10B dug up all of the details and laid them out for me to enjoy with natural, nonmechanical ease.

The XR-10B will sound bright in some systems even if you load down your cartridge, and will probably sound...
threadbare in the midband in others—and if you like the sort of warmth and velvety richness the MiniMax provides, you might think the XR-10B sounds "electronic" and somewhat parched. But I don’t, especially because of the top end’s delicacy and cleanliness, which were addictive. Still, the XR-10B did emphasize transient attack over harmonic development, and I’ve heard richer string tone. If your system needs more richness, this may not be the phono preamp for you. On the other hand, if your system is a bit sluggish and syrupy, the Emmeline could provide a wakeup call.

Needless to say, a phono preamp this revealing demands a careful choice of cables. I found the Shunyata Research Antares to be the ideal match for the XR-10B. It has the midband richness the XR-10B needs without compromising its transparency and speed. It produced just the right balance to let strings sound rich and full yet still well detailed. Don’t prejudge the ultrarevealing XR-10B before considering the cables you’re using.

Although my review sample of the Emmeline had been broken-in by Ray Samuels himself, I found it needed a few more days of warmup and use before it began to cohere and sound musically together—especially on the bottom. Once it locked in, though—and with the Wilson MAXX2s, which really plumb the depths—I knew it! I found the XR-10B equally good in MM and MC modes. The combo of the $750 Blackbird and the XR-10B was nothing short of synergistic and sensational, the cartridge’s upper-midband richness perfectly complementing the preamp’s transparency and transient speed. But the XR-10B’s resolution demonstrated why the Blackbird costs $750 and the Titan $4500.

The Ray Samuels Audio Emmeline XR-10B is to phono preamps as electrostats are to loudspeakers: lightning-fast, transparent, clean, quiet, and extended on top. But unlike most electrostats, it has awesome dynamics at both ends of the scale, subwooferlike bottom-end extension and control, and it doesn’t “beam.” If your musical tastes are mostly rock and jazz and you can spend $4500, the XR-10B should be on your short list, especially as it comes with a try-it-at-home, no-obligation, money-back guarantee. How can you go wrong? The XR-10B is a sensational phono preamplifier.

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www.triereference.com, October 2005
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S
one thing has changed for the better. People say it's easier to get a decent meal in Moscow than it used to be, and, almost regardless of one's views on organized religion, it's good that Russians can now worship as they please, and that they've responded to their newfound freedom with a hopeful fervor.

Then again, now that Russia is catching up with the rest of the world on so many fronts, it may be only a matter of time before their venerated classical music tradition is dragged through the alleys of commerce and spoiled: shot through with the same greed and soul-rotting thirst for titillation that so many others have suffered.

For the time being, Russian music remains unadulterated, and that's what lured the Grammy Award-winning producer Kavi Alexander to Saint Petersburg, a city that was off-limits to American record companies for most of the 20th century. In 2003, after literally decades of trying, Alexander was granted access to the legendary Great Hall of Saint Petersburg, home to both the Saint Petersburg Philharmonic and the Saint Petersburg Academic Symphony. The immediate results of his efforts are three new Water Lily SACDs.

The atmosphere was a boon to Alexander. "For the time being, Russian music remains unadulterated, and that's what lured the Grammy Award-winning producer Kavi Alexander to Saint Petersburg, a city that was off-limits to American record companies for most of the 20th century. In 2003, after literally decades of trying, Alexander was granted access to the legendary Great Hall of Saint Petersburg, home to both the Saint Petersburg Philharmonic and the Saint Petersburg Academic Symphony. The immediate results of his efforts are three new Water Lily SACDs.

The atmosphere was also a boon to the other purpose of Kavi Alexander's first trip to Russia: making a series of test recordings with his field setup, comprising a Tascam DA-98HR— and Pearl extended-range microphones. The Pearls use long, rectangular capsules, which Alexander describes as having line-source-like properties: "I don't know the physics," he says, "but [the capsule shape] seems to give an enhanced sense of imaging." He used two microphones in a Blumlein configuration suspended 15' above the floor and 15' from the first row of players.

"The Saint Petersburg Philharmonic has their own sound engineer," Alexander says, "and during my second visit he asked me, 'How did you arrive at this microphone position?' So I told him that I had been to the hall before and made some test recordings—and he said that I had arrived at the very same positions that the Soviet acousticians had found to be best!"

Encouraged by the success of those test recordings, Alexander returned to Russia in September 2003 to make the recordings that would comprise the first wave of Water Lily's Saint Petersburg releases. This time he enlisted the aid of a very friendly cab driver— "He was astounded when I offered to pay him to be my driver for an entire day"—which gave Alexander even greater freedom to breathe in all the art that Saint Petersburg has to offer. "Every morning I would start by going to a different Orthodox church—each one a museum, a place of great spiritual and artistic value. I went to light candles and smell the frankincense and listen to the beautiful music. I also went to the conservatory at Saint Petersburg, and it, too, is a holy place: The people there truly worship music."

And every day, there were concerts at the Great Hall. "The audiences in Saint Petersburg are incredibly passionate and well-versed," Alexander says. "To them, a concert is not a social event, a place to show off your mink coat. They are so passionate about recording the Shostakovich Seventh, whose program refers to the Nazi siege of Leningrad during World War II: "On the day of the recording, the stage hand, whose name was Victor, came up to me and said, 'You're going to record the Shostakovich tonight, right?' I said yes, and immediately Victor began telling me his own story about the siege of the city. He told me about the horrors he witnessed, and how his grandparents went..."
hungry so that their grandchildren would have enough to eat— all of this with tears streaming down his face.

"So, that evening, there is Victor at the concert, front-row seat, looking grand in a double-breasted suit with a carnation in his lapel. I was so moved to see him. And I looked at the front of the stage, and there is a portrait of Shostakovich, surrounded with flowers. And then I see him at the front: Maxim Shostakovich, the composer’s son..."

Alexander couldn’t linger with the audience, but had to retire to the recording booth—not that that was any great hardship. "I was in a separate room, where I had complete silence, listening through headphones. I was surrounded by Czarist artifacts: I know nothing about furniture, but these were obviously valuable and very-well-preserved antiques. This was by no means a mere monitoring room, but a place made more for the reception of royals."

The surroundings were in keeping with the way Alexander was treated during his work at the Great Hall. "Were the people friendly? I was treated with kid gloves, like a visiting dignitary. At one point a woman threw a flower at me! What an amazing world!"

**Temirkanov & Mahler**

The Shostakovich performance was surely an important event in Saint Petersburg’s recent musical history, and the Water Lily recording of it is satisfying in every way. Still, it’s the Mahler 5, under the direction of Temirkanov, that has spent the most time in my CD player. “The Saint Petersburg Philharmonic has only recorded Mahler once before,” according to Kavi Alexander. "The Second, under Tennstedt, for an Italian label. And it is unfindable. Non-existent! So, for all intents and purposes, this is the first Mahler disc from Saint Petersburg." Alexander looks forward to reaching committed Mahlerians with his new release. "People who buy the Mahler will buy it for the music; they won’t care if it’s three microphones or 30. And that’s good."

"I think that Yuri Temirkanov is one of the very best living conductors, on a par with the greats. Because he doesn’t have the fancy haircut or the three-day Hollywood growth, he gets overlooked. And he will not do interviews: ‘You want to know about me? Listen to my music.’ But he is the last of his breed. When he is gone, that is it.”

Temirkanov’s Mahler is epic, and completely unlike any other that I’ve heard.1 The first movement’s funeral march is gentler and considerably slower than most, and that alone gives the orchestra’s nearly klezmeresque outbursts a contrast starker than usual. (Nowhere in the entire piece does the Saint Petersburg Philharmonic sound more Russian.) But it’s in the third..."
LISTENING

movement—the real center of the Fifth in every sense—that Temirkanov and his players catch fire and raise the level of concentration to a point where nothing is predictable, and where the symphony seems almost to compose itself as it goes along. That tension is maintained even through the famous Adagietto, played here without schmaltz, and the Philharmonic hurries toward a very satisfying finale. I could complain that the funeral march is so deliberate that there's effectively no room for a dramatic slowing at the very end of the movement—which is true—but superficial tempogriping is too often the sole province of the armchair conductor, so I'll just say that this is one of the few Mahler Fifths that really, consistently works for me.

The sound is outstanding. It's the least compressed orchestral recording I know of, and the overall level seems to have been set unusually low at the mastering stage. So in order to get the full effect of the symphony's wide dynamic swings, as well as to catch all the subtle details (the \textit{col legno} strings at the end of the first movement, for example, are less than vivid here), you'll want to goose up the volume somewhat. You'll be rewarded with a very real sense of a large orchestra playing on an unusually wide stage. My only complaint regarding the engineering is that I wish the audience's applause at the end hadn't been faded out so soon.

As hinted above, the SACD release is in true DSD sound, which I admire for its superior, analoglike sense of momentum and flow—digital's real stumbling block, as opposed to such ephemera as sound that is bright or flat or both. It also has a multichannel layer, which seems a bit odd, given that the recording was made with only two microphones. But, as Kavi Alexander explains, those two channels were teased into a multichannel architecture at the mastering stage using a mathematical model developed by Robert Greene, a UCLA professor who also writes for The Absolute Sound. I didn't audition that layer, not only because my system does "only" two-channel (and mono!), but because I'm not really interested in multichannel. Alexander seems to share at least some of my ambivalence: "I think most of these multitrack SACDs are bogus: You have this loud orchestra in front of you, and this slightly less loud orchestra behind you, and it sounds ridiculous. Where in the world do you have a cello behind you? That might impress the people who are entertained by the sounds of jet planes going over their head in the movies, but..."

Incidentally, their Russian provenance isn't the only remarkable thing about the three new albums: These are also the first all-solid-state, all-digital recordings from Water Lily Acoustics. Take \textit{that}, you purists—but take heart, too, in the knowledge that Kavi Alexander also recorded the Saint Petersburg concerts in analog, on his Stellavox, simultaneous with the DSD masters. LP versions will be released in the foreseeable future.

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Petty Gripes
A couple of years ago, Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers put on a concert at the Saratoga Performing Arts Center in Saratoga Springs, New York, which is where I lived at the time. I went with my friend Leigh Gibson, who scored some very good seats, and the show was wonderful: a near-perfect blend of musicianship, visual effects, showmanship, and great songs. Just two or three songs into the set, Petty debuted the first of many tunes from his then-new album, The Last DJ: the subtle “Have Love, Will Travel.” I decided then and there to buy the CD the next day.

Which is how those things are supposed to work, I guess. I’d already heard the new album’s title song—a wistfully edgy broadside against the septic tank that is the broadcast industry. It has since evolved into (I suppose I should say “has changed slowly into over time,” to appease the people who do control most of the airwaves)—and I’d also read somewhere that The Last DJ was something of a concept album, with many of the songs plowing a similar furrow. I was as presold as a man can be. But I didn’t just buy the CD: I decided to spend a few extra bucks on the package that contained the CD and the bonus DVD, The Last DJ Sessions.

I’ve just now finished watching the DVD for the first time—I’m on a gentle video curve up here—and it was one of the most appalling things I’ve seen on a television screen since Queen for a Day, or maybe that awful show about disfigured people who get free plastic surgery and then “present” themselves at some stupid wedding-mill lobby. I mean, here’s this really good album, with a theme running through it about how the music industry has become even more shallow and phony than it ever was…and the companion DVD is made up of lip-syncing, pick-syncing, grievously bad drumstick-syncing, and some contrived scenes of Petty pretending to go over the string charts, or to “compose” one of his songs on the spot at the piano. At another point, he says to the camera, “Yeah, we’ll shoot the rehearsal,” before launching into “Have Love, Will Travel” with a lineup of musicians who, according to the liner notes, did not play on the song—yet what we hear is obviously the finished album version. What utter bullshit!

I enjoyed The Last DJ a hell of a lot more before I watched the DVD. I thought Petty was cool. I admired his candor and his lack of pretense. Now I can’t hear those songs without picturing the posing and the somnambulant lip-syncing. And as for the Heartbreakers, it’s depressing to see so many fiftysomething guys with dye jobs—the kind where their hair gets that black-plus-magenta look that wouldn’t fool Doc Watson. (Charles Dutoit has that magenta thing going, too, but at least he’s in his 70s.)

If this is the sort of element that video is supposed to add to audio, you can keep it.

I still respect Tom Petty, who consistently writes and sings wonderful songs, and I wouldn’t bother making these criticisms if his music didn’t mean something to me. But projecting an equally sincere and committed persona on the small screen is apparently not his forte, notwithstanding a few early, great videos in MTV’s salad days. He or his management should have shown the door to whoever it was who proposed The Last DJ Sessions.

Side 2
A pop quiz: What do the songs “Within You Without You” (Beatles), “This Time Tomorrow” (Kinks), “She Sells” (Roxy Music), “Queen Jane Approximately” (Bob Dylan), “The World Turns All Around Her” (Byrds), “Here Comes the Sun” (Beatles again), “California” (Joni Mitchell), “Oh, Lonesome Me” (Neil Young’s cover of Don Gibson’s song), and even “The Old Revolution” (Leonard Cohen) have in common?

Each is identifiably a side 2 opening song—a song selected for being just the right thing to hear after finishing side 1 and flipping the record over. A side 2 opener has to be strong, if not quite as strong as a side 2 closer (let alone a side 1 opener), but a side 2 opener also tends to be lighter in subject matter than the rest of the material on the album—and sometimes downright humorous. Side 2 openers make good singles, although on an album that has more than one of those, the first place of pride is, or was, often given to the second song on side 1.

A collection of songs on a CD can be thought of as an album: I have no trouble with that. But my concept of the pop-music album at its best was forged when the LP was the medium of choice. And the best artists of the day—and even a few of the worst—knew that an album had an Act I and an Act II, and they worked it out accordingly: There’s a certain kind of song that works best at the end of side 1, or in second place on side 2, or just before the album closer, or whatever. The Kinks and the Beatles were best at it, but, hell, this is something even Simon and Garfunkel figured out after a while. (“Fakin’ It,” though a mildly awful song, fared better for beginning Bookends’ second side.)

Which brings me to my newest old whine. I hesitate to mention it, because I don’t want to discourage any of the good work that’s been doing these days, but when vinyl reissue specialists sit down to reissue vinyl, I wish they’d resist the temptation to alter the songs’ running order. The most bothersome example I’ve encountered lately is Mobile Fidelity Sound Lab’s otherwise fine vinyl remastering of John Lennon’s “first” solo album, Plastic Ono Band. As a lad, when a friend first introduced me to that album, I scarcely let my turntable for months on end: Rock music got no better, I thought, and God bless Phil Spector for keeping it simple. Later, in my 30s, I rejected the album completely for the unintentional silliness of Lennon’s simpleminded edits, and because the stripped-down arrangements began to strike me as calculated. Now, three and a half decades after its release, I’ve found charm in its sillinesses and made peace with its pretenses. I’m back to thinking it’s a wonderful album.

But I want to hear side 1 end with “Isolation,” side 2 begin with “Remember,” and the album close with “My Mummy’s Dead.” Unfortunately, MoFi glued “Remember” onto the end of side 1, and tacked on two more songs at the end of side 2: “Power to the People” and “Do the Oz.”

If it were up to me, I wouldn’t have bothered with either of the bonus cuts, anyway: “Power to the People” is a forgettable ditty whose overcooked arrangement stands out like a sore thumb amid such spare fare as “Mother” and “Love”; “Do the Oz,” cowritten and performed with Yoko Ono, would stink in any setting. But in the noble effort to satisfy completists who do want those tracks on vinyl, a separate 7” single might have been the answer.

Mobile Fidelity’s Plastic Ono Band is nonetheless good enough to deserve a place in your collection, and I continue to enjoy it—although I find myself lifting the needle out of the groove one track before the end of side 1 and pausing a good couple of minutes before lowering it again to play “Remember.” More silliness, I know—but wasn’t Gustav Mahler barking up the same tree when he asked conductors to leave a silence of five minutes between the first and second movements of his Symphony 2?
Reference

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I recently spent a few days filling in for a local engineer, recording middle-school and high-school bands and choral ensembles. This was a requirement of the statewide music-educator adjudication process. (Don't laugh; recording high-school bands is how Telarc got its start.)

It was an interesting experience. One of the first things it did for me was to make me wish I had an M/S (Mid/Side, or "sum and difference") microphone array and a variable M/S matrix. (I hope to return to M/S recording in a future column.) It also made me wish that I had one of those new, ultracool, portable, high-resolution hard-disk recorders—such as the Sound Devices 722 (www.sounddevices.com). To heft one, as I have, is to crave it. With any luck, I can cover that in a later column, too.

But the most salient impression the experience made on me was to prompt me to revisit one of my perennial topics: cost-effective stereo systems for music lovers. In conversation with the out-of-state adjudicators and with several local teachers, it became apparent to me that high-end audio has made few (if any) inroads into the awareness of people who have chosen to dedicate their working lives to teaching music to children. Friends, there is a lot wrong with this picture!

Were I an audio retailer, it would seem to me that at least some of the music educators in my area might be good prospects for home-audio systems set up for music rather than for home theater. Perhaps I would offer to set up a demonstration system at their next annual meeting—or, working with the local person who records their adjudications, invite them to bring the CDRs of their ensembles' performances into my store, so they could hear them on a good system.

Music educators are not rolling in money, and we know that every last one of them will be laid off before the first sports coach is. On the other hand, they are not dirt-poor, and a music teacher often makes up part of a two-earner family. I can't help but think that the audio retailer who meets them at least halfway will get some word-of-mouth marketing going. It's a question of priorities. Perhaps retailers could do a better job of selling to people who are not equipment hobbyists, the value proposition of a high-end audio system. If a high-school music teacher buys a Mazda Miata (the name, I've been told, is Italian girlspeak for "luv ya!") as a weekend-and-summer car, most people will say "Good for him (or her)." Spending an equivalent amount of money on a stereo system that can be enjoyed every day of the year and is also directly related to the teacher's career (I make no suggestion as to its tax treatment) doesn't seem to be happening. But it should.

Which leads to the near-eternal question: What is the least amount of money you can spend and still get most of the sound you want to hear? Recent experiences with three loudspeakers, an integrated amplifier, and an FM receiver have provided some at least tentative answers. But first, a bit of background.

Years ago, when I was writing for The Absolute Sound, I did a series of columns organized around the concept that I was picking out a stereo system for the great American poet Wallace Stevens. Yes, I knew that he had been dead since 1955, but I think of him as the most musical and musically sensitive of the great American poets.

The test piece I ordained for that quest was the—as far as I am concerned—still unsurpassed recording of Brahms' Ein deutsches Requiem, sung (in German) by the Atlanta Symphony and Chorus conducted by Robert Shaw (CD, Telarc CD-80092). The first three minutes are magisterial. The string basses' throbbing is augmented by extremely deep, steady tones on the organ pedals. The entry of the chorus is perfectly judged in all respects. Even if listening to the entire work is not your cup of tea, the first three minutes should be in your arsenal of test tracks.

(I have asked Telarc to consider reissuing the original recording as an SACD. However, if it was not a Stockham Soundstream 50kHz master, query the benefit compared simply to playing the plain old CD (POCD)) on a good upconverting player. I'm not prejudging that outcome, merely querying. The Stockham system was a very good digital recording system that failed to catch on; much the same can be said of dbx's delta-sigma digital recorder.)

In retrospect, perhaps the choice of the Shaw Brahms Requiem was too stringent a test. Joined by Mahler's symphonies and bits and pieces of other orchestral works, the German Requiem is really at one end of the bell curve in terms of its audio demands. (This includes rock and pop music. Rock and pop gets played at high volume levels, but its dynamic range and, except for synth bass, frequency range are less than those of orchestral music.) As it was, the only "affordable" speakers that could do justice to the Brahms' frequency and dynamic requirements were Shahinian Obelisks, and only when driven by a Plinius 8150 integrated amplifier.

Unfortunately, in the interval since I made those explorations, the falling dollar has taken its toll. The Obelisks are made here, but almost entirely of components imported into the US (including the Baltic-birch plywood for the cabinets). Back then they cost $2800/pair; now they're $4400/pair. The Plinius 8150's successor is the 9200. The 8150 then was $2995; the 9200 now is $4095. So, even though both remain excellent choices for the
lover of large-scale orchestral works, they’re getting up there in price.

My first stop on this new trip was Harbeth’s HL-3P-ES2 ($1595/pair, stands required), Harbeth’s drop-in replacement for the BBC’s LS3/5a broadcast monitor.1 Stands were the Sound Organisation’s sturdy, affordable, 24"-high Z570s, a bargain at $245/pair (www.soundorg.com). Harbeth’s US importer, Walter Swanbon (www.fidelisay.com), graciously hand-delivered the HL-3P-ES2s and set them up, using some Mortite I had on hand. After hearing about an hour’s worth of music, Walter pronounced himself satisfied with the setup and with my listening room.

Gloriosky, these little speakers are just great to listen to! Over and above placement and bass-mode problems, Walter pronounced himself satisfied with the setup and with my listening room.

The drawback is that they lack low bass. (Quelle surprise—their woofer is the size of a CD.) A good subwoofer might almost bridge that gap, keeping in mind that a good subwoofer (one that can play musical tones, as distinct from reproducing the artificial foot-steps of artificial dinosaurs) is not going to be cheap, and your low bass will then be in mono. But I cheerfully admit that, in certain rooms, the satellite/sub approach can be the most affordable way to get around speaker-placement and bass-mode problems.

About listening to music through the HL-3P-ES2s: Sometimes I think we may deceive ourselves. We think of certain tracks as “test tracks,” yet are such tracks (I have my favorites, as longtime readers will know) really more likely to point out flaws in the speakers, or are they more apt to flatter the speakers, to make them sound good?

Here’s an example of what I mean. My friend Jeff Mitchell was, on balance, skeptical of Dynaudio’s 25th-anniversary loudspeakers’ value proposition (you can read my comments on this speaker at www.stereophile.com/thefifthelement/762/index2.html). But after I’d played for him John Atkinson’s recording of Cantus singing “Shenanadoah,” from Let Your Voice Be Heard (CD, Cantus CTS1201),2 he turned to me and said, “John, if that had been the only track I’d heard, I’d say these were the best speakers in the world.”

In the same vein, Bob Saglio, a dealer chum, calls my desert-island pick of Ella Fitzgerald singing Cole Porter’s “Easy to Love” “God’s gift to the high-end audio industry.” He has never heard it sound anything less than listenable. There perhaps is something to be said for having some not-very-good tracks in one’s listening pile; an accurate system should make them sound not very good. Suggestions invited.

Be that however it may, Harbeth’s HL-3P-ES2s were nothing short of brilliant on a trio of Mobile Fidelity Sound Lab (www.mflspl.com) SACD/CD hybrids of mono jazz reissues from 1956, ’57, and ’58: Steamin’ with the Miles Davis Quintet (UDSACD 2019), Sonny Rollins’ Plus 4 (UDSACD 2006), and John Coltrane’s Soultrane (UDSACD 2020). SACD playback was via Esoteric’s X-01. (Yes, I know; it should go back. Breaking up is hard to do.)

Do not for a moment let the fact that these SACDs derive from monophonic masters stop you from enjoying the wonderful playing. In terms of timbre and dynamics, their sound (Rudy van Gelder engineered) is actually very good, lacking only the last quantity of luster and punch. Concerning imaging and soundstaging, I prefer honest mono to sound that masquerades as stereo, but in fact is a compilation of mono tracks artificially panned to left, right, and center (Kind of Blue, anyone?). In addition to the original liner notes, MFSL’s SACD reissues include new critical essays that place the recordings in a larger context. Highly recommended. If you can spring for only one, I recommend Soultrane, for the plangency of “I Want to Talk About You” and “Theme for Ernie.”

Interestingly enough, while listening to these three mono jazz recordings from the 1950s (each, of course, with an upright double-bass) through the Harbeth HL-3P-ES2s, I felt that I was not missing much at all in the low bass, whereas on large orchestral works and rock I very much missed the bottom octave. What follows is merely a partially educated guess, but: perhaps a hollow-body acoustical string bass has an even more harmonically rich frequency spectrum than that of an electric bass guitar.

As JA has pointed out in his online annotations to Stereophile’s Test CD 2 (www.stereophile.com/features/338), an electric bass guitar’s lowest note is E=41.2Hz, but the overtone at the first octave (82.4Hz) is 11dB louder than the fundamental. That is, that overtone has nearly four times as much energy as the fundamental. If that’s how an electric bass works, and if a string bass has even stronger harmonics compared to its fundamental tones, then it would indeed be easier to follow the bass lines on these recordings, even though the HL-3P-ES2s were not doing justice to the fundamentals. Hmmm...

The first amplification component I tried with the HL-3P-ES2s was the compact but rugged Audio Analogue Primo 70Wpc integrated amp ($850), which so impressed Sam Tel-

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Whatever the budget
Whatever the system
lig in the June 2004 “Sam’s Space.” The Primo had very nice sound and surprising drive capability. It’s good value for money, and I enjoyed my time with it.

But there were a few purely

eronomic issues. Because the user controls are microprocessor-based, powering the Primo down and up would always reset the input selection to Phono and the volume to zero. Now, to have one’s car radio’s volume reset itself automatically to zero whenever the car is shut off is something devoutly wished by parents of teenagers, but it is not what most of us are used to from our stereos.

Eventually (by no means shortly; it took weeks of annoyance), I developed the knack of turning the Primo on and then, instead of moving on to the CD player, pushing the amp’s input selector button and switching its large, circular volume knob. The Primo’s volume knob, you see, has a very limited range of motion; it wants only an indication of which direction, up or down, you want the volume to go in. Also, the volume increments were a bit too large, and the input indicator lights seemed less than 1mm in diameter and were recessed. The lights were visible only when looked at strictly on axis. Moreover, the remote control was small, and the legends for its buttons were slightly confusing. In short, if your weekly load of junk mail includes invitations to join AARP, perhaps the ergonomics of this otherwise fine amp will exasperate the dickens out of you. Apart from that, the Primo is a contendah for our hypothetical music teacher’s system. But I still had a hankering for something a little more old-school.

Until vintage-kit maestro Peter Breuninger can get around to writing up the joys of 1970s Marantz receivers, both quad and stereo, one’s old-school hankering are in good hands with Magnum Dynalab’s MD 208 F M- only receiver (1 00 Wpc, $2975, www.magnumdynalab.com). Chip Stern gave the MD-208 receiver a full and enthusiastic review in January 2001 (www.stereophile.com/amplificationreviews/329). I included it in one of the systems I suggested for Victoria’s Secret lingerie model Rebecca Romijn in “The Fifth Element” of May 2002 (Vol.25 No.5, www.stereophile.com/thefifthelement/582). It is a good example of what I was talking about a few columns ago: good products that remain in production may tend to fall off peoples’ radar screens. Beware the tyranny of the new.”

The Magnum Dynalab MD-208 combines an FM-only tuner and an integrated amplifier in one handsome, slightly retro-styled cabinet. (MD also makes an integrated amplifier that is in essence an MD-208 without the tuner. But with all that music on the air for free, I can’t see why anyone wouldn’t choose the receiver.) The front halves of the side panels of its chassis are adorned with thick, sculpted pieces of hardwood trim. The display panel is bracketed by two pivoting-needle analog meters, one for tuning, the other switchable between signal strength and multipath. The middle of the display panel is given over to two LED-segment numerical readouts. One indicates volume or the selected input, the other the station tuned to. Tuning is analog, via a large knob with a very silky feel.

The MD-208 has already been covered, so I’ll just note a few points and then come to a conclusion. The MD-208’s sound falls slightly on the smooth side, as distinct from hyper-defined. This very slightly forgiving sound is wonderful with most recordings. FM radio, however—especially, in my opinion, male announcers’ voices—might benefit from some slimming down and sharpening up. Most male announcers seem to cultivate a chest-heavy vocal production, which is exacerbated by certain microphones’ “proximity effect” of a 6dB/octave bass boost. I find it annoying, but you may not. (Johnny Carson, I’m told by someone in the know, had a reedy and somewhat annoying speaking voice, which is why his iconic desk microphone was an antique ribbon design with a figure-8 pickup pattern. Such a microphone has a very strong proximity effect and a very sweet top end.)

The MD-208’s volume control is on its left side. I find the right side a more intuitive location. You may not care. Input selection is accomplished by paging through all the inputs in order by repeatedly pushing the Input button. If you use only the Tuner and the CD input, going from CD to Tuner will involve several button-pushes.

One other issue is that although the

3 The MD-208 has remained essentially unchanged since 2001. However, by the time you read this, Magnum Dynalab will have made available an optional phono-input card, retrofittable to units already in the field.

Magnum Dynalab’s MD-208: Satisfy your retro yearnings.
MD-208 has a tape output, it does not have a tape loop as such. Similarly, its Process mode allows the connection of an HT processor that will override the MD-208’s volume control while using the MD-208’s power amplifier to drive your front channels. But again, that is not a loop. While the MD-208 does have Preamp Out jacks, it does not have Amplifier In jacks.

The only situation where all of that would make a difference is if you wanted to use an outboard equalizer or a processor such as Rives Audio’s PARC, which requires both a “send” and a “return”; i.e., a loop. Very much on the plus side, though, is the fact that the MD-208’s front Power switch is actually a standby switch; your volume, input, and station selections are saved and will come right back up.

THE MD-208 QUIETLY EXUDES CLASS AND IS A DELIGHT TO LISTEN TO.

The MD-208 quietly exudes class and is a delight to listen to. I would unhesitatingly recommend it to any music lover as the foundation of a high-quality music system that is long on performance and convenience and short on needless expense and complication. Are there better-sounding ways to skin a cat? Of course. But they are firmly in the land of diminishing returns.

Right under the wire: I raved about Stereovox’s cost-no-object reference-grade interconnects and speaker cables in the December 2002 “The Fifth Element” (Vol.25 No.12, www.stereophile.com/thefifthelement/742/index2.html). Stereovox has now issued Rev.II versions of both that are roughly 40% less expensive. (Changing the packaging from the totally over-the-top, black ballistic-cloth, red-velvet-lined orchestral cymbal cases to somewhat chintzy famous-maker aluminum attaché-case knockoffs probably contributed to the price reduction.) On preliminary but nonetheless high-confidence-factor audition, they are as impressive as the originals. The music had a more organic balance, yet with a full measure of detail.

Good show. (www.stereovox.com)

Next time: More speakers for our hypothetical music teacher.

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World Radio History
avid Chesky, whose company has been making superior recordings for nearly 20 years now, isn't from the engineering side of the business. He's talent—a pianist who sometimes performs on his label, a composer of classical and jazz selections integral to its catalog, and an arranger as well.

Chesky was born in October 1956, grew up in Miami, and began studying piano at age five because his mother, an eighth-grade teacher, decreed that "everybody in the house is going
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DAVID CHESKY

CHESKY: I came to New York because it’s Rome. This is a university in itself. I got a job in a jingle house writing music for television, and there were a lot of great orchestrators there, guys in their 50s and 60s. I learned from them. And that’s when I became very interested in sound.

LANDER: In 1986, you paid a call on Earl Wild, the distinguished classical pianist. He was a friend of your uncle’s, and you approached him for advice on composing. Wild gave you a budget LP copy of Rachmaninoff’s second piano concerto, which he had done for Reader’s Digest, but you said it didn’t sound good.

CHESKY: It didn’t, and I noticed it was recorded by Charles Gerhardt and Ken Wilkinson, guys with a great reputation, so I said, “Maybe we can hear the master tape one day.” Earl arranged it, and I went to hear the tape, and it was amazing—such a great, lush record. Charles Gerhardt, Ken Wilkinson—they started this whole audiophile recording ballgame. They laid the groundwork for everybody. That’s how I started the label. I went to Reader’s Digest and said, “Look, I like this. Can I reissue it in high-quality vinyl?”

LANDER: Chesky Records was initially in the business of reissuing classical titles on vinyl, but by 1988 you were actually producing recordings, the first of which featured the violinist Johnny Frigo with both Pizzarellis, Bucky and John. Now that your catalog contains more than 200 releases, what qualities do you feel are most essential to audiophile recording?

CHESKY: For me, there’s got to be total transparency and a realistic sense of imaging. Tonality must be realistic. Dynamics must be real, not compressed. If the engineers from the ’50s and ’60s heard what was going on today, they’d freak out, because those guys were audiophiles. What we’re doing is applying their philosophy, but with much better equipment. We go into a studio with one stereo mike, and we put a band in front of us. This is our mantra: one mike, natural perspective, real musicians in a real space. There’s real interplay between the musicians, and it makes them play differently. A lot of musicians hate it at first, because they’re used to an artificial environment where everything’s assembled, pasted together, and airbrushed, but after a few days they get used to it and really like it.

LANDER: You’ve long used exotic equipment to make your recordings.

CHESKY: We have so many things in our studio: a large selection of vintage tube mikes, our own custom tube mikes preamps and custom tube mike mixers. We use a lot of audiophile mike cable, and we have a SoundField mike that we had customized as well. We use Genex multichannel optical disc recorders, and we have a selection of A/D and D/A converters.

LANDER: As a longtime champion of high-resolution digital and the first to release a recording with 128x oversampling, do you want to comment on the format wars?

www.Stereophile.com, October 2005
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Michael Fremer, Stereophile, August, 2005

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Michael Fremer, Stereophile, August, 2005

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CHESKY: I don't care what the format is—SACD, DVD, Blu-ray—as long as it's one format and we go forward with it. I believe high-end audio is 15 years behind what's capable today, but we're locked in these political battles. We record in [Ambisonic] B-format, with a one-point mike that captures 360° around it. That gives us all the information of the live event from the same perspective a listener would have if he were there, and I can decode to four channels, six channels, or a hundred channels—any way a future format dictates. All the perspectives, all the spatial cues will be correct. But apart from surround sound, we still need to think about higher sampling frequencies, because 16-bit/44.1kHz doesn't capture the correct timbres of instruments.

LANDER: You've said that recording reviews should focus more on things like those timbres. Can you expand?

CHESKY: Take a hypothetical review of three recordings of Stravinsky's Rite of Spring, with [Lorin] Maazel conducting the New York Philharmonic, [Simon] Rattle with the Berlin [Philharmonic], and [Pierre] Boulez with the Chicago [Symphony]. I know they'll all be good—though maybe not exactly what I would have expected—and I'm tired of hearing music critics tell me about the performances they liked or would have liked. I want to know which recording will sound best when I get it home and play it on my expensive equipment. In a world where most people hear music on recordings, not live, we can't separate the music from the sound.

LANDER: I've heard you use the word tonality a lot.

CHESKY: Tonality is a big part of music. A great violinist works a lifetime to achieve beautiful tone. A reviewer ought to tell me if a recording makes it sound like he's playing on a Stradivarius or an instrument made of plywood. What sometimes annoys me is that most music critics have a double standard. In a live concert hall, they want soloists and orchestras to see a pastoral landscape when I close my eyes, but then I get pneumonia. It took a long while to recover.

LANDER: If a guy goes to McDonald's or Taco Bell, and goes to the movies and sees Batman, Spider-Man, etc., he's not going to walk home and say, "I want to hear Mahler Five." The only thing you want to talk about?

CHESKY: When I was 36, a problem developed, and 10 years later I had to have a valve replaced. The operation went well, but then I got pneumonia. It took a long while to recover.

LANDER: In the booklet for Area 31, a recent CD featuring your classical compositions [Stereophile's "Recording of the Month" for July 2005—Ed.], you make a point of thanking three doctors and the cardiothoracic staff of Mount Sinai Hospital "for really giving me the opportunity to do this recording." You've also agreed to participate in a testimonial advertisement for the hospital.

CHESKY: I'm enamored with scientists and doctors. They can do so many great things today. When it comes to medicine, we always want the best. Why can't people have the same attitude when it comes to culture?

LANDER: Did those medical experiences change your way of looking at things?

CHESKY: For a while, but pretty soon it was back to work and writing music.

LANDER: You've called the classical style you've been writing in most recently "neo-impressionistic," but I don't see a pastoral landscape when I close my eyes while listening to Area 31 perform your Violin Concerto.

CHESKY: I don't live on a farm in the pastoral countryside. I live in New York, a fast-moving, pulsating city. My new music is about pulse, all types of rhythm superimposed on each other. About 10 years ago, I started playing drums in an African band. It's a drum circle, a lot of guys from Ghana, Senegal, Ivory Coast. We get together on the weekends in Central Park and play. When I started, it was uncomfortable because it's very polyrhythmic, but I sat there one day and wrote these rhythms out and said, "God, are these things complicated!" Now, after 10 years, it feels natural.

LANDER: You've complained that classical music has been hijacked by academics.

CHESKY: It seems that the concept of the music is more important than the music itself today. The mass evacuation of youth from America's concert halls tells me what's happening there doesn't reflect our urban culture. When you live in an insulated academic environment, you might write music that pleases you but isn't relevant to our culture in general. This is just one aesthetic viewpoint, but to me music has to sound good, and it has to be visceral as well as intellectual. Music has to sweep you away. You have to be moved. Otherwise, what's the point?
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**500 TOP RECOMMENDED COMPONENTS**

Components listed here have been formally reviewed in *Stereophile* and have been found to be among the best available in each of four or five quality classes. Whether a component is listed in Class A or Class E, we highly recommend its purchase.

Each listing—in alphabetical order within classes—is followed by a brief description of the product's sonic characteristics and a code indicating the *Stereophile* Volume and Issue in which that product's report appeared. Thus, the September 2005 issue is indicated as "Vol.28 No.9."

Some products listed have not yet been reported on; these are marked (NR), for "Not Reviewed." We recommend that you read any product's entire review before seriously contemplating a purchase (products without reviews should therefore be treated with more caution)—many salient characteristics, peculiarities, and
Stereophile editors pick the industry's best products

500 RECOMMENDED COMPONENTS

TURNTABLES

therefore be regarded as a guarantee that we feel represents good value for it will continue to appear in this listing. A product received a favorable review cannot audition. The fact that a product defects that show up after extended Stereophiles reviewing staff and editors, compiled after consultation with money Bear in mind that many differ-

The prices indicated are those cur-

No.10 (October 2002). Longevity in a hi-fi component is rare enough that we think it worth noting (although it can also indicate that the attention of design engineers has moved elsewhere).

We are not sympathetic toward letters that appearance in Class D still means that “Recommended Components” will not tell you what to buy any more than Consumer Reports would presume to tell you whom to marry!

Class A
Best attainable sound for a component of its kind, almost without practical considerations; “the least musical compromise.” A Class A system is one for which you don’t have to make a leap of faith to believe that you’re hearing the real thing. With Super Audio CD, 24/96 DSD, and DVD-Audio now available, we have created a new Class, AA, for the best performance in those digital categories. Class A now represents the best that can be obtained from the conventional 16/44.1kHz CD medium. We also created Class A+ categories for turntables and phono preamps, to recognize the achievements of the Rockport Sirius and Boulder 2008, respectively.

Class B
The next best thing to the very best sound reproduction; Class B components generally cost less than those in Class A, but most Class B components are still quite expensive.

Class C
Somewhat lower-fi sound, but far more musically natural than average home-component high fidelity; products in this class are of high quality but still affordable.
that "it was in every way laughably better than anything else I'd ever heard." How so? Its overall presentation was so much bigger, more focused, solid, three-dimensional, sure-footed, dynamic, and seamless, that I lost my footing. Literally. I was floored. It rendered the LP with utter precision, "puts the stylus on a straight and true path across the record surface, allowing for precise adjustment of all parameters, which it then reliably holds indefinitely." (Vol.23 No.8; see also "Letters" in Vol.23 No.10 WW)

Avid Acutus: $12,000

Based on a main chassis that includes three spring-suspended towers and a cast-aluminum subchassis, the Acutus is built to be "extremely rigid but not critically damped." MF: "The theory behind all of this is to allow vibrational energy at the stylus/record interface to be quickly and efficiently transmitted to the main bearing and then to the subchassis, where, much like an electrical 'diode,' it can't travel back in the other direction."

Though MF was disappointed by the Acutus being more than 1% slow, it was still among the handful of the best turntables he's heard: "It definitely matched the SME 30/2 in the way the music emerged from jet-black silence. It's a Rockport System III Siritus. The Avid's bass was deep, powerful, very well-focused, and rhythmically nimble, though it couldn't match the SME's weight, drive, solidity, or ultimate control... The Acutus has an airier top end because I didn't find the overall sound at all bright, though tonally, its bass was "both softer and sweeter than playback-by-sound as though I was munching potato chips," said MF; it "sounded dead quiet on a conventional turntable could severely wavy ones. Its laser pickup was also unable to play moderately warped LPs, it would not play..."

Avid Acutus is akin to that of a CD player, complete with the ability to isolate the supporting base from horizontally and vertically induced vibrations, and its platter's speed can run at precisely 33.3 and 45rpm. Combined "deep, tight, basically free from real vibrations, and its platter's speed can run stably and ultra-low noise floor" 'floated' the sound with "big, full, weighty, and rich." The massive 'table's speed was "both softer and sweeter than playback-by-sound as though I was munching potato chips," said MF; it "sounded dead quiet on a conventional turntable could severely wavy ones. Its laser pickup was also unable to play moderately warped LPs, it would not play moderately warped LPs, it would not play;

The "remarkable-looking" Quattro Supreme is milled from one of "quiet — quiet and mood-tinting mid-and-louds, that "it was in every way laughably better than anything else I've ever heard." How so? Its overall presentation was so much bigger, more focused, solid, three-dimensional, sure-footed, dynamic, and seamless, that I lost my footing. Literally. I was floored. It rendered the LP with utter precision, "puts the stylus on a straight and true path across the record surface, allowing for precise adjustment of all parameters, which it then reliably holds indefinitely." (Vol.23 No.8; see also "Letters" in Vol.23 No.10 WW)

Galibier Quattro Supreme: $7500

The "remarkable-looking" Quattro Supreme is milled from a 75-lb billet of aluminum alloy, features an articulated armboard (which made setting the precisely correct spindle-to-pivot distance a snap), and offers the...
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500 RECOMMENDED

truly special products I've reviewed in the past 18 designs. Music emerged from dead silence to create
with the rock-solid stability of mass-loaded
arm ($1495), the Resolution "combined the airy, light-
T+A G10 R: $4750, with Rega tonearm
to current specification costs around $3000. (VoL13
all strong suits of the earlier SOTA, have been drasti-
formance." Soundstaging, resolution, and dynamics,
the past... The replacement of the wood- and- metal
power supply, issues of speed stability arc things of
external power supply. PB: "With the new motor and
uses a new 24-pole stepper motor with a synthesized-
chassis of solid aluminum as the $7360 Millennia and
Incorporates the same drilled- out and damped sub-
SOTA Cosmos Series III: $5950
incorporates the same RB700 tonearm and 24V, 50Hz motor, but
of polished steel, and acrylic cones for feet. Good
another thin slab for the platter, a short spindle bear-
MMF-9/Maestro's sound, like the RM-9's, was some-
uses the same feet, bearing, and motor drive as the '850 and
and elegandy finished turntable, and adds more fea-
Thorens TD850: $2299, with tonearm and dust
together. The plinth, made of a
jcket RIv1-9. MF: "The MMF-9 is a far more handsome
urer's appearance and ease of use.... One song was all it
cast, written the music and rhythmically involv-
MFC 11B1000 arm ($1595) outclasses
was "somewhat the right speed, with no motor leakage,
SGT PSU power supply, ran 0.1% fast at 33.3rpm and
and elegantly finished turntable, and adds more fea-
Thorens TD800: $1799, with tonearm and dust
cover
Designed by Gunther Frohnhoefer, the Thorens TD 800
uses the same feet, bearing, and motor drive as the '850 and has a
Thorens TD250 tonearm. The 800's platter is a
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500 RECOMMENDED COMPONENTS

**TURNTABLES**

The Debut II turntable, equipped with a new Ortofon OM-5E MM cartridge, and maybe the "ideal beginner's turntable." Setup was simple. The turntable's speeds can't be adjusted, but it ran very close to dead-on 33 1/3 and 45rpm. With its "remarkably well-controlled bottom end," the Debut II allowed music to flow gracefully, producing a picture that was "tight, compact, somewhat bright, and just plain modest overall." MF: "If you prefer to move cautiously into analog without risking a lot of money, the Debut II turntable will communicate the essence of analog as well as any." MF preferred the Audio-Technica AT95E to the supplied Ortofon cartridge, which had more robust bass and a slightly warmer balance. (Vol.27 No.9)

**TONEARMS**

**Brinkmann 10.5:** $3650

A tonearm like gimballed-bearing design that features an armtube described by the designer as a "high-speed, double-concentric, ceramic-plated, self-damping transmission device." See Brinkmann Balance tonearm. (Vol.28 No.5)

**Grund Phantom:** $4500

Designed to be a drop-in replacement for the Graham 1.5 and its successors, the Phantom uses much of the original tonearm's technology and design but is bigger and more massive, and features Graham's new Magna tonearm base. The arm's gimballing action at the pivot point and give it the feel of a traditional gimballed arm while providing an easy means of adjusting both azimuth angle and antiskating force. The Phantom combined technical expertise with emotional intensity, delivering "lightning strikes of deep, fast, ultralight bass" and a "greater expression of bloom and air, with no loss of detail or control." MF: "The Graham Phantom is a tonearm whose pure, effortless sound is almost enviable." (Vol.28 No.9)

**Hovis 2.2:** $3200, depending on options

The most significant difference between the original 2.0 and the 2.2 is the latter's rigid mounting platform. "A major improvement sonically (in the bass) and mechanically," writes MF. "The Graham 2.0 is one of the most neutral, revealing cartridge carvers you can buy, though I wouldn't mind a bit more bloom and richness—a bit more generosity—in the mids and upper mids." Purchasers should experiment with arm cables, which can make a big difference. Ease of setup and removable arm base make it "a dream come true for many." (Vol.20 No.6)

**Simson 12.5:** $4000

Clearest-sounding of the earlier Ittok (on which it is loosely based), the Ekos rivals the SME in overall neutrality, while offering a somewhat brighter, more energetic presentation of the music. The treble is nevertheless superbly transparent.... The Ekos "is a much better match with the Linn 1210 than the English arm, which loses control of the bass when mounted on the Scottish turntable. MC also found the Ekos' bass to be "more tuneful and "open" than that of the original Ittok. AD and PM prefer the Naim Airo on the LP12, however. Azimuth adjustment is not possible. While other, similarly priced tonearms provide on-the-fly adjustment of VTA, MF concluded that, "Based on listening level settings, the fixed-pivot Ekos is completely designed and executed, and sounded and felt competitive with other arms priced at around $3000." Some users have reported long-term problems with the bearings; the sample JA borrowed in 1989 has been okay in this respect. (Vol.16 Nos 3 & 4, Vol.13 No.6, Vol.15 No.8)

**Naim Airo:** $2900

"An instant balance and harmony consistent with the musical message," says MC of this unipivot design. MS found the Airo to offer superb internal accuracy, soundstaging, dynamics, and rhythmic integrity. He also found it less bright than the Linn Ekos, and better balanced in the bass than the SME V, with a "top-end presence, ranking it high among the arms he's auditioned, but cautions that any of the long-lasting adjustment dictates careful cartridge matching, or the ability to drill new armboards with different radii from the spindle for each new transducer. Additional arm tops cost $1350. (Vol.16 No.6, Vol.19 No.2 WW)

**Shelbyville:** $2499

"One of the best builder's arms in its category to the extraordinary neutral SME V. Raised the level of performance of the SME Model 10 even further, exclaimed MF. "Noticeable improvement in low-level resolution, retrieval of detail, and, not surprisingly, soundstage depth, with back-of-hall events coming into focus more clearly. It's a smooth, open picture that bettered in every way an already impressive performance" from the "stock" M10 tonearm. A first-class performer that forced MF to reassign his 10 to the SME 11.5, he said. MF adds: "I think that there's a slight midbass exaggeration that may part of the spread warming above this range, and which gives this arm its inviting midrange. BD says of the 12" version, "lower the original's already low distortion. The background is blacker and the arm seems to float an infinite well of lover and lower-level details. The total balance is more neutral, but combined with the "NT III or IV, is still warm and inviting." With the 12.5, Harry Weifield made small but important modifications to the 12" JWM that resulted in heightened rigidity, a reduced center of mass, and improved damping. What BD found most impressive was the "noisy-note-you-see-it" touch of the small V groove machined into the top of the headshell. This allows the user to more easily gauge headshell tilt while setting azimuth. "Next?" MF adds: "Luxurioussmoother, lower-cost arm which gives the same performance, but with a more "live" sound." (Vol.16 No.8, Vol.20 No.11, Vol.20 No.11, Vol.23 No.4, Vol.24 No.1, Vol.25 No.3, SME IVU)

**PVI JMW-112:** $2400

Unipivot tonearms feature vestigial annullating, which decreases DC noise. Nevertheless, he covered over its lissome midrange, ultra-smooth top end, and rock-solid imaging and soundstaging. "Subjectively, it seems to have lower distortion than any other pivot arm I've heard, but part of that might be the result of its smooth slow frequency balance. Inner detail was outstanding." How MF did it: "...all the small adjustment points are located in the arm's underside, giving the user a more easily gauge headshell tilt while setting azimuth. "Next?" MF adds: "Luxurious smoother, lower-cost arm which gives the same performance, but with a more "live" sound." (Vol.16 No.8, Vol.20 No.11, Vol.25 No.3, SME IVU)

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**Clearaudio Twelve:** $1200

PB: The Unify is a slick-looking unipivot tonearm with a sexy carbon-fiber armtube for low resonance and high stiffness. Azimuth and VTA are adjustable, and a length of Clearaudio's Six-Stream interconnect is permanently attached. This makes a bit tricky to handle during setup, but with the aid of the "X" adapter which provides a much better match with the Linn 1210 than the English arm, which loses control of the bass when mounted on the Scottish turntable. MC also found the Ekos' bass to be "more tuneful and "open" than that of the original Ittok. AD and PM prefer the Naim Airo on the LP12, however. Azimuth adjustment is not possible. While other, similarly priced tonearms provide on-the-fly adjustment of VTA, MF concluded that, "Based on listening level settings, the fixed-pivot Ekos is completely designed and executed, and sounded and felt competitive with other arms priced at around $3000." Some users have reported long-term problems with the bearings; the sample JA borrowed in 1989 has been okay in this respect. (Vol.16 Nos 3 & 4, Vol.13 No.6, Vol.15 No.8)
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500 RECOMMENDED COMPONENTS

PHONO PREAMPS

Graham Robins: $645

Fixed-pivot, medium-mass tonearm with removable headshell, designed to drop into a standard Rega mount.

TONEARMS

Hadcock 242 Integra: $1259

Recently upgraded with a stainless-steel arm tube, higher-quality internal wiring, and better finish. The 242 Integra is an unusual unipivot design in which a pivot spike rests in a ball-bearing in the arm housing. Matched with the London Reference cartridge, the Hadcock 242 Integra, rich midband, and complemented the Nottingham Doc's jet-black backgrounds with stunning sound, said MF. (Vol.28 No.7)

Merch DP-6: $1590

Uses a silicone-damped, precision ball-bearing assembly for lateral motion, and two sapphire bearings for vertical motion. Mickey didn't like the use of dual O-rings for fitting counterweights, but was otherwise pleased. The DP-6 has a "natural, unforged, velvety detail that was inviting and non-mechanical, an arm I've heard... An entry-level-priced tonearm that competes in the most important ways with empty-your-pockets-level arms." Bass extension and overall clarity, but temporal shortening in some ways, but the RB300 (with replacement counterweight) had greater solidity and punch. (Vol.26 Nos. 6 & 8, Vol.28 No.2 WW/W)

Rega RB300: $395 $$$

The Rega offers very good detail, depth, midrange neutrality, and transparency that had replaced them... While the RB300 is a very good product, it is not up to the job." With the Helikon, Scan-Tech has come up with one of the most beautifully balanced cartridges I've heard." It is also one of the analog lovers, and with most associated equipment, ultimate enough! Reprinting. $1995. (Vol.23 Nos.8 & 11, Vol.24 No.6 & 12, Vol.28 No.6 WW/W)

Linn Akiva: $2950

The top-of-the-line Shelter cartridge increases the 901's dynamics, soundstaging, and transparency that had replaced them... While the RB300 is a very good product, it is not up to the job." With the Helikon, Scan-Tech has come up with one of the most beautifully balanced cartridges I've heard. It is also one of the analog lovers, and with most associated equipment, ultimate enough! Reprinting. $1995. (Vol.23 Nos.8 & 11, Vol.24 No.6 & 12, Vol.28 No.6 WW/W)

Lyra Titan: $4500

The Lyra Titan is machined from a single piece of titanium to minimize standing waves, internal reflections, and resonances. Two symmetrical disc magnets create a symmetrical magnetic field that is said to eliminate distortions common to conventional pole-piece designs. MF: "This is the Titan's low-output (220µV) SL version of the Helikon. Noise phono section is mandatory for the high-resolution signal. With the Helikon, Scan-Tech..."

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Texas Instruments DLP™ SmoothPicture™ technology (similar to Cinema Smooth™ on Samsung models) fully leverages the quality of the 1080 HDTV formats, delivering a truly natural image. This unique technology enhances the HDTV experience by virtually eliminating pixelization that is noticeable on some other types of TVs. DLP™ technology with SmoothPicture™ presents crystal clear, lifelike images with no “screen door effect.”
IMAGINE BEING A PART OF THE ACTION. IT'S THAT REAL.

With every putt, pass, pitch or turn, you're there. Whether you're watching sports at full speed or on slow motion replay, an HDTV with DLP™ technology displays amazingly crisp clear detail and rich true-to-life colors. Fast-moving images are reproduced with no motion blurring. The DLP™ chip creates razor-sharp images and works with 1920 x 1080p resolution to produce the ultimate HDTV experience. What's more, HDTVs with DLP™ technology don't suffer image burn-in like plasma and CRT technologies can.

MOVIES, GAMES AND BROADCASTS ARE MOVING TO 1080. SHOULDN'T YOUR HDTV BE 1080 AS WELL?

Broadcasters, content creators, and manufacturers are making the 1080 HDTV formats more widely available. With a DLP™ 1080p HDTV, you can experience the best that HDTV has to offer today and be ready to enjoy all of the 1920 x 1080p sports and entertainment content that's on the horizon.

• Game consoles and DVDs will increasingly move toward 1920 x 1080p resolution.
• Film converted to 1080p format for home theater delivers the image quality the director envisioned.
• Major TV networks are already broadcasting in 1920 x 1080i format and future broadcasts in 1080p will be a natural evolution in digital TV.

To take advantage of the amazing viewing experience that HDTV content can deliver today and tomorrow, choose an HDTV with DLP™ 1080p technology.

THIS ISN'T SOME DISTANT PROMISE. YOU CAN HAVE DLP™ 1080p TODAY.

HDTVs with Texas Instruments DLP™ 1080p technology are available right now from leading consumer electronics manufacturers. Even before you notice the DLP™ logo on the cabinet, the awesome picture quality is a dead giveaway. Unbelievable color, high contrast, rich blacks, edge-to-edge sharpness and stunning clarity are hallmarks of HDTVs with DLP™ technology. The sooner you buy a DLP™ 1080p-based TV, the sooner you can enjoy the ultimate HDTV experience. A list of manufacturers and models is on the back.

ADVANTAGES OF DLP™ TECHNOLOGY

• Brilliant Colors: An enhanced color palette creates a vibrant, vivid viewing experience.
• Lifelike Images: Smooth-Picture™ technology eliminates pixelization and "screen door effect."
• Clarity: Enjoy razor-sharp images and text with no motion blur.
• Maximum Longevity: Images won't burn in over time and, due to DLP™ single chip design, colors will not suffer mis-convergence.
• High Contrast Ratio: Experience ultra-rich blacks and images that "pop" thanks to contrast ratios up to 10,000:1.
• Slim, Elegant Cabinets: Space-saving DLP™ HDTVs are lightweight and complement any room.
• Renewable Performance: DLP™ HDTVs perform like new with simple lamp replacement.

DLP™ technology enables HDTVs that offer unsurpassed picture quality at a very attractive price.

*On Samsung DLP™ 1080p models

PIXEL-TO-PIXEL MAPPING: FROM IMAGE CAPTURE TO DISPLAY

DLP™ full 1080p technology makes it possible to see every image on your HDTV just as it was captured on camera. Slip in a DVD, and you'll see that each detail of the director's vision is crystal clear. Or enjoy your favorite HDTV show with each pixel optimally represented on screen. Plus, if you're playing games, each scene will be displayed just as it was created. And because DLP™ 1080p technology can extract excellent image quality from lower resolution content, DLP™ 1080p-based TVs can be relied on to deliver unsurpassed picture quality.

THE HDTV EXPERIENCE HAS BEEN REDEFINED. TO BE A PART OF THE ACTION, MAKE SURE YOUR NEXT HDTV IS POWERED BY DLP™ 1080p TECHNOLOGY. FOR MORE INFORMATION, GO TO
dlp.com/1080p

DLP™ A TEXAS INSTRUMENTS TECHNOLOGY
HDTVs with DLP™ 1080p technology:

**HP**
- **Model**
  - MD6580n
  - MD5880n

**Mitsubishi**
- **Model**
  - WD-52627
  - WD-52628
  - WD-62627
  - WD-62628
  - WD-62827
  - WD-62828
  - WD-73627
  - WD-73628
  - WD-73827
  - WD-73927

**Samsung**
- **Model**
  - HL-R6768W
  - HL-R6168W
  - HL-R5668W
  - HL-R7178W
  - HL-R6178W
  - HL-R6578W
  - HL-R5078W
  - HL-R5688W

**Toshiba**
- **Model**
  - 56HM195
  - 62HM195
  - 72HM195
  - 56MX195
  - 62MX195
  - 72MX195

If you’ve been waiting for the best HDTV has to offer, wait no longer. HDTVs with DLP™ 1080p technology are here, and they have the power to put you in the action. For more information on DLP™ 1080p technology, or for a list of retailers, go to dlp.com/1080p
van den Hul Condor Gold: $4680

A light tracker designed for tonearms of 12–20gm mass and with a recommended tracking force of 1.35–1.5gm, the Grasshopper Condor Gold uses a nude design and features a cross-shaped modulator, matched crystal gold wire, and a plastic mounting platform, and 0.25mV output. With "an immediately addictive top-to-bottom smoothness with no sense of loss of transient detail, overall resolution, or spaciousness," the Condor excelled at creating a natural acoustic space while remaining "almost mellow," said MF. Most everyone agreed the Condor with classical, acoustic jazz, and folk music. (Vol.28 No.3)

Benz Micro L2: $1295

Low-output moving-coil with FG2 line-contact stylus, rated output of 0.4mV at 3.5k/s, and a recommended tracking force of 1.7–2.0gm. PB: "Paired with the Champion 2, the [Clearaudio] Unify tonearm and the L2 made a well-matched and satisfying combination, the Benz is particularly outstanding for its excellent tracking, its sweet, natural, unhyped presentation, and an engaging, highly musical personality." (Vol.26 No.7 WW/WW)

Cartridge Man MusicMaker: $995

Loosely based on the Grado Signature series, the MusicMaker uses a proprietary grain-oriented, high-contact, low-spring mass cartridge. The Benz is a single-point low-contact tweeter that's damped inside and out. Mounted on the Haddock 242 tonearm, and after a lengthy break-in, the MusicMaker impressed MF with its dynamic resolve, crystalline clarity, and silent backgrounds. Subtle textural shadings with low-level detail and ambient cues. "If you like your transient attacks right there and your top end slightly on the sharp side, but without etch or smear, you'll probably like the MusicMaker," said MF. (Vol.28 No.7 WW/WW)

Clearaudio Virtuoso Wood: $800 $55

BJR couldn't agree with even MC's criticism of this wooden-bodied version of the excellent Aurum Beta S. It shares that cartridge's transparency, midrange naturalness, extended treble and bass definition, and dynamics, but adds an additional layer of detail resolution, sweetness, and subtle low-level articulation. BJR decided that the Virtuoso Wood might be the affordable cartridge for lovers of jazz, classical, and rock music. "The performance of the Clearaudio Virtuoso Wood was so extraordinary that I recommend that anyone thinking of spending more than this much on a moving-coil cartridge consider buying the [$800] Wood instead." (Vol.25 No.12 WW/WW)

Lyra Dorian: $749

The "budget-priced" Dorian offers 0.6mV output and a recommended tracking force of 1.8–2gm. MF: "The Dorian's transparency, transient speed, rhythmic solidity, resolution of low-level detail, and tone, well-extended bottom end brought an overall balance and musical excitement that I've yet to hear from any cartridge competing at this price." (Vol.28 No.3)

Shelter 901: $1500

The 901 increases the 501 Mk.II's output to 0.5mV, improves the channel/balance tolerance to 0.8dB, and weighs 9gm more. However, at almost twice the price, the 901 was not twice as good, said MF. "With the 901 you get supertweeter performance with supertweeter's occasional grain and glare. And it's 301 does a bigger job as well as any of them, decided MF. (Vol.25 No.12 WW/WW)

Shelter 301: $794 $55

The Blackbird weighs 9.6gm, has a compliance of 120u, and tracks at between 1.8 and 2.2gm. Like the Sunnuko Blue Point Special, it lacks a body around the generator, and its highshen output of 2.5mV means that it can be used with a standard moving-magnet phonograph preamp. The Blackbird's strongest points were its background quiet, and the power, extension, and focus of its bass. It threw a big, wide-open soundstage, revealing plenty of low-level detail, and brought forth a shining, well-balanced top end with no hint of brightness or edge. More supple mids and highs, and more delicacy and palpability, will come only with spending more money."A strong Class B cartridge," said MF. "It's all about sounds, analog perfection, and mic certainty, and excellent tracking," with "a reason- able amount of punch and an overall clean, bracing demeanor." In comparisons with more expensive cartridges, MF noted stilled harmonic development, restricted dynamic range, and diminished soundstaging. (Vol.27 No.11)

Sunny Blue Point Special EVO III: $349 $55

With an output of 2.5mV and recommended tracking force of 2.0gm, the new version of the Blue Point Special uses a top plate said to offer far greater rigidity while weighing less, and a 0.3gm by 0.8mm elliptical stylus. It proved to be "a model of right clarity, rhythm- ic certainty, and excellent tracking," with "a reason- able amount of punch and an overall clean, bracing demeanor." In comparisons with more expensive cartridges, MF noted stilled harmonic development, restricted dynamic range, and diminished soundstaging. (Vol.27 No.11)

Audio Technica AT95E: $50

"With in 3.5mV output, recommended tracking force of 1.5–2.5gm, elliptical stylus, and moderately high compliance, the AT95E was a good match for the [Pro-Ject] Debut S. Tracking at 2gm, the AT95E offered slightly more robust bass, and sounded richer and fuller than the Ortofon OM-SE. "Makes music for 50 bucks." (Vol.27 No.9)

K Groovin' Brothers P-88, Lyra Titan Mono.

Deletions

ZYX R-1000 Airy S, R100FS, and R100 no longer available; Koetsu Urushi, Dynavector XX-2, Ortofon Kontrapunkt B, Transfiguration Spirit Mk.3., and Benz Micro Gilder L2 all not auditioned in too long a time to be sure of rating.

PHONO ACCESSORIES & RECORD CLEANERS

Air Tight Disc Flatter: $1995

Place a warped record on the surface, close the lid, wait four hours — two for heating, two for cool- ing — and your warped record comes out flat as a board. Won't cure pressing defects or serious deformities, but will flatten a record completely without damaging the grooves. Serious low-q, narrowband warps may need a double treatment. (Vol.27 No.6)

Allsop Orbitrac 2 (model # 77500) record cleaner: $49.99 +

MF considers this indispensable for optimum vinyl hygiene — he uses it to clean records before using a vacuum-operated cleaning machine. Otherwise, he main- tains, the machine's intake pads become contaminated and, in turn, contaminate every future record cleaned with the same pads. Refills (model #22903) cost $7.99. (Vol.20 Nos. 1 & 4)

Benz/Aesthetix MC Demagnetizer: $99

Battery-powered, reasonably priced, seems to do the job as well as any of them, decided MF. (Vol.25 No.7)

ELI Magnetic Outside Limit Turntable Ring: $960 +

Heavy, stainless-steel ring acts as a speed-stabilizing fly- wheel, dampens the record, and flattens outer-groove warps. However, MF cautioned, its weight means that you won't be able to use it only with turntables with massive plat- ers and/or very powerful motors. MF also noted that a centering template would be a good addition to the package. The Outside Limit was "a pain to center." Nonetheless, it "blackened backgrounds, solidified images, and made them 'pop' in three dimensions." (Vol.24 No.10)

DB Systems DB-10 protractor: $49 +

Fuddly but accurate guide for setting cartridge tangency. JA's preferred alignment protractor. (NR)

Stereophile editors pick the industry's best products

50 RECOMMENDED COMPONENTS

Expressio Audio Micro-Tech digital stylus force gauge: $160
This low-cost stylus-force gauge can measure 0.1 gm to 120 gm in increments of 0.1 gm, and proved to be as accurate as the Lindemann 0.1 gm version. It places the stylus very close to the record surface to measure the tracking force with greater accuracy, it's easily self-calibrated, and it appears to be bulletproof. (Vol.27 No.10)

Expressio Audio The Heavy Weight tonearm counterweight: $129
This stainless-steel replacement counterweight for Rega tonearms has a hard Delrin insert between the armtube and the counterweight to act as a filter. MF commented on both The Heavy Weight and Kerry Audio's F2 Titanium design: "The sonic improvement from these two relatively inexpensive accessories made to the RB300's low-frequency extension and control, and a much-improved sense of overall 'weight' and tonal richness, try one of these." (Vol.26 No.5)

Hageman Audio UFO Stroboscope: $75
(See Michael Fremer's review in this issue.)

K- A- B SpeedStrobe Digital Phonograph Speedometer: MF felt it was amazing: "If you want much better bass response from your system, greater low-frequency extension and control, and a much-improved sense of overall 'weight' and tonal richness, try one of these." (Vol.26 No.5)

Lyra SPT-5 with Nitty Gritty Mini V record cleaning machine: $289
Includes a small, wedge-shaped applicator with which MF brushed a drop of this fluid away, back to front, along the stylus. Don't get any on the cantilever, he warned, and wait 10 seconds before playing a record. Pricey fluid said to lubricate the stylus, to improve S/N ratio and tracking, and to last for one side's playing time. Mikey thinks he noted a slight sound-softening effect, but wouldn't bet the farm on it. (Vol.23 No.11)

May Audio CA 222D record cleaning machine: $39
(See Michael Fremer's review in this issue.)

The best record weight J-10 has used on his Forsell turntable is worth a full-blown vacuum cleaning. Contains DuPont's Vertrel CF, which is said to be bulletproof. (Vol.25 No.10)

Rega cartridge torque wrench: $145
Expensive, but a must, MF felt, "for serious analog addicts and professional installers." Agreed, said one, "but for God's sake be careful with this thing, especially with the new Grado wooden-bodied cartridges... best used with very careful handling." (Vol.21 No.11)

The Disc Doctor's Miracle Record Cleaner: $23.50/pint plus $5.50 E&H
The Disc Doctor's Stylist Cleaner: $25/16 oz

The Mini Pro is a semiautomatic machine that cleans one side at a time, semiautomatically. Clearly an industrial-quality machine of reassuring quality and construction. "It's just fantastic," effused J-10. "It looks cool, and it's a snap to perfectly set the speed." (Vol.19 No.2)

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Audio Physic presents:

Love for the Detail

Loudspeaker manufacturers can be found far and wide. There are many manufacturers who favour a traditional design approach, some of them also try to refine acoustic principles or produce a good sound within a given budget. [audio physic] is different. 20 years ago, our company was founded, and ever since we have been committed to absolute, uncompromised perfection in sound reproduction.

No loss of fine detail has become our motto and our design standard from the first Spark loudspeaker to all other vintage [audio physic] products. Where there is such a thing as an ideal loudspeaker without a single compromise, it requires the integration of several factors. Our design and production techniques are a credit to the name of [audio physic] and our products are nothing short of meeting the highest expectations.
BRYSTON SST C-SERIES | TAKING POWER TO THE NEXT LEVEL.
Stereophile editors pick the industry's best products

500 RECOMMENDED COMPONENTS

post-garage-sale/record-convention analog orgies when only cleaning the whole pile will do. "The 17F is probably the best record-cleaning machine available," MF concluded; "a true workhorse." (Vol.8 No.1, Vol.19 No.6, Vol.23 No.6, HW-17F; Vol.5 Nov.7 & 9, original HW-16; Vol.17 No.5, Vol.19 No.6, HW-16.5)

WVP/VA ADJUSTER for Rega tonearms: $1590

"Seems to maintain the desired rigidity while allowing "Seems to maintain the desired rigidity while allowing VP1VTA adjuster for Rega tonearm: $150.

"Drill it out yourself or antiskating, and azimuth are merely supremely useful. WallyTractor is indispensable. Other tools for VTA, antiskating, and azimuth are merely supremely useful. My job has been 100 times easier since Wally came on the scene," sums up the Analog Guru. (Vol.25 No.5)

Record Research Labs LP#9, Clearaudio Diamond Cleaner stylos cleaning fluids. Extreme Phono None-Felt Mat (see "Letters," June 2005); QR/DNM Design Ringmat Mk.II XLR turntable mat no longer available.

PHONO PREAMPS/MOVING-COIL STEP-UP DEVICES

Boulder 2008: $31,500

Despite everything else he had ever heard or reviewed, MF could have never been prepared for what the 2008 offered. He was taken to a higher level: "What the 2008 delivered was the music's meaning... It was like analog on acid. Every note, every musical gesture became the most important, most profound note ever struck... until the next one... The 2008 gripped, mesmerized, suspended time, and communicated profoundly.

The sound, MF raved on, was "fearless in every way, form and imaging, staging, imaging, dynamics, harmonics, frequency extension, solidity, 'bloom' — you name it." MF had no complaints: "As with the Rockport System III Sirius turntable, the 2008 belongs in Class A+ by itself — the single most impressive electronic audio component I've heard." (Vol.25 No.7 WWW)

Conrad-Johnson EV-1: $2000

Scaled-down version of the EV-10SE: "One of the most impressive phono stages I've heard, the EV-1 has overdriven the competition in terms of dead quiet, timbral neutrality, frequency extension, and overall tunefulness, though I found it slightly prominent or over-extended on top without sounding exactly 'bright.' " (Vol.21 No.6, Vol.26 No.11 WWW)

Linn Lento: $1700

"A super-quiet" dual-monophase vacuum-tube phono stage featuring switchable moving-magnet and moving-coil inputs. MF: "Bias extension, control, and definition were startlingly good... Subtle dynamic scaling was on a par with the Boulder and notably superior to the Connoisseur... Substring textures, reeds, and female voices were positively thrilling, and the size and weight of the entire picture... was particularly impressive. Add that to snap-you-back-in-your-seat dynamics and authoritative decay, and the Lamm became one of the hands-on best few phono sections I've ever heard." (Vol.25 No.12)

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StereoPhile editors pick the industry's best products

**500 RECOMMENDED COMPONENTS**

- **PHONO CARTRIDGES**
- **PHONO ACCESSORIES**
- **TURNTABLES**
- **PHONO PREAMPS**

### Ayre P-5xe: $2350

The P-5xe is a non-tubey, non-solid-state phono preamp that offers a “keen sense of rhythm and pacing,” followed by its “general delicacy and liquidity, however, came a tendency toward softness, some overripe bass, and an over-all rhythmic softness. Dynamics were not as extended as with some other more expensive phono preamps. Still, MF called it “a monumental achievement that sets new standards for the cleanliness and transparency possible in a phono preamp.” BD said that the P-5xe’s purity and freedom from electronic haze is quite special—something that everyone analog lover should hear for himself or herself.”

### Musical Fidelity X-0PS2:

The X-0PS2 offers high-fidelity performance, saving for a push-button switch that lets you choose between moving-magnet and moving-coil cartridges. MF: “The X-0PS2’s doesn’t come close to offering the configuration and gain of the Petras SVXI, but it sounded far more rich, warm, and pleasing. It was less oppressive, less bright, and had more complete harmonic development...It neither wowed nor annoyed, but made music sound rich and relaxing, with reasonably good detail.”

### Acoustic Signature Tango: $1500

Entry-level phono preamp with off-the-shelf outboard power supply and rear-panel DIP switches to permit a wide variety of MC resistive loadings and MM capacitive loadings, as well as a choice of MM or MC gain. MF: “It did nothing wrong, and quite a bit right. It was quiet, well-organized, and rhythmically tight, with good extension at both ends, but was somewhat brighter and more forward than the [Lehmann Black] Cube...The Tango’s presentation was somewhat forward spatially, though not at all bloated, in-your-face forward or fish-eye distorted. The build quality and appearance are very good.”

### Monolithic Sound PS-2:

An improved version of the PS-1, the PS-2 features upgraded internal components and higher gain options to better serve lower-output MCAs. DIP switches allow you to select among gain settings from 42dB to 60dB at loadings from 100 to 47k ohms. While the PS-2 lacked the lush midrange of the less expensive PS-1, it produced more solid, well-focused images, with superior bass extension and control. MF: “An inexpensive, fine-sounding phono preamp that’s competence-designed and built.”

### Parasound TuboX: $1500

Though it was “a bit noisy in MC mode,” the Zphono offered “more extension, air, and sparkle on top” than the similarly priced NAD PP-2. "The most impressive aspect of the Zphono’s sound,” said MF, “was what wasn’t there: grain, sizzle, edge, and grit.”

### Pro-Ject Tube Box: $549

“Sturdily built, attractive, and compact,” the Tube Box is based on the 12AX7 tube and offers 60dB gain for MCs, 40dB for Ms. The Tube Box sacrifices pinpoint imaging and ultra-translucency for lush midband textures, and offered a “relaxing, graceful sound that was easy on the ears while giving a bit at the frequencies extremes.”

### Wheat Audio PS-20 + MaL 20: $2595

The small, unassuming PS-20 + MaL 20 surprised MF with its “ultra-quiet” sonic performance, drawing comparisons to the much more expensive Manley Steelhead. “Liquid without being soft, yet properly gentle without being wavy, it produced a sharp, sharply etched, yet perfectly focused, almost effervescent sonic picture...to eicker your tympanic nerve,” MF suggested coupling the Music-4 with a MM cartridge or a moderate-output MM like the Harbeth HL-15. MF was “raved about the purity of sound generated from the Music-4.” Nevertheless, its modest MC gain (40dB) was just too much of a blemish to be overlooked. Large-scale dynamic swings and realistic SPLs were missing. “Very quirky product with barely sufficient power for most MCs, but very pure sound,” he summed up. JA was not impressed by the Music-4’s measured performance: “Its high source impedance at low frequencies and the dependence of its bass response on the loading make it a poor choice for use with line preamps other than Final’s own Music-5.”

### Ayre P-5xe: $2350

The P-5xe offers more settable and gain levels of 42dB to 60dB at loadings from 100 to 47k ohms. While the P-5xe lacked the lush midrange of the less expensive PS-1, it produced more solid, well-focused images, with superior bass extension and control. MF: “An inexpensive, fine-sounding phono preamp that’s competence-designed and built.”

### Parasound TuboX: $1500

Though it was “a bit noisy in MC mode,” the Zphono offered “more extension, air, and sparkle on top” than the similarly priced NAD PP-2. “The most impressive aspect of the Zphono’s sound,” said MF, “was what wasn’t there: grain, sizzle, edge, and grit.”

### Pro-Ject Tube Box: $549

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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 Grand Series 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 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 Grand Series - beauty personified coupled with sound quality that is expensive, exquisite and refined.

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but for $150 — or more than twice that — the Bogue was quite a credible performer. Plug-in power-supply option available for $25 (half-kit only). Comes with a 30-day money-back guarantee. (Vol.26 No.8)

Alesis MasterLink ML-9600 hard-disc/CD recorder: $1699

With the ML-9600, MF was thrilled to be able to record its hard drive at any combination of 44.1, 48, 88.2, or 96kHz sample rates. And, for the first time, MF was able to create his own specialized Playlist, and record 16-bit/44.1kHz "Red Book" CDs at his choice of speed. As a reviewer's tool, the ML-9600 proved invaluable: "LPs as played through different phone sections, turntables, and cartridges can be archived to 24/96 discs and be played across the front porch in 4-24 seconds later with new product reviews — the MasterLink's fidelity is that good." But its functions run far beyond that of the audio reviewer, and for only $1699 (street price as low as $1000), it's a bargain: "The MasterLink has to be one of the greatest values in audio as a CD burner, an archival tool, or a music server... Once you understand how to use it, it makes creating CD compilations a blast. Highly recommended." JA enthusiastically agrees, using a MasterLink as a backup on his live recording dates. (Vol.25 No.6 WWW)

Arcata DV-79: $1795

"Simply a great DVD-Audio player with up-to-date video and communication facilities," the DV-79 has eight analog outputs, coax and TosLink digital outputs, a full array of video outputs, and uses a 32-bit Zoran Digital Audio Processor along with 24-bit/192kHz Wolfson DACs. KR noted an overall "lighter, more diaphanous sound" and a "spacious but well-defined lateral soundstage." Lacked some bass weight, but made up for it in overall presentation and transparency, "Smooth, creamy sound overall..." He summed up. (Vol.27 No.12 WWW)

Ayre CX-7E: $2950

In his measurements, JA concluded that Ayre's CX-7E integrated CD player "is a model of modern CD-playing design... Its sound is clean as it looks. Its balance is so well designed and deep, its highs clean, detailed, and well-resolved." He was impressed by the way the CX-7E preserved the "fragile sense of an acoustic around recorded instruments... Nothing sounded confused or obscured via the CX-7E... Though the top-of-the-line Ayre D-7e has a more refined sound, JA preferred the CX-7 in his system for its "more coherent character and more vibrant presentation." Compared to the Musical Fidelity Nu-Vista player, the Ayre sounded "more forward, but with better upper-bass definition..." The Ayre presented the bass instrument with the right combination of tonal body, LF extension, and the attack of fingerspits plucking the strings." While appearing physically unchanged, the CX-7E has undergone several upgrades, including a new FPGA chip. "Surprisingly rich, smooth, and delicate," with "velvety highs and an enormously deep bass," the CX-7E "fully deserves a Class A rating in Stereophile's Recommended Components," decreed JA after auditioning an early version of the "E" revision. AD is working on a "Follow-Up" of a current production sample. (Vol.26 No.5, Vol.27 No.12 WWW)

Burmester 001: $14,995

Expensive but "a superbly engineered CD player and analog preamp that's incredibly versatile, easy to use, and built to last until the next millennium." BD. "It was gorgeous, seductive, rich, and absolutely wonderful, with detailed, solid, three-dimensional images and incredible tonal colors and textures." However, with slightly soft images, a warmer-than-neutral tonal balance, an imprecise bottom end, softened dynamic transients, and a "beguiling golden sheen," the CX-7E was said to be "a bit too much of a goody-goody-sounding" BD decided. Though it had a more overt personality than one might expect from a $14,995 unit, it was still "the best digital front-end" BD had ever heard. "Superb air, delicacy, and dynamic expression," BD summed up. (Vol.26 No.9 WWW)

Cary Audio Design CD-303/300: $4000

(See AD's and BD's review in this issue.)

Ensemble Directo: $8995

Simple and well-built CD player, with particular atten-
Perfect form and sound.
The form is artistic. Beautifully crafted like the body of a musical instrument. The sound is exquisite, and the combination of perfect craftsmanship and state-of-the-art technology is unique. This new Canton loudspeaker series represents pure musical enjoyment and timeless design. Its name is Vento.
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- 2004 Editors Choice - The Absolute Sound
- 2005 Editors' Choice - Audio Art
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Thee High End
6923 Inwood Road Dallas, Texas 75209 Tel: 214-704-6082 Fax: 214-357-0721 Web: www.theehighend.com Email: stan@theehighend.com
of the OEM Pioneer circuitry at its heart: “The McCormack will not offer any more resolution from SACD than it does from CD or DVD.” (Vol.28 No.1 WWW)

**Shanling CD-T300:** $6995

“Fascinating. Flabbergasting. Completely over the top.” The Shanling CD-T300 is bathed in blue light and more than a little bit over the top. The top-loading Shanling uses an NPC MS584 upsampling filter chip and eight Burr-Brown PCM 1704K D/A converter chips. ST appreciated the Shanling’s sound as much as its sense of humor, noting excellent low-level resolution, bass reproduction, and timing and spacing. With the Whatho dzip, the Shanling sounded slightly richer and more relaxed. Featuring the long-lasting Philips CD4 transport, the CD-T300 is limited to 300 units. (Vol.28 No.7)

**Simaudio Moon Orbiter:** $7200

In addition to its 24-bit/192kHz Burr-Brown DAC, this universal player’s circuitry comprises a Silicon Image Si504 video scan converter, a standard DVI interface, and an optional SDI output ($1000). The result is superior video processing. “Unaggressive and a bit of a back-laid,” the Orbiter offered outstanding performance, exceeding the McCormack UDP-1 in terms of presenting a greater sense of the space between notes. “If your top priority is sound but you appreciate good video, you should find the Orbiter, at $7200, reasonable,” said KR. Borderline Class A, agreed ST (Vol.28 No.3 WWW)

**Simaudio Moon Eclipse:** $6300

The Moon Eclipse is Simaudio’s first “statement” digital product. “Everything about it — technology, build quality, user interface, cosmetics — reflects careful thought and lavish attention to detail,” declared BD, who thought this CD player’s performance “excellent in nearly every regard, and truly exceptional in some… While it wasn’t perfectly neutral, it was awfully close, and its deviations — a slight lack of low-power bass and a slightly cool overall tonal balance — were minor enough to be very easy to live with.” The latest incarnation no longer offers HDCD, but BD said that “it does everything well, and its incredible strengths in the areas of spatial reproduction and detail resolution are, if anything, even greater than the original.” BD goes on to note that its overall tonal balance — “slightly cool overall tonal balance, so it may not be the best match for some associated gear.” The disc-acceptance quirks that bothered BD, as well as the need to jumper past the HDCD filter to achieve its incredible resolution, have also been addressed. Add $500 for PSS power supply. (Vol.24 No.4, Vol.26 No.4 WWW)

**Aarcam FMJ CD33:** $2499

Well-made CD player with S/PDIF digital outputs as well as analog. CD data are upsampled by an Analog Devices AD1896 chip and fed to two Wolfson WM8740 stereo DACs at a 192kHz rate. JA was most impressed by the CD33’s image depth: “Sound sources emerged from a dead-black background, with a wide, deep soundstage.” In addition, the Arcam, with its clean but extended low frequencies, was able to clearly separate musical elements in even the mudziest discs. JA: “With a measured performance that is both beyond reproach and sound quality that lacks for little, I heartily recommend Aarcam’s FMJ CD33.” Borderline Class A. Compared to the Naim CDX5, ST heard “marginally greater transparency, felt AD, but it could not match the Naim’s rhythmic prowess.” (Vol.27 Nos. 7 & 11 WWW)

**Atoll Electronique CD 100:** $1475

Atoll’s top-of-the-line CD player features a single pair of variable-volume analog outputs as well as a coaxial digital output, plus an internal SDI output, and a USB port. Combined with a one-bit Matsuhita DAC, Partnered with the Atoll IN 100 integrated, harmonic presentation was “rich, full-bodied, even voluptuous at times.” ST matched the CD 100 against the nearly-five-times-more-expensive Musical Fidelity NuVista 3D. “The CD 100 was not more resolved… I thought the Atoll player was resolving, dynamic, and authoritative.” “A competent performer at a very good price,” he sums up. Price is for black facplate; silver facplate adds $65. (Vol.26 No.4 WW)

Creek CD50 Mk.II: $1495

In an attempt to create a virtually jitter-free signal source, a digital buffer circuit delays the CD playback to create shock immunity from the player, and feeds the signal to the Creek’s Crystal C54396 24-bit/192kHz DAC. Uses conventional 8x-oversampling. The CD50 Mk.II made the already-skeptical Sam even more skeptical about the purported advantages of SACD. Comparing the CD50 Mk.II to the Sugden CDMA, ST said: “The Sugden presented the music as its sense of humor, noting excellent low-level resolution, bass reproduction, and timing and spacing. With the Whatho dzip, the Shanling sounded slightly richer and more relaxed. Featuring the long-lasting Philips CD4 transport, the CD-T300 is limited to 300 units. (Vol.28 No.7)

McIntosh MCD205: $2695

McIntosh’s first CD changer lets you load up to five CDs, one at a time, into one slot, without a tray, drawer, carousel, or loudly grinding gears. ST: “The sound was most impressive… unflappable… It never compressed or expanded and was never thin, irritating, or edgy… A number of the discs I had admired as performances but not as recordings became more listenable with the MCD205 — smoother, more extended, less objectionable.” Sam also appreciated the speed and steadfastness with which the changer loaded and ejected discs; those qualities were also very helpful in its simplicity and user-friendly operation. “It was like having an automated disc jockey.” (Vol.25 No.11)

**Musical Fidelity A3.5 CD player:** $1600

(See Sam Tellig’s review in this issue.)

Music Hall Maverick: $1495

The two-channel Maverick SACD player is made exclusively for Music Hall by Shanling, and uses a Crystal CS8420 upsampling chip along with a Burr-Brown PCM1738 DAC. ST enjoyed noting the benefits of upsampling: “tais, atmosphere, dimensionality — the illusion, at least, of more low-end.” Though the Musical Fidelity Tri-Vista 21 offered more space, dimensionality, resolution, and dynamic authority, said ST, “for SACD and quite good upsampled CD, and with no associated gear, I’d consider the Music Hall Maverick.” (Vol.27 No.1)

**Naim CDX5:** $2950

Descended from Naim’s original entry-level CD3, the CDX5 is an upgrade of the CD5 that now includes a Philips VM1202 transport, adds a dual-mono 24-bit Burr-Brown chip, and a Wolfson WM8740 DAC chip to use a Pacific Microsions digital filter. While AD appreciated the CDX5’s fine spatial performance, convincing timbres, and surprisingly good stereo imaging, he was most impressed by its rhythm, pacing, and knack for preserving the original meaning of all music. AD: “On the CDX5, the music was obviously, appropriately more relesent — all dash dash dash dash dash dash dash dash dash dash dash dash in the best possible way.” Its “decidedly chunky sound” could have benefited from a little more air and transparency, however; JA wondered if Naim’s FlatPack power supply might have helped. Borderline Class A. ADdisworkingona“Follow-Up.”(Vol.27 No.11 WWW)

**Simaudio Moon Equinox:** $2200

The Equinox’s audio circuitry is based on a Burr-Brown PCM1738 DAC chip with an internal 8x-oversampling digital filter. HDCD decoding is not offered. The Equinox’s bass was “big, powerful, and weighty,” while its treble region was “refreshingly free” from any tendency to brightness. Its soundstage lacked the image depth of the Lavry DA2002, but still did a fine job of depicting a three-dimensional soundstage. JA was hard-pressed to hear any sonic differences between the Equinox and the FMJ CD33, but ultimately decided that the Simaudio was more robust, while the CD33 had a more delicate-sounding quality. JA concluded, “To those who do care about sound quality and have large CD collections, I confidently recommend the Moon Equinox.” (Vol.27 No.9 WWW)
Stereophile editors pick the industry's best products

500 Recommended Components

Sugden CDMaster: $1955

The CDMaster, part of Sugden's Bijou line, measures just 9" wide. A Philips transport is coupled to a Philips TDA1549 DAC. ST heard "a lovely liquidity, a generous, full-bodied way with harmonics, a sweet midrange, extended highs." He recommended the CDMaster especially for vocals, solo piano performances, and chamber music. "If you're looking for a CD player that doesn't sound harsh, bright, and harmonically threadbare, the CDMaster might be your ticket." (Vol.27 No.8)

C

Ah! Njoe Tjoeb 4000: $4790

Basically a Marantz player with a new output board consisting of high-quality tube sockets, a host of filter caps and regulator chips, premium parts by Wima and Vishay, a Philips TDA1546 DAC chip, and dual mono-Burton Brown DPA60405 S-inputs for voltage gain. While the 4000 offered superb rhythm and pacing, great depth of field, fullsome sense of resolution, and compelling depiction of space, CS was most impressed by its detailed and deeply layered midrange. Options: AC Direct power cord, $79; Tjoeb Shoes isolation feet, $69/four; Super Tjoeb package consisting of CD player and both options, $887; 24-bit/192kHz Tjo Upplayer, $349. (Vol.26 No.11 WWW)

Audio Analogue Prime: $850

Uses an 8-bit DAC with an internal 8x-oversampling digital filter. Identical to the Prime integrated amp in size and price, this basic CD player also shares the Prime's very good resolution and exceptional tonality, especially with strings and female voices. ST: "Peaceful-sounding; not tos in terms of resolution and dynamic drive, however." (Vol.27 No.6)

Cambridge Audio Azuro 640C: $529 $$$

Made in China, the 640C is built around a Sony transport and a Wolfson WM8740 DAC that runs at 24 bits/192kHz. The player uses proprietary reclocking circuitry to reduce jitter, and features separate power supplies for the transport, converter, and audio sections, along with a vibration-damping chassis. Compared to the more expensive Creek Audio CDS500 M2, the 640C lacked some finesse and detail, sounding "a tad overcooked," but offered "surprisingly good weight, dimensionality, and speed." (Vol.27 No.9)

D

Apple iPod: $399 as reviewed

This sleek and nifty data-storage unit offers a hard drive from 5 to 20GB, a 1.5GB memory card, and is capable of playing lossy formats with up to 40GB capacity, and is capable of playing lossy formats. The "smooth, liquid, very natural, yet fast and revealing." (Vol.27 No.6)

Audio Analogue Primo: $850

Uses an 18-bit DAC with an internal 8x-oversampling digital filter. Identical to the Primo integrated amp in price, $349. (Vol.26 No.11 WWW)

Esoteric D-70: $6500

dCS Elgar Plus: $17,500

A remote-controlled D/A processor with digital volume control that's future-proof in that it will decode two-channel DSD and 24-bit recordings (although it does lack HDCD decoding). "The Elgar sounds simply superb and has a measured performance to match." JA thought about the original version. While there were differences between the two units, Our Fearless Leader felt the Elgar was within striking distance of his longtime reference, the Mark Levinson No.30. However, he added, "the sound of 96kHz tapes reconstructed by the Elgar was simply more real." And that is what the High End is all about." Compared with the original Elgar, the Plus adds support of DSD, SDFI-2, and IEEE1394 interfaces, the ability to slave to an outside word clock, a digital output, and a substantially expanded function menu. With these upgrades, J-10 found the Elgar Plus to be direct into the amps (no active line-stage necessary), fine-tuned with a choice of four filter settings. "In a way, the elegance of the Elgar Plus is all about the highs," he decided. The rest of the frequency spectrum is a knockout as well: very liquid and natural in the bass region, and the treble, which is "almost zero," adding the Verona to a Verdi-Elgar all-dCS system. The Elgar Plus adds "wild superiority" in terms of spatial reproduction, providing the greatest stage width, depth, and height in JA's experience. The key ingredient of the Elgar's components, setting up the Verdi La Scala-Delius combo proved to be a bit tricky; AD found that the system worked best with the Delius in master mode. Class A, he felt, but JA feels A to be more appropriate. (Vol.28 No.1 WWW)

dCS Verona: $7495

Housed in an enclosure identical to that of dCS's Purcell upsampler, the Verona features a highly stable crystal-controlled oscillator from which is derived a standard TTL word-clock reference signal running at 44.1kHz or 48kHz, available on five-ohm BNC jacks (AnS-3D1F). Three seek output is also available. With the Verona Master Clock driving the word-clock inputs of the Verdi, Purcell, and Elgar in parallel, JA discovered better imaging and a more defined soundstage that brought new life and excitement to music. Long-term listening with the Verona's dCS-derived presence produced consistent improvements. While its applicability for use in non-dCS-based systems is "almost zero," adding the Verona to a Verdi-Elgar all-dCS player "will take it a small but nonetheless important step forward in sound quality to achieve the best sound quality I have yet heard, not only from SACD but from CD as well," said JA. (Vol.28 No.3 WWW)

Esoteric D70: $6500

D/A processor allows HDCD and upconverted CD playback as well as high-sample-rate LPCM playback. A rate-switchable digital filter on the input allows the user to select the suitable filter for the input. No2 finds the design claimed to interoperate data representing frequencies greater than Fs/2, as well as selectable word-clock options and RAM-buffer refresh. Digitally controlled, optically coupled, variable analog output allowing the user to drive a power amplifier directly. "The sound just plain absolutely wonderful. Not a trace of glare or grain. Even more important, this was demonstrably not achieved by rolling off the treble to make it sound 'more like analog.' There was a full measure of detail preserved, which, instead of showing back into my seat, brought me deeper into the soundstage and deeper into the music." (Vol.26 No.7 WWW)

Lavry Engineering DA2002: $8500

"Impressively engineered and even more impressive-sounding." The DA2002 has balanced and unbalanced analog outputs and AES/EBU and S/PDIF digital inputs. Features sample rates from 44.1kHz to 96kHz and uses a proprietary, discrete DAC architecture. JA noted "an analog-like ease to the Lavry's presentation" and a "most nebulous midrange smoothness to the Lavry's sound." He said to have found differences between the Lavry and the $12,000 Nagra DAC, and in the end decided that the Nagra was "ever so slightly better" at defining the space around instruments. "The Lavry's jitter measurements," he said, "are among the best I have encountered. Doesn't move when fed a Dolby Digital bistream, which may be an issue when used with DVD players. (Vol.27 No.8 WWW)

McIntosh MDA1000: $8000

DA1000 has balanced and unbalanced analog inputs, accepts PCM data sampled from 32kHz to 96kHz, and boasts its own handy level control. Delivered "ambience, ambience, and more ambience," said ST, with an "analog-like sense of ease." ST: "If digital audio gets better than this, it's probably not by much.... The MDA1000 makes each digital recording sound as if it were sac." (Vol.27 No.7)

Nagra DAC: $12,000

KR: "Notable for its powerful dynamics and clarity, the Nagra probably will get you as close to the music as the
Theater

The N"40 Media Console.
Pure Surround.

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mastering engineer was.” Though the two-channel Nagra DAC lacks a digital output, it includes a high-quality 24-bit/48kHz A/D converter, making it backward-compatible and suitable for listening to analog sources. Kal noted professional construction, superior sound, ease of use, and a high degree of programmability. “Neutral harmonic balance, extended and transparent treble, and taut, powerful bass” marked the Nagra’s overall sonic character, while a “dead quiet background” and “grippingly immediate soundtrack” gave the discs a visceral impact. (GRIT No.6 2005)

KR and JA, however, both agreed that a true analog pass-through input would have been better than one that digitizes the signal. (Vol.27 No.5 WWW)

**Theta Digital Generation VIII:** $10,000

The Generation VIII D/A converter also functions as an analog line preamplifier with analog circuits that are fully balanced, differential, discrete, and class-A. In overall sound was open, grain-free, and unaggressive. The Gen.VIII was just as uncowed and transparent as the Weiss Media and Mark Levinson No.3665, but displays more detailed presentation in the midrange and highs, with more discrete definition of instruments, both harmonically and in space. KR was most impressed by how the Gen.VIII consistently made familiar CDs sound better than ever: “Through the Gen.VIII I heard in each track how much more information, music, and enjoyment my stereo CDs contain.” AT&T optical input, add $300; jitter-rejection board, add $499. (Vol.27 No.2 WWW)

Stereophile.com, October 2005

**Benchmark Media Systems DAC1:** $975

Designed with all the simplicity, the Media is a powerful tool. KR: “In addition to accepting up to 24 bits and sample rates of up to 96kHz at each input, inputs 1 and 2 can be used simultaneously to process rates of 192kHz. All inputs are automatically upsampled to 352.8kHz or 384kHz, and all inputs are subject to two jitter-reduction schemes.” The result? KR again: “Independent of comparisons, the Media impressed me with newly discovered solidity and definition in the midrange, full presence in the midrange, and silky, extended highs. Through the Media, my CDs, DADs, and DVDs sounded as or more satisfying than they ever had, offering: (1) tighter, more potent bass; (2) greater vocal presence, particularly with male voice; (3) a deeper soundstage with less highlighting of treble instruments; (4) a more laid-back and relaxed presentation; (5) a deeper and more extended and better-defined bass.” (Vol.26 No.11 WWW)

**Bendixen &孱son DAC:** $899

“Just as a musical instrument,” Bendixen explained, “the DAC is a simple but nice-looking black box” with an outboard Wavelength Brick: 51750 SU Headphone amplifier with an onboard DAC handling bargain.” (Vol.28 No.9 WWW)

**Grace Designs m902:** $1695

A simple but nice-looking black box” with an onboard Wavelength Brick: 51750 SU Headphone amplifier with an onboard DAC handling bargain.” (Vol.28 No.9 WWW)

**Grace Designs m902:** $1695

A simple but nice-looking black box” with an onboard Wavelength Brick: 51750 SU Headphone amplifier with an onboard DAC handling bargain.” (Vol.28 No.9 WWW)

**Apple AirPort Express:** $129

Worked “marvelously” according to WP. “For what really counts — accurate and easy recording and playback of your own music,” he concluded. (Vol.23 No.11, Vol.24 No.1, Pro; Vol.25 No.3, Pad WWW)

**Echo Indigo IO PC soundcard:** $199

Easy to install and use, this CardBus-format soundcard for PCs and Macs has one set of stereo outputs, a two-channel analog input, and features a 24-bit, 128x-over- sampling A/D converter running at sample rates from 32kHz to 96kHz. It offers a 24-bit Motorola DSP for mixing and monitoring, a headphone amp with volume control, and, if your music-production software supports multiple discrete outputs, the Indigo will appear as though it actually has eight separate outputs. While it lacks the sound quality of high-end separates, especially in terms of imaging and soundstage, JA found it “perfect for turning a laptop into a portable, high-quality test system.” (Vol.27 No.11 WWW)

**K**

**Metro M10 M10288, Lyna Studio One PC soundcard, Grace Design m902.

**Deletions**

Grace Design m902 no longer available; Chord DAC64 not auditioned in a while.

**CD, DVD, & SACD TRANSPORTS**

**Chord Electronics CDP:** $12,500

The combination of an up-to-date SACD transport that supports every channel SACD, CD, CD-R, and CD-RW. The Chord adds the functionality of the Pureups upsampler to the Chord’s Verdis, upscaling “Red Book” CDs to the 2.82MHz standard of DSD. DSD output of both versions is on an IEEE1394 FireWire jack. With magnificent and realistic colors and a smooth, layered, organic sound, the Verdi La Scala—Delius combo sounded “more like analog than any digital source” AD had ever heard. With the Verdi driving the Purists and Elgar Plus, “there were a clarity, a focus, and a delineation of individual instruments...In physical presentation was clearly focused and correctly sized, cushioned by a distinct breath of air...This was the first CD presentation that played on the same musical field at the best analog,” said JA. SACD playback via the FireWire-connected Chord was “the finest, most immediate, most musically pure that I’ve heard,” he summed up. JA agrees, particularly when the Verdi is docked by the Chord DAC64.

**Edoer ESoteric P-770:** $575

This CD transport’s vibration-Free Rigid Disc-Clamping System uses a precision mirror-polished platter with a very slight convexity to brace the disc from above. “I’ve been using it in combination with my DAC,” said JA. “It is one thing to say that one hears things on a creature recorded recording one has never heard before...It is quite another thing to say that the sense of immediacy, of being enveloped in the world of a true recorded recording,
Great theater deserves a great setting.

Sanus reinvents style in your own home with new Java furniture. Exotic hardwood in a luscious espresso finish, with the added contemporary flair of extruded aluminum and fluted glass, creates the newest tide in contemporary décor. As with all Sanus furniture, the Java line is built with unique AV features such as extra-deep shelving, large wire channels and removable back panels. Features that set Sanus furniture apart from the crowd...like an escape to a secluded tropical isle.

SANUS SYSTEMS
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Stereophile editors pick the industry's best products

500 RECOMMENDED COMPONENTS

MUSIC SURROUND-SOUND COMPONENTS (OTHER THAN SPEAKERS)

A
Bel Canto eVo6 gen.II: $4500
Six-channel power amplifier created with three of the two-channel modules from Bel Canto's eVo2, along with a bigger power supply that's suitable for running all six channels at 120W. Comparing the eVo6 to its reference Bryston 9B-ST, KR, said, "The eVo6 initially seemed to have less treble energy, but extended listening found nothing missing in terms of balance or detail. . . The bass was full and extended. . . The depth of image, in all dimensions, was excellent." KR also found the eVo6 to be "quite forgiving of "hot" recordings." He concluded, "With both RCA and balanced inputs, the eVo6 is a no-brainer solution to all the obvious demands of multichannel." (Vol.26 No.9 WWW)

Bel Canto PRe6 gen.II: $4000
At $4000, a bargainable of eight-channel operation, or six-channel operation in one zone simultaneous with two-channel operation in another. Default setup is for two six-channel inputs, three two-channel inputs, stereo tape input/output, two six-channel outputs, and two two-channel outputs. What KR liked most about the PRe6 was the difficulty he had in defining its sound: "Like any first-rate preamp, it doesn't have much character." Juiced sounding "lively, tight, and punchy," while big orchestral music sounded "strong, sweet, and powerful." Though the McCormack MAP-1 was easier to set up and use overall, the PRe6 was easier and more enjoyable to use with a wider range of components and discs. (Vol.26 No.12 WWW)

Bryston 9B-ST: $4895
The 9B-ST power amplifier (called 9B-THX at the time of the review) boasts five channels, 120Wpc into 8 ohms, and is built like a pro gear, is like a tank. Hand-soldered, double-sided glass-epoxy boards and elaborate grounding scheme front special-grade steel-toroidal transformers. According to JA, "the excellent set of measurements and solid, reliable engineering." LG was impressed by this amp's speed, power, extension, its tightness and definition in the bass, and "excellent" midrange. Fully the equal of more costly amps, with wide dynamic contrasts and "involving" vocals, and sonically similar to previous Bryston ST amps. THX conformation, a 20-year (f) warranty, and a reasonable price make this beefy, reliable amp an attractive package -- a perfect choice, suggests LG, for home-theater and multichannel music systems. (Vol.23 No.9 WWW)

Fosgate FAP V1: $13,000
The 71-channel, analog FAP V1 surround processor/preamp offers several listening modes, including Dolby Pro Logic II. Nine 6N1P tubes and one 5AR4 are fitted into discrete circuits mounted on the mirror surface of its transformer housing, making the FAP V1 "just plain gorgeous." KR noted a rich, detailed midrange, nicely defined highs, and clarity in the bass, all of which approached the sound of solid-state preamps. KR found the presence of remote control and bass management. Nevertheless, he concluded that "if you're a traditional tube and stereo guy who wants to combine a high-end two-channel system with a multichannel and/or home theater setup, the FAP V1 should be ideal." (Vol.27 No.6 WWW)

McIntosh C45: $29,000
Two-channel preamp that can accommodate and switch two multichannel inputs but lacks interchannel balancing for multichannel sources, or even LR balancing for stereo. KR applauded its large, bright front-panel display, substantial remote control, silky front-panel knobs, and overall ease of use and convenience: "The C45 was the most intuitive and pleasant-to-use preamp I have yet encountered." He compared it to the Bel Canto PRe6 and the McCormack MAP-1. "It seemed a bit brighter than the PRe6 at the upper end, but was equally formidable at the bottom. The transparency of the C45 and the PRe6 seemed equal. . . The C45 and MAP-1 sounded even more alike. Their balances are similar, but the MAP-1 is a bit tighter on the bass. . ." (Vol.27 No.3 WWW)

Meridian Reference 861 surround controller: $17,000–$19,000, depending on options
Multimedia controller with video, 1394-based decoding for matrixed and discrete multichannel audio sources. Functions as analog preamp/control, digital and video controller, and A/D-D/A converter. Built-in, reprogrammable decoding of multichannel sources (Dolby Pro Logic, Dolby Digital, DTS, Ambisonic, etc.), plus TTIX and TriField output from two-channel sources. All inputs digitally processed. Of TriField's simulated front-three-channels output, KR noted, "I came to regard the loss of air and the narrower soundstage as acceptable concomitants of the richer, tighter, better-defined central image. 'Audiofile' air begun to seem an artifact rather than an enhancement." DTS and Dolby Digital 5.1 music recording and rendering in the bass, which acoustic superiors exceeded his room's. Multichannel is immersive, but KR would rather not sit in the middle of a string quartet or orchestra. For two-channel, "equal to the best. . . beyond significant reproach." Multichannel, he declared, is the future, and Meridian is ready now. Logical but complicated setup and option procedures executed via PC; heavy dealer involvement is key to getting the best from this ultimate component. But when the 861 is programmed for precise time alignment and amplitude balance among the speakers, and the crossover and bass management adjusted independently for the main, center, and rear channels, "everything seemed just right, and it made for consistently satisfying listening," he decided. "The TriField DSP is a greatly advantageous feature that deserves more recognition. I felt confident that whatever little silver dollar difference in cost would sound superb." (Vol.23 No.2, Vol.26 No.8 WWW)

B
Adcom GFA-7805: $2599 $$$
The 300Wpc, five-channel, solid-state GFA-7805 is the latest in Adcom's reputation-enhancing series. The GFA-785, KR described, "lots of power, no frills, good value." Listening with all five channels at work, KR noticed "a general feeling of smoothness and balance, with no particular part of the spectrum out of place." Music was "conveyed with tremendous power and weight, as well as great delicacy when appropriate." Listening through this two-channel system, KR found "the GFA-7805 delivered full, extended, defined bass, a balanced midrange. . ." (Vol.26 No.2, Vol.26 No.8 WWW)

ADCOM

Outil Audio ICBM: $249
Remote-controlled, line-level, multichannel analog preamplifier. Uses McCormack's Ambience Recovery Mode (ARM), which derives center, sub, and surround signals a bit differently than conventional multichannel source. KR: "ARM was nowhere near as impressive or as useful in simulating ambience as Meridian's DSP-based TriField; ARM helped only with congested source material, while TriField was enjoyable with almost all two-channel recordings." Unlike the Sony TA-P9900ES, the ICBM-1 comes with a separate stereo preamp and a built-in setup procedure that makes channel offset and balance easy using only the remote. Its overall sound was also "marginally quieter, more open, and more integrated than the Sony's with all sources." (Vol.26 No.9 WWW)

Outlaw Audio ICBM: $249
The ICBM, a seven-channel bass-management controller, can be used between any two line-level devices. KR: "If it did the job it was intended to do, and I could hear no sonic compromise while using it. . . I was satisfied that any very slight veiling I might have heard with the Outlaw was more than outweighed by the advantages gained by its use." The ICBM also added an "ultra-detailed (but not bright) sound when used with the Magnepans." (Vol.26 No.12 WWW)

NO CLASS RATING
Harmonic Technology Harmony Rainbow: $310/1m with RCA's, $40/additional meter
Six individual color-coded cables in a single bundle for multichannel systems, the Rainbow, turns "Cable Hell." (See "Cable Hell" in Vol.25 No.7)
RScables: "The Solution": $179/1m, $20/additional 0.5m
Another excellent 6-conductor multichannel cable at a competitive price. "It is a good idea to simulate a true multichannel source." (Vol.26 No.6)

K
Linn Chakra multichannel amplifier.
Deletions
Zektor MA53 multichannel inopathy withdrawn; discontinued; Theta Digital Intrepid not auditioned in a while.
Aesthetics Saturn Calypso: $4500
“A beautifully built, smartly designed, crisply functioning, versatile, and sonically brilliant preamplifier,” the Saturn Calypso is a single-box, tubed unit that borrows technology from the more expensive, two-box Jupiter Calisto to offer “an attractive combination of couch-potato convenience without compromising its tweaky audiophile performance potential,” thought MF. It lacked the last bit of expansive air and resolution found in more expensive preamps but never sounded bright, hard, or artificial, and provided “one of the best-balanced sounds of any audio component I’ve come across at any price.” (Vol.28 No.7 WW/WW)

Balanced Audio Technology VK-51SE: $8500
Fully balanced, tubed line preamplifier with five inputs and two outputs. Like its predecessor, the VK-505SE, the ‘51 uses four 6H30 Super-Tubes in each channel and the BAT Six Pak capacitor bank in the output stage, but adds a second Six Pak in the power supply bypass caps to improve filtering and noise immunity. The ‘51 showed excellent dynamic performance throughout the listening spectrum. Deep bass “detonated with awesome suddenness,” and “lightning transients” were “undeniably in the mids and treble,” resulting in “tremendous rhythmic drive and punch.” Background noise was “consistent and transparent” and high-fidelity performance was exceptionally good. The VK-51SE is on the short list of the world’s best line preamps: a hedonist’s delight,” said BD, “with an immediacy that was big and vibrant,” said BD, “with an immediacy that”... (Vol.28 No.11, Vol.27 No.4 WW/WW)

Burmester 011: $15,995
The single-box SL-10 offers a solid-state design with integral MC phono stage, combines brilliant functionality, ease of use, and efficient packaging with the kinds of luxurious user interfaces and construction quality one might expect from its price. “The Burmester’s sound was forthright, direct, and crisp with an immediacy that re-created the feel and presence of a live performance.” JA concurred: “The Burmester 011’s overall measured performance is superb, with very low levels of distortion and noise and a very high dynamic range.” The limited HF overload margin of its phono stage, associated with its high gain, will preclude its use in high- or even moderate-output MC cartridges. BD concluded: “A wonderful preamp... built by music lovers for music lovers.” (Vol.28 No.7 WW/WW)

Cary SL-10-PB: $3500 $$$
Cary’s SL-10-PB preamplifier presented rich musical colors that did not lack air or believable texture sparkles, but were velvety throughout the mids. Lower octaves were clear, and rhythm and pacing were excellent throughout. Along with its expansive soundstage, the Cary broadcasted its emotional and musical character. MA wrote: “The Cary SL-10-PB plays music in a way that respects the notes and beats, and its sound respects and to some extent glorifies many of the things that I respond to in recorded music: Texture. Color. Drama. Scale. Perhaps a bit too big-barked for Class A, but what the heck! Price is for Jaguar Carnival Red finish; Jaguar Anthracite Black finish adds $200; line–level–only version (SLP-98) costs $3100. (Vol.27 No.2 WW/WW)

Conrad-Johnson ACT2: $13,500
“A work of art as beautiful to behold as it is to listen to,” the ACT2 employs four 6N30P dual triodes — a higher-gain, lower-noise design than the ten 6922 triode sections found in C-J’s ART — and fits into a single chassis. While it performed imaging, soundstaging, and other audiophile tricks extremely well,” the ACT2’s real strength was presenting music as a whole,” trans- porter the listener to the musical event. “Raises the bar for tube preamps,” said WP. ST agrees. Required 100 hours of break-in for optimum performance. (Vol.28 No.3 WW/WW)

Consonant Audio Technology SL-1 Ultimate Mk 2: $7950 ★
JE found the Mk.1 version of the tubed CAT both harmonically accurate and able to endow music with “glo- rious midrange splendor.” J-10 called it “vivaciously balanced and ruthlessly revealing.” Phone booth size is quite enough to work with the AudioQuest 7000xmk. MK.III upgrade channels tube complement, making it “definitely quieter,” said RD. “More lively, yet better behaved than in its previous incarnation.” The Ultimate is the MK.III with more capacitors, more components, and a new cir- cuit board. RD said the Ultimate, his long-term refer- ence, “sounds more relaxed, more liquid, and draws me into the music. There is also an improvement in dynamics, the music seeming to ‘breathe’ with greater freedom.” RD notes the Halcro dm10 against the Mackie db, 70, VTL TL-75, and BAT VK-51SE. “Halcro’s concept aims to generate as spacious a soundstage as the competition, and it consistently put me further away from the music.” Optional phono modules add $2500. (Vol.23 No.1, Vol.22 No.4 WW/WW)

McIntosh C2000: $7500
“Fully the equal of the MC501,” said BD. The solid-state, two-channel, full-function, remote-controlled C2000 preamp includes both moving-magnet and moving-coil phono sections, three balanced and eight unbalanced pairs of inputs, and three balanced and three unbalanced pairs of outputs. The C2000’s timbral balance was “exceedingly neutral from top to bottom,” combining “exceptional bloom and solidity” in the bass region with an “uncolored and extremely natural midrange,” and treble that offered “a winning blend of extension and distinction.” BD appreciated the C2000’s very warm overall tonal character: “Like the MC501, the C2000 invites you to pour yourself a glass of good wine, put your feet up, and enjoy music you love, preferably in the company of someone you love.” (Vol.27 No.10 WW/WW)

 McIntosh C2020: $4900
ST waited 40 years for McIntosh to introduce this new tube preamp. Though its line-stage performance was “superb,” ST found the McIntosh’s phono stage to be “less than stellar.” However, he advised, “IF I was a preamplifier, secondary, occasional source, then the C2020’s phono stage might be all you need.” ST was most impressed by how quiet the C2200 was. “The C2200 seemed neutral without being clinical [and] did not impart any tube glare” ST raved on: “McIntosh has made a tube preamp that exceeds what, for [$4900], would have been possible in a solid-state design... [It] was one of the finest line-stage preamps I have ever used, and far and away the most user-friendly...” A Mac masterpiece” (Vol.15 No.12 WW/WW)

Musical Fidelity Tri-Vista kW: $14,995
Massive, two-channel, full-function preamplifier includes both MM and MC phono inputs with adjustable load- ing. Provided the ideal mate for the kW power amps, the Tri-Vista offered “greater than absolute” expression” than the VT 75, and an “amazing ability to present a coherent and clear image location.” MF praised its “dynamic slam, grand stage size and image scale, and the absolute authority of its iron-fisted control of the bass.” (Vol.27 No.1 WW/WW)

Musical Fidelity X-10: $3995 $$$
that when used with a vacuum-tube preamplifier and was produced in a limited run of 4800 units. Intended to remove any mismatch between source device and amplification stage, the X-10 shows your CD player, DAC, or other source a high input impedance while...
A Tall Order

It was a tall order when Revel engineering was asked to create the most affordable line of Revel speakers. But there was one overriding mandate: Make sure they sound like Revels!

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offering your power amp, integrated, or preamp a low output impedance. Adding more depth and dimensionality to the sound, with more body and weight, the X-10 "brought the X-Ray's performance up to that of a world-class CD player," said ST. Offers no gain, however, and has no control functions. "Class A for what it’s worth," sums up (Vol.27 No.7  Nagra PL-L: $7500

With its inputs on the left and outputs on the right, the PL-L offered KR some setup problems, but he found it "practically impossible to criticize the PL-L's sound. The PL-L was absolutely satisfying and enjoyable. No noise was noticeable... and all controls worked silently and smoothly. The PL-L was revealing and natural, imparting little personality or coloration of its own." KR commended it "not only for professional monitoring, but also for home systems of the very highest quality," and JA found "superb measured performance. Another Swiss jewel of a product from Nagra." Remote control adds $1000; balanced outputs add $500. (Vol.25 No.11 WWW)

Naim NAC 552: $24,450

Remote-controlled, solid-state preamplifier with separate power supply. MF was most impressed by how the NAC 552 added "grasp and drive" to everything he listened to. "The sound was almost unmentionable in its transparency and a slight harmonic darkening, the Naim's performance was exemplary in every way: it was quiet, grain-free, did nothing to change the overall spatial picture, and didn’t impose its own texture on the music. I found the NAC 552 to be a superb measured performance." (Vol.26 No.7 WWW)

Placette Audio Remote Volume Control: $1000

A paperback-sized black box with one set of unbalanced inputs and outputs, a toggle switch and remote, a row of LEDs that light up to indicate the relative volume level, and a 125-step attenuator built entirely with super-premium Vuhay S-102 foil resistors. The Placette centered and locked images into place, improved transparency by removing grunge, and snapped sonic pictures into focus. Box price: $125. Comes with 30-day-money-back guarantee. (Vol.26 No.7 WWW)

VTL TL-7.5 Reference: $13,500

With both delicacy and power, "the VTL TL-7.5 combines a seemingly molecular level of resolution with an agile, flowing facility at presenting contrast, meaning and emotion." The overall sound was entirely grainless and transparent, with true, deep, and tight bass, and incredibly fast, smooth, and open treble. PB: "It is, by no small margin, the finest line stage I have ever heard at length." MF found that the TL-7.5 was a "smooth operator," with a "sumptuous but not excessive midband glow and smooth overall musical flow." It may have sacrificed dynamic expression, but it offered long-term listenability, tunefulness, and emotion. For JA, the TL-7.5 was "a delight to test," it displayed "nearly blemishproof measured performance." PB chose the TL-7.5 over the Halcro dm10, BAT VK-51SE, and Levinson No.32: "[its] strongest suit remains its complete lack of discernible sonic character. It is... the finest pure line stage I have heard, barely nipping the Halcro by a few thousandths into the next line of this Grand Prix." "Slightly soft on the bottom," adds MF. One of Stereophile's "Joint Amplification Components" for 2003. (Vol.26 No.10, Vol.27 No.1 & 4 WWW)

Z-Systems rdp-1 reference: $4000

"A little like a mental age" KR insists. "A fully transparent digital preamp, the rdp-1 is also a flexible and friendly parameter equalizer. The best way to correct tonal imbalance in speakers and source material." Accepts only digital inputs; current production can handle 96kHz sources. "Editor's Choice" for 1998. (Vol.21 No.7 & 12 WWW)

Audio Note M2 Balanced: $4850

AD: A properly tuned preamp has considerations of timer and tone, mostly by sounding consistently, supremely right — and then by doing the arguably more important trick of playing music in a consistently involving fashion." If it departed at all from tonal neutrality, it was "just a wee bit dark overall," which may have been due to the phono stage having a rolling response slightly at the frequency extremes, as JA noted in the M2's modest measured performance. Line-only version costs $3950. (Vol.27 No.6 WWW)

Audio Research SP16L: $1995

Preamplifier that uses three 12AX7E tubes and features eight high- and low-voltage regulators and short signal paths. RD: "The SP16L is very good, too, its somewhat laid-back character complementing the Audio Research VSI 10 amplifier's slightly forward quality in a way that's sympathetic. In matching the SP16L with other equipment, the factors to watch are amplifier gain (loudness may be limited if the gain is much less than the industry-standard 26dB) and source output voltage (the SP16L's maximum input level of 3.5V is lower than the outputs of some 'hot digital sources')." (Vol.26 No.8 WWW)

Blue Circle BC3 Galatea MK.II: $4995

The original version of this dual-mono class-A triode design impressed CS with its understated elegance and high Class B. "It offered all the precision and detail one could want, but without the edging and austerity of the high Class B..." EXCELLENT soundstage, EXCELLENT bass control, EXCELLENT harmonic control. One also found it airy and extended — "immersive," as he put it. Inverts absolute phase. The MK.II Galatea features an outboard power supply split into two channels all the way back to its toroidal transformers, a new wiring layout, and larger power supply capacitors. The MK.II was "well-mannered in every regard," with no apparent texture of its own, and brought forth "an unambiguously big soundfield full of realistically rich instrumental colors..." (Vol.23 No.8, Vol.24 No.9, Vol.25 No.12 WWW)

Blue Circle BC21L: $1650-$1990, depending on options

Tube line preamp uses two 6SN7 tubes and matched well with companion BC22 amp, said KR, but also complemented the Sonic Frontiers Power-3 and McCormack DNA-1. To create "a big, maco sound." Great power and depth in the sub-100Hz range: tight, clean, extended. Throughout the rest of the frequency range it had "dynamics, clarity, and soundstaging far beyond my expectations on even its retail price." For JA, the Ninety-Nine offered a nice balance between tubed liquidity and solid-state precision — an accurate, musical sound, with the supple breath of life that tubes contribute so well... It delivered a wealth of realistic detail and splendid harmonic control... I can't imagine any preamp at this price point whose performance even vaguely approaches that of Rogue's Magna Ninety-Nine." Borderline Class A in the right system. Optional tubed MM/MM phono stage adds $500 (MM) and $400 (MC). Non-Magnum version costs $1995. (Vol.26 No.1 WWW)

Sudgen Headmaster: $1995 $$$

Next headphone amplifier also makes an excellent line stage, according to ST. "If you choose Headphones & Headphone Accessories." (Vol.27 No.8)

VTL TL-5.5: $3500

Using two 12AX7 and four 12AT7 tubes, the TL-5.5 "had a profoundly crystalline sound — remarkably clear, sweet, and extended," said CS. It showcased "exceptional speed and clarity" to offer dynamic contrasts that were "smooth, sweet, and richly detailed, without our glare or sibilance." Its "luminous midrange" was "juicy and detailed, but blissfully free of euphony." CS summarized: "The VTL TL-5.5 is a fine example of the midrange liquidity and the human character that a tube design can add to any signal chain — even as its bass control, midrange smoothness, sparkling highs, and quiet authority suggest the performance of solid-state..." JA gave his approval: "a well-engineered preamplifier, with nothing to indicate that its use of tubes has compromised its performance." Optional phono stage, $750. (Vol.25 No.11 WWW)

Editor's Note: There are currently no Class C or D preamplifiers listed.

K Balanced Audio Technology VK-3IX, Mark Levinson No.320 & 326, Sonic Euphoria PLC, Sutherland Director, Placette Active Line Stage, Viola Cadenza.

Deletions

Conrad-Johnson Premier 17LS2 discontinued; Boulder 2010, Jeff Rowland Design Group Synergy III, Simaudio Moon Pro-5, and VAC Renaissance Signature Mk.II, all not auditioned in too long a time.

Conrad-Johnson Premier 17LS2 discontinued; Boulder 2010, Jeff Rowland Design Group Synergy III, Simaudio Moon Pro-5, and VAC Renaissance Signature Mk.II, all not auditioned in too long a time.
Wilson Audio’s sanding crew uses a huge 70 pound hand-drawn sled to sand flat raw speaker cabinets. That’s the only sure way to get the enclosures flat enough to pass Joe Allan’s inspection. Using a calibrated stainless precision straight edge bar and a feeler tool, he looks for any anomalies. If the flat blade of the feeler tool—which is exactly 4/1000 of an inch thick—slides beneath the bar at any point, it indicates a deviation from flatness unacceptable to Wilson; the cabinet is rejected.

The reason for such extreme tolerances is simple. The enclosure receives its eight layers of WilsonGloss paint and clearcoat before it is wet sanded and buffed to a mirror-like finish. Any underlying bumps, divots, valleys or ridges would then be visible to the naked eye.

Wilson Audio’s highest priority is sonic perfection, but it just doesn’t seem right to house it in a cabinet built to a lesser standard.
Nevertheless, even within each subclass, Class A amplifiers differ sufficiently in character that each will shine in an appropriate system. Careful auditioning with your own loudspeakers is therefore essential. Except where stated, output power figures are for the specified power but rather than we measured into an 8 ohm resistive load. All amplifiers are stereo models, except where designated.

**A SOLID-STATE**

Bel Canto Design eVo2 gen.II: $3300

Solid-state. 100Wpc with a switching "class-T" output stage. (Class-T is claimed to 'distribute' the switching frequency, adjust the "dead time" to suit the output devices, and modulate the switching frequency with the signal.) "Unimpressive in the best possible way," said KR of the original eVo2002. "It did not call attention to itself, and did not color the harmonics or dynamics of the music."

The 2002 was Stereophile's "Editor's Choice of 2001." In addition to "a welcome and successful facelift," the new eVo2 has a transformer and power supply and the capacity of the original. KR was pleased with the change. "With the full deletion of restricting power-supply limitations, one eVo2 now has the practical oomph of a pair of 2002s. Although the upgrade is primarily that, the eVo2 lacks the eVo2002's slight HE veil, which had made many of us question including it in Class A." Compared with the current PS Audio HCA-2, he sums up that "the more literal eVo2 seemed to more accurately serve the music" (Vo124 Nos 3 & 11, eVo 2002; Vo25 Nos 12 & 16; see also KR's report on the eVo2 in Vo26 No.9 WWW)

**Bryston 14B- SST:**

The 14B-SST produces high power (600W) with low distortion, and challenged LG's long-standing assumptions that amps with bridged output circuits don't image precisely, throw deep soundstages, or have the transparency that the lower-end model. KR finds this "an evolution out of the 14B-SST's "unfailing neutrality" and chameleon-like character." The Bryston 14B-SST "seemed to have no character at all.... It ranged from polite to powerful, but with no simple profile emerged." However, he did find "solid, massive, deep bass that was rich and expansive," "first-rate imaging," "clear and extended" treble, and a soundstage that remained "deep, wide, and rich." (Vo25 No 11 WWW)

**Class A Omega monoblock:** $728,000/pair

The DMN PA3S is sufficiently idiosyncratic that it is only recommended in combination with a DMN preamplifier. When he paired it with DMN's C3 preamp (no longer available), Art heard superb rhythm and flow, and along with a "composer" of the DNM system, he was "amazed at highlighting distinct musical images while reproducing the entire musical event. The PA3S drove Art's Quad to satisfying levels "without a trace of grainless and open, with outstanding resolution of top-octave detail.... [Its] foremost strength was a remarkable clarity and transparency.... It reproduced music with a beautifully cultivated and sophisticated character." Borderline Class A, was PB's final verdict. Radia owners and would-be purchasers should look at the serial numbers of their units and check with their dealer to make sure it has the later, better-performing internal grounding arrangement. (Vo27 No.3 WWW)

**Jeff Rowland Design Group M302: $14,800 each, $29,600 a pair, the M302s are what Hovland calls "a very fussy about how it is used," likening them to "one of High End's great companies; gorgeous looks andbulletproof operation, with high energy efficiency and low distortion."

Lamm Industries M1.2 Reference monoblock: $2,690/pair

The 10W M1.2 with hybrid front end and MOSFET output stage, comprehensive short-circuit protection, and high/low impedance settings, offered "unflinching honesty in conveying the true nature of the music that passed through it," said PB. "Utterly continuous and coherent from top to bottom," the M1.2 combined resolution and transparency with harmonic completeness, timbral richness, and glow. (Vo26 No.11 WWW)

**Linn Industries M2.2 monoblock:**

Like the M1.2, the 22W M2.2 is a hybrid design with a solid-state input stage, a single 602A tube as the driver, and the M1.2's MOSFET output stage. "Follow-Up" to investigate some measured problems in the original review. (Vo27 No.10 WWW)

**Halcro dm38 monoblock: $29,990/pair @

PB warned about this 200W (260W at clipping) Bruce Candy design. "Shouldn't buy without buying a pair of these wonders unless you're willing to bear everything in the recordings you play, and exactly what the rest of your components are doing, for better and for worse." Luckily for Paul, he heard only the best. "The dynamics, purity, and tonal transparency were beyond anything in my prior experience.... Detail retrieval bordered on the supernatural.... Soundstaging was superb.... Depth was little short of incredible." The Halcro offered dynamic performance that "concrete mortars can't manage." When PB compared the dm38 to the Lamm M2.1, he described it as "yin-yang, Apolloitan to Dionysian, Platonic ideal vs Aristotelian reality — that was the difference between the two electronic giants.... I could not conclude that the Lamm's ultimate image was quite the equal of the Halcro's, but no other amp's are, either. But the M2.1's ability to consistently infuse a genuinely human presence into recorded music placed it on a peak barely less unapproachable than the solitary Everest on which dwells the Halcro dm38 ST denotes, however, respecting the Halcro more than he loved it. Soprophile's 2002
2010 Isolated Preamplifier...

...Priceless Perfection
Musical Fidelity Tri-Vista kW "Monobloc": $29,500/pair

"A singular combination of value and performance," the 500W (720W at actual clipping) MC501, rated to deliver more than 100 amperes of output current, is McIntosh's latest and most expensive solid-state amplifier and features balanced (XLR) and single-ended ( RCA) inputs, and the patented Autoformer coupled output stage. Bass was delivered in an especially lifelike way, and the midrange was "push, plush, lush, and generous" without sacrificing dynamic nuance or retrieval of detail. The soundstage was comparable to the Halo d58S, with superlative width and sense of space, but with sometimes a snugged-up depth. Again similar to the d58S, the MC501 was able to resolve the smallest details without breaking a sweat. PB: "They politely exerted its finescent concerns out of the listening room and invited back in the love of music for its own sake."

Heatsinking not generous enough for sustained high-power use on sinewaves, but probably adequate for music. (Vol27 No.8 WWW)

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"Physically and electrically imposing, each kW weighs nearly 95 lbs without its separate power supply and delivers more than 1000W into 8 ohms. The kWs combined power and grace to produce convincing dynamics at the top levels, but also revealed that all of the low-level dynamic expression. Though they were very responsive to different cables and AC conditioners, they consistently produced unlimited dynamics at both ends of the volume scale, created a sense of images floating between the speakers, and always sounded relaxed with no hint of compression. Inserting the kW into his system, MF found a "unique and sensational upward step in both sheer sonic pleasure and in the communication of musical meaning. The awesome bass control might lead to leanesses with some speakers, cautions JA. (Vol27 No.1 WWW)

"Sounding... was phenomenal — deep, detailed, holographic. Tonal balance was natural, and possession of purity and clarity galore. Low-level detail never left the scene, but existed naturally within the musical gestalt. Paradoxically, the No.33H exists on a plane where the news isn't about more, it's about less. It had no grain, no grit, no electronic character that I could detect. It had no 'warmth'... no MOSFET blur, no transistors' constrictions... It was incredibly natural and completely nonexistent — except that it did what it did better than anything else I've ever heard." JA's reference (he bought a pair). (Vol21 No.1 WWW)

Mark Levinson No.431 $6000

The 200Wpc, two-channel No.431 is shorter, deeper, wider, and 7 lbs lighter than its predecessor, the No.334, but it is rated to deliver almost twice the power into 8 and 4 ohms. LG: "There was a slight reduction in bass solid- state, and confusion when the sum No.431 was compared with the magnificent No.334 in the Revel, Ultra Salons, but there were also improvements in midrange detail and treble extension through the Quads." Despite running very warm, the No.431 proved to be a "well engineered powerhouse of an amplifier," says JA. (Vol28 No.11 WWW)

Mark Levinson No.436 monoblock: $12,500/pair

This 350Wpc (500W at clipping!) powerhouse has "Sherman-tank construction, an overkill power supply, and the best components money can buy," according to LG. "Listening to the No.436 was an unusual pleasure," he wrote. "It provided the same open, detailed, lush, sumptuous, warm sonic signature I associate with the No.334, as well as the same appealing midband punch and deep-bass massage.... It's clear to me that the No.436's trimmer chassis, cooler operation, and convenience give the owner even more value than earlier ML amplifiers, and that it represents evolutionary progress in practical amplifier design." (Vol26 No.8 WWW)

McIntosh MC501 mono $9900/pair

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*the Era speakers....impressive speaker engineering at affordable prices*
John Atkinson, Stereophile, May 2005, CES report

"Despite their small size, these little brutes delivered surprisingly robust, open sound thanks to beefy, sophisticated custom drivers, designed from scratch..."
Michael Fremer, Stereophile, December 2004

Best of Show, CES 2005
"Most promising new company: Era Acoustics, whose exquisite satellite/subwoofer based systems feature drop-dead gorgeous looks and incredibly well-balanced sound -- all at prices starting around $2500 for a complete 5.1 system. Surefire winners."
Chris Martens, The Absolute Sound

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dynamic drive, massive bass control, captivating high-driver stage. PB: "The VTL MB-450 Signature offers a high-gain 12AT7 tube capacitor-coupled power outputtransistors and offers twice the power of the MV605E for $500 less. "A version includes a new bridge rectifier and upgraded wiring. ST: "Low-level resolution was excellent.... Transients were very cleanly rendered, and the harmonic presentation seemed natural. ...[It] managed to avoid the things that have so often annoyed me about solid-state: the stripping away of natural harmonics, the relative lack of body and bloom, the leanness, the comparative absence of palpability. While the MV605E sounded "tad more real and a touch more resolving," the MF2250A improved on the smaller amp's bass extension and authority. (Vol.26 No.5) Quad II Classic monoblock: $2700/pair Rated at 10Wpc (17.8W at clipping) the Music-6 is powered by the compact cool-running MX-D1: "Me Yamaha push-pull vacuum-tube monoblock that can work with any) of the vices of high-quality, medium-powered solid-state amplifiers: clarity, focus, tonal trueness, dynamic drive, and ample bass."

Edutor's Note: There are currently no Class D power amplifiers listed.

K Advanced Audio Technology VK-55, VTL S-400, Chord PSM-14000 monoblock, Simaudio Moon W8, Music Reference RM10 MK2, Viola Symphony, Moscode 401HR, Musical Fidelity W750. Demo

Conrad-Johnson Premier 140 discontinued; Air Tight ATM-211 monoblock and Quicksilver Horn Mono monoblock not auditioned in a while.

INTEGRATED AMPLIFIERS & RECEIVERS

A Brinkmann Integrated: $4850 The 75Wpc Integrated combines a passive input stage with transformer-coupled balanced operation. JM: "The Brinkmann exhibits all of the virtues and few (if any) of the vices of high-quality, medium-powered solid-state amplifiers: clarity, focus, tonal trueness, dynamic drive, and ample bass." He also commented that it was also "a very quiet amplifier, in terms of both lack of transistor rush at idle and retrieval of low-level musical detail." JM summed up: "If you’re looking for a medium-powered one-box solution that combines extremely engaging and detailed, high-quality construction and very distinctive design, Brinkmann’s Integrated should be on your audition list."

World Radio History

Stereophile editors pick the industry’s best products

500 RECOMMENDED COMPONENTS

Wavac Audio Lab SH-833: 8350,000/pair Wavac "creates an undeniable magic, even as it shows the Wavac 'creates an undeniable magic, even as it shows"
passive preamp stage and extensive switching capability. Headphone output, but no balance control. BJR found the SE neutral throughout the frequency range, with "like-life, delicate, yet forceful transient articulation...organic reproduction of low-level dynamic nuances and subtle ambient cues," and "a degree of bass definition, articulation, clarity, and bottom-end extension unlike any I've heard from any amplifier in this price range and/or power rating." ST thinks the little integrated is just as transparent and, subjectively, almost identical to its predecessor. ST finally said, "The Krell A400xii is a true integrated amplifier capable of out-driving all but the most power-hungry AV monitors...even if you're an audiophile who prefers the sound of tubes. 

It didn't handle multipath in the upper part of the FM broadcast band, but in fact surpasses tube performance, ST pointed out that it was a misnomer to call the Panache LP "better than ST has heard from other integrateds. "There was an ease about the Performance—a flow, an exceptional dynamic quality, both microdynamic and macrodynamic." Though bass was ample, it was not as muscular or as tight as with Unison's Unico SE. ST wasn't crazy about its styling, however, and (if conditionally) recommended it. 

"The Krell A400xii retained the 300's best qualities—control and unexcelled timbre—while improving on it across the board, especially at the frequency extremes. Combining surprising naturalness with an unhyped detail and toe-tapping rhythm and pace, the Krell 400xii emphasized the music's emotional impact. "I would avoid pairing the amplifier with head- speakers that drop below 4 ohms," JA advised, adding that the amplifier has inadequate heat dissipation and requires high-power-hungry power supplies. 

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>>有關更多內容，請訪問 Stereophile.com，October 2005 >>

**Musical Fidelity A 3.5: $1600**

(Same Teliš's review in this issue.)

Pathos Acoustics Logos: $795

Unlike the standard Unico, the Piccolo employs a single-ended input stage with a linear input match, and retains high-resolution, high-transparent bass. Sam: "cheap, clear, and crisp, with a high degree of palpability, treble refinement, and ultimate oomph into the bass at lower levels."

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The King.

The King, a uniquely shaped speaker, sculpted from proprietary Hansen Composite Matrix material, stands before you. You sit down. You lean back. You close your eyes. And then it begins. Music so dynamic and with such dimension you feel as if you could reach out and touch the stage. Low frequencies register with vigor. High notes ring truer than a saint. Every sound, every passage, every breath sends a tingle across your skin. It's sound redefined. It's sound, pure and flawless.

Sound. Redefined in a complete line of speakers.

Hansen Audio Inc. 37 Burndenford, Markham, Ontario, Canada L3P 7X3 P: 416 254-8662 F: 905 201-8144 www.hansenaudio.com
fully designed package. "Strongly recommended," said AD. While the Solo exhibited overall excellent measured performance, JA cautioned that "Owners should steer clear of speakers with impedances that dip below 4 ohms." (Vol28 No.7 WWW)

AToll Electronique 100C: $1275

This 100Wpc integrated uses a single pair of MOS-FET devices per side and is supplied with 660VA transformer "a well modulation, a warm, a tight low-frequency texture in sound that in some ways departed from what I considered to be quintessentially French sound..." The AToll treated my musical kind with such a benefit the of an edge or aggressiveness of their own. "With the Triangle Ti 30 XS speakers, the sound was "not far short of fabulous." ST warned against speakers whose impedances dip much below 4 ohms. Remote volume control adds $110, phone stage adds $75. (Vol26 No.6 Audio Analogue Primo: $799

The 70Wpc Primo integrated features five line-level inputs in a small, 15.6-lb package. Each channel used two National LM3886T integrated circuits to provide the power. The Primo sounded "tube-like to a remarkable degree," with very good resolution and exceptional tone quality. It was "a good choice for those who want good two-channel sound, convenience with out complications, and an uncluttered system," delivered "a polite" sound that was "a tad bland and less than totally involving," but nevertheless assured and powerful. Made exclusively for Music Hall by the Chinese hi-fi firm Shandling, the Maven offers AM/FM radio and also features an upscaling Crystal CS8420 chip and a Burr-Brown PCM1713 DAC for its digital input. "A terrific buy," said ST. (Vol28 No.5 NAD C320BEE: $399

A 50Wpc integrated from veteran designer Bjorn-Erik Edvardsen — hence "BEE" — with very clean layout and excellent build quality, featuring five line-level inputs, two tape loops, and sets of preamp-out and amplifier-in jacks. AD: "The NAD C320BEE sounded surprisingly good, at least on paper, but actually to the amp was consistently more an exercise in fulfillment than frustration..." The C320 reproduced stereo recordings with excellent depth..." [It] preserved the music's sense of flow, regardless of style..." The NAD is musically well realized and reasonably accomplished, and is probably about as close to organic sound as you can get for this kind of money..." One of the greatest bargains in amplifiers today." (Vol26 No.7 WWW) Rotal RA-02: $1095

This 40Wpc integrated has sleek low-profile styling, four pairs of line-level inputs, a tape loop, a phono section, and a pair of preamp-out jacks whose output signal is affected by the amp's volume, balance, and tone controls, making it ideal for owners of subwoofers. While AD preferred the RA-02's sleek looks to the PR-100's, they found the Rotel's sound to be "crisp and forward." AD: "The Rotel RA-02 is a well-designed and decent-sounding product; with such features as a built-in phono section, subwoofer outputs, and provisions for a second pair of speakers, it offers undeniably good value for the money. But the NAD C320BEE's music-making is more to my taste." (Vol26 No.7 WWW) Vincent SV-121: $995

This 50Wpc, line-level, remote-controlled integrated uses two pairs of Sanken bipolar output transistors per side, operating in Class-AB. Strong bass, a smooth midrange, a lack of top-end sibilance, and no apparent out of his or her experience, approaches the current state of the art in loudspeaker design. (Note that, to be eligible for inclusion in Class A, the system must be full-range — i.e., feature bass extension to 20Hz. It must also be capable of reaching realistic sound-pressure levels without any feeling of strain.)

For those unconfident about the last few hertz of low-end extension, we have created "Classes A, B, and C (Restricted Extension LF)" for those speakers that are state of the art in every way. Candidates for inclusion in this class must still reach down to at least 40Hz, below the lowest notes of the four-string double-bass and bass guitar.

In addition, such has been the recent progress in loudspeaker design at a more affordable level that we have an extra class; E, for "Entry Level." Someone once asked us why Stereophile bothers to review inexpensive loudspeakers at all; In effect, aren't we insulting our reader's by recommending that they buy inexpensive models? Remember: it's possible to put together a musically satisfying, truly high-end system around any of our Class D and E recommendations. That's why they're listed — and why you should consider buying them.

A Musical Acoustics Model 20T: $25,000–$30,000/pair, depending on finish

Stereophile's "Joint Loudspeaker of 2004." (Vol27 No.4 WWW)

Calix Phoenix Grand Signature: $67,500/pair

(Full-Size Name: www.calixusa.com/www/calixusa.com)

Focal-JMLab Grande Utopia Be: $85,000/pair

Mission piston: $400/pair

(j.mission.com)

NHT Evolution T56: $4000/system $$$

Speakers included in this reports are B6 woofers and a cabinet; M6 monitors, 2 A1 250 amplifiers, 1 X-1 bass manager, 2.6 assembly; 1 M6 Monitor, 346/32ch; 3-Channel, $2000 each. (Vol28 No.4, Vol28 No.5 WWW)

Revel Ultima: $15,000/pair


Rockport Technologies Merak II/Sheridan I: $29,500/system

(Stereofilme.com, October 2005)
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Marantz
SA-11 $3299
Designed for the most discriminating two-channel audiophile, the Marantz SA-11 truly offers World Class Performance! This CD/SACD player is so musical, even our analog customers love this player! Call or check our website for much more information about this incredible digital player.

"The SA-11S1 gets an unqualified recommendation, both for its outstanding CD performance and even better SACD sound. The Marantz SA-11S1 is a perfect choice for those looking for true high-end performance from a mid-priced player."
— Robert Harley, The Absolute Sound

Channel Island Audio
VHP-1 Headphone Amp $349
The new Channel Islands Audio VHP-1 Headphone Amp is another example of CIA's price-to-performance killers! This little headphone amp impressed us with incredible tonal accuracy. It works great with the Grado, Sennheiser, and even the Shure Headphones! Its high bandwidth, extremely low noise and 120 dB of dynamic range will really impress! Also available w/ VAC-1 Power Supply Upgrade for $1591

D-100 Mono-block
The new D-100 Mono-blocks from Channel Island Audio are a superb marriage of performance, sound quality and reliability. With a powerful bottom end, smooth, textured midrange and sweet extended highs, these amplifiers produce a glorious sound matched only by the most expensive amps. Get your hands on these mighty amps and put 'em up against the competition at over twice the price! (100 W/Ch into 8 ohms, 180 W/Ch into 4 ohms) Price $1599/pair.

"Channel Island's nifty little D-100 amplifier is extremely well built - the fit and finish are superb. I kept having to remind myself that a pair of them costs less than $2000! A lot less! I really had to keep pinching myself as I auditioned them!"
— Wes Phillips, Stereophile, August 2005
Stereophile editors pick the industry's best products

500 RECOMMENDED COMPONENTS

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that stands 50" tall and weighs more than 150 lbs. JM: "Pro: Superb value for dollar; all the bass extension one should need; rich and full sound at lower volume levels; engaging detail and musicality. Con: Not a speaker for small rooms or nearfield listening; bass extension requires care in placement; electrostatics or dynamic two-ways will often nose ahead in absolute coherence."

CV1-25: $18,000/pair

The Confidence C4 has much in common with its cost-

a bandpass woofer section. driver configuration and a bandwidth woofers.

the review pair. (Vo128 No7 WWW)

Joseph R BM33i Signature: $7949-$7999/pair, depending on finish

CS raved that "Jeff Joseph and Richard Modafferti have achieved something special with the RM33i, an "infinite Scope" design that allows the woofers to roll off quickly while the tweeter comes on gradually. CS was impressed: "the RM33i suggested a complex flavor — like a fine old Bordeaux revealing layer on layer of body and bouquet...to reveal a web of heretofore inimaginable sensations." However, JA was bothered by finding the "33i's sensitivity significantly lower than the specified 88dB, and was concerned by a measured lack of integration between the midrange unit and the tweeter. However, while CS stated that "it's easy to misconstrue the RM33i's extraordinary levels of clarity and resolution as being hard to place," he decided that "in a powerful home theater environment and with a large underground listening room with my ancillaries, there was simply too much treble energy." But IA did agree with CS that "The RM33i did present an astonishing width of recorded detail, and their soundstaging was simply superb!" Late 2002 update: Upon closer point analysis, the crossover slightly improves the midrange/tweeter integration. CS found a "more natural and satisfying" fill between the bass and midrange frequencies. "What had essentially been a highly resolved, coherent two-way speaker with an integrated soundstage and fine detail has now morphed into a refined white-wine speaker that now suggests a more layered, textured red." Price includes Sound Anchor stands. (Vol.24 No.10, Vol.25 No.6, Vol.26 No.1 WWW)

KEF Reference Model 207: $15,000/pair

This five-way speaker uses a 0.5" fabric-dome super-
tweeter, a 1" ring-radiator tweeter, a 4" polypropylene- cone midrange, and 2" ceramic-cone mid-woofer. While its treble was exquisite, the midrange and timbre aspects of the music had a natural, relaxed, flowing quality, a delightful sense of physical depth. Timbral and spatial perception, however, could be affected by the speakers' positioning; AD advised against toing them in, and paid special attention to their spikes. (Vol.28 No.4 WWW)

Marten Design Coltrane: $50,000/pair

If one can be found..."Peck's simple, clear, unadorned energy detail," the three-way, reflex-loaded Coltrane features an "inverted diamond-dome tweeter, 3.5" ceramic-cone midrange unit, and two 9" ceramic-cone woofers. For MF, the Coltranes were all "about attack, attack, and more attack." Optimizing their placement took time, but "Getting the Coltrane there wasn't easy; when it was there, the speaker was unforgettable in letting me know something was wrong." And, even after changing it optimized, MF filled found the Coltrane "a bit bright on top, slightly lean on bottom." The solution, he found, was to change to the recommended Jorma Design #1 cables. "The Coltranes...cohered as they hadn't before. The top end, still ultra-extended and detailed, was now transparent and silky-smooth, the midrange more pronounced and fleshed-out, the bass fuller and more realistic." (Vol.28 No.2 WWW)

Opera Callas Divina: $8995/pair

In addition to its four idealst.6" bass/midrange dri-

The goals set for the Andra II were to give the original Andra more accurate amplitude response, higher effi-
ciency, deeper bass response, and a major increase in overall transparency. Revisions include extensive changes to the cabinet, an entirely new crossover, new wiring, and modification of the drivers. Despite PB's efforts to get Jeff Joseph to match the drivers, there was no strain, no compression of the size of the soundstage, and there was every bit as much grace and finesse in the low-level passages...as in the sheer horsepower and unflappablility of the earth-shattering segments.... Dynamically, the Andra II was a behemoth power lifter that could dance like Baryshnikov. "It that could dance like Baryshnikov. Its greatest strength was its ability to let music breathe and flow: 'It excelled at communicating the essences of music as much as at reproducing the sound.'"

EgglestonWorks Andra II: $18,900/pair

The small, two-way Callas displayed surprising bass down to around 40Hz. For about the same amount of money as the larger Quinta, the Callas offered "a certain sweetness, and coherence, and has a very warm and nonfatiguing," while the reproduction of vocal music was "more natural and satisfying" fill between the bass and midrange. (Vol.24 No.10, Vol.25 No.6, Vol.26 No.1 WWW)

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The small, two-way Callas displayed surprising bass down to around 40Hz. For about the same amount of money as the larger Quinta, the Callas offered "a certain sweetness, and coherence, and has a very warm and nonfatiguing," while the reproduction of vocal music was "more natural and satisfying" fill between the bass and midrange. (Vol.24 No.10, Vol.25 No.6, Vol.26 No.1 WWW)

Krell Resolution 1: $81,000/pair

A "bold, powerful speaker" with an "ambitious design," the 5-way, reflex-loaded, magnetically shielded, floor-standing loudspeaker. Users a revised Uni-Q drive-unit and a superb tweeter, mounted atop an elliptical cabinet. "Suffice it say," concluded JA, that the 207 appears to embody everything the English company has learned about driver configuration and speaker-system design in the 40 years since it was founded by the late Raymond Cooke." He was impressed by the speaker's combination of LF extension and clarity, as well as its "broad, stable, and unflinching...image." The Krells sacrificed transient speed, trans-

Piega C8 LTD's defining design element is its rib-

for low-bass freaks, the C8 exhibited a steep rolloffbelow

the midrange and treble frequencies above 650Hz, a warm midbass, a smooth midrange, a subdued top end."

Harbeth Super HL5: $3995/pair (stands necessary)

"A classic for more than a quarter of a century," the lat-

ization, he found, was to change to the recommended

The small, two-way Callas delivered more detail, more resolution, more refinement, a tad more sweetness. Superior soundstaging, a la mininons. "The magic is in the way the speaker is voiced," says ST. Matching stands add $499/pair. (Vol.27 No.4)

Paradigm Signature S2: $1900-$2200/pair, depending on finish (stands necessary) $$$

The Signature S2, with its high-tech, high-dynamic-

range drive-units..."A gold-anodized aluminum-dome tweeter and a 7" mica-loaded polymer-cone woofer... and its immaculate high-gloss finish, is intended to sprea-

head Paradigm's assault on high-end speaker design. The S2 sacrificed ultimate loudness and bass extension for nuanced higher-frequency purity and the ability to develop a stable, detailed soundstage, possibly making it the ultimate in moderately sized, hyper-realistic loud-

Peaia C8 LTD: $17,000/pair

This two-way loudspeaker has a dedicated and nonre-
movable stand, which houses the crossover for better mechanical and electrical isolation. JM: "The InCo-

nito excels at bass (though not deep bass), midrange sweetness, and coherence, and has a very warm and nonfatigating treble. Imaging and soundstaging are first-

rate." Perhaps related to its lack of deep bass was JM's perception that the InCognito "really 'came alive' only in a hung space with the midbass so fat it was...broadly gorgeous at an equally attractive price, with faults that are minor and strengths that are major, the S2 comes highly recommended," said JA. Matching Pendant J-29 speaker stand solid separately. (Vol.28 No.7 WWW)

Peak Consult Empress: $25,000/pair (See Wes Phillips' review in this issue.)

Peak Consult InCognito: $15,000/pair

This two-way loudspeaker has a dedicated and nonre-
movable stand, which houses the crossover for better mechanical and electrical isolation. JM: "The InCo-

nito excels at bass (though not deep bass), midrange sweetness, and coherence, and has a very warm and nonfatigating treble. Imaging and soundstaging are first-

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Here’s your chance to meet one of the true “innovators” in the history of high-end audio...

David A. Wilson will be at Overture, Saturday, October 15th, from noon until 4:00 PM. David will introduce the remarkable new “Duette” speaker system, and you’ll have the opportunity to visit with David and ask him any questions you may have. David will explain some of the unique ways the Wilson Audio design team approaches and solves the many problems encountered in designing state-of-the-art speaker systems.

Wilson Audio’s Director of Sales, Peter McGrath, will join us and play some of his remarkable master tapes. If you’ve never heard Peter’s recordings, you’re in for a rare sonic treat. Peter is one of the world’s finest recording engineers.

Overture’s President, Terry Menacker, will join David and Peter to bring you an up-to-the-minute report on the state of the high-end audio industry today.

We have a great day planned that any serious music enthusiast will surely not want to miss. The entire Wilson Audio Line will be on display, from the exciting new Duette to the incomparable Alexandria X-2.

Of course, you’ll see and hear the world’s finest associated components including the incredible Audio Research 610T and 210T monaural amps, Spectral’s groundbreaking SDR 4000S CD PLAYER, MIT’s revolutionary Oracle “Maximum Articulation” cables and Classé Audio's all new Reference preamp and the world's first 1080P DVD player, and much, much more! It’s an event no music enthusiast will want to miss.

For reservations and for more information, please call 1.800.838.1812.
The product of a concerted engineering effort that has paid off in real-world performance, the 809 DC is a three-way, bass-reflex design with a slender, curved, monocoque cabinet made of six layers of laminate. Drive-units include a 1" aluminum-dome tweeter, a 7" aluminum-midrange cone, and two 8" aluminum-midrange woofers. WP was most impressed by the Canton's tweeter, which "put out an unusual amount of sparkle and air" and contributed to the speaker's overall "light, agile, and accurate" character. Though it could sound "a tad lightweight," the 809 DC offered excellent clarity and detail, and delivered powerful bass when properly set up. "A lot of speaker for the money," said WP. (Vol.28 No.6 2005)

Cox Audio Systems SM-035: $3895/pair

The "unprepossessing" SM-081 uses the tried-and-true cones-in-a-box formula, featuring 1" tweeter, a 4" pulp midrange cone, a 5.5" upper-bass driver, and a 7" side-firing lower-bass woofers mounted near the bottom of the cabinet. JA was impressed: "The competition is reasonable, precise, and very well executed." The SM-081's upper frequencies were "brilliant, transparent, and precise," and its midrange was "brilliant, very fast, and without overhang." It was "a great all-around performer," and "an exciting speaker for the money." (Vo128 No.5 WWW)

Legacy Audio Focus 20/20: $6498/pair

The Legacy uses seven drivers in a five-way configuration, and delivers 185 lbs. Combining relaxed musicality with high authority, it proved highly adept at resolving low-level detail to perform well with large-scale power music, whether rock or classical. PB: "The Legacy Focus 20/20 is a genuinely full-range, alluringly musical, alluringly musical, alluringly musical, alluringly musical, alluringly musical..." (Vo128 No.7 WWW)

Wilson Benesch A.C.T.: $813,500/pair

Wilson Benesch's proprietary Tactic 7" bass and bass-midrange drivers and a 1" hand-painted, silk-dome tweeter. JM summed up: "Pros: Drop-dead gorgeous; extraordinarily low distortion; smooth and clear throughout; bass quality of the Quad ESL-989 was astoundingly good." Unlike LG, AD never heard a "polite character." (Vo128 No.3 WWW)

Wilson Audio Specialties Sophia: $812,700/pair

The new A.C.T. is the same size and shape as the original SM-081, but with the internal volume of the larger model's improved bass is excellent — very quick, very sharp, and powerful — larger and more ambitious speakers will do a better job with the lowest octave. (Vo125 No.7, Vo128 No.10 WWW)

Canton Vento 809 DC: $5000/pair

Canton's tweeter, "which put out an unusual amount of sparkle and air" and contributed to the speaker's overall "light, agile, and accurate" character. Though it could sound "a tad lightweight," the 809 DC offered excellent clarity and detail, and delivered powerful bass when properly set up. "A lot of speaker for the money," said WP. (Vol.28 No.6 2005)

B - FULL-RANGE

Audio Physic Virgo III: $7495-$7995/pair, depending on finish

A "well-engineered, beautifully executed, and great-sounding" three-way floorstanding speaker that is basically a mini-monitor allied to a subwoofer. Unlike earlier Virgos, the IIIs woofer subsystem uses two passive radiators; each sidewall houses a vertical array of woofer and radiator. BD: "The Virgo's strengths, weaknesses, and overall presentation were much more akin to the Magnepan MG3.6/1's." (Vo128 No.6 WWW)

Cobra Audio Systems MB-08/1: $83895/pair

A "unique and fascinating slice of speaker technology," the Virgo's "unusually open, airy, coherent sound." When pushed too hard, the system's sound became "somewhat grayish, bright, and a bit forward," but with "dramatic levels, a "slight lack that didn't hide detail and was free of sharp spikes." Required careful setup in order to achieve the appropriate balance with the matching Thiel II powered subwoofer ($2500 each), use with which is mandatory for the recommendation. (Vol.29 No.10 2006 WWW)

World Radio History

www.Stereophile.com, October 2005
What does a compass have to do with your system?

A compass is an everyday example of how material can be influenced by an external "field." The earth's magnetic field causes a compass pointer to align itself relative to the earth's magnetic poles.

In a very similar manner, the AudioQuest Dielectric-Bias System (DBS) causes the molecules of a cable's insulation to align themselves relative to an electrostatic field. A 36v DBS battery-pack attached to inner and outer DBS field elements creates a strong and stable field.

Electrostatically unorganized insulation causes non-linear phase error; different amounts of time delay for different parts of the signal. Polarized (aligned) insulation eliminates almost all of this distortion. Sound is much smoother and easier to understand, seeming to come from a quiet black background. Information and emotion come through as never before.

Listen and Enjoy!
Below 40Hz, however, the bass fell off very rapidly, music, a heavy rocker might want to look elsewhere. Earlier versions of the top model in this Canadian manufacturer’s Reference series were long-term residents of "Recommended Components." The Studio-100 v.3 features three 7" woofers compared with the v.2’s two 8.5" units, a 7" midrange unit rather than the v.2’s 6.5", and a 1" aluminum-dome tweeter that now protrudes slightly above the top of the enclosure. With an overall sound that was "laid-back rather than bright, smooth and seamless, the midrange was simply superb.... smooth, the midrange uncolored, and bass extension and definition were excellent for a speaker of its price and size. There was a slight coloration in the upper midrange, some piano notes sounding more forward in the soundstage than they should. Overall, however, JA echoed ST’s enthusiastic recommendation: "A superb performer.... Highly recommended." Compared to the Canton Vento 809 DC, WP felt the Cremona offered deeper, tastier bass and a warmer overall sound. (Vol.26 No.11, Vol.27 No.3, Vol.28 No.22) THIEL CS6: $8900/pair "The CS6 offers high perceived value," JA said. "It is beautifully constructed, well balanced, and, once set up optimally, with a gutsy amplifier and high-quality bus and a warmer overall sound. (Vol.26 No.11, Vol.27 No.3, Vol.28 No.22) Dynaudio Special Twenty-Five: $5200/pair Used in a 50" ribbon driver to cover the midrange and treble, the 11-G Radia 580 stands 70" high by just 8" wide. LG heard "clean, nonfatiguing sound, superb soundstaging that placed the instruments and voices with rock-stable solidity, a wide dynamic range, and overall transparency." The speaker’s mid- and low-bass outputs is prematurely rolled off but in a well-controlled manner, making it a natural choice for use with a subwoofer. JA’s measurements uncovered an unevenness in the speaker’s frequency response, though, he agreed with LG’s evaluation of the Radia’s performance, he would have liked a bit more top-octave energy. (Vol.27 No.12, Vol.28 No.1 WWW) Earthworks Sigma 6.2: $3500-$5000/pair The Special Twenty-Five borrows technology from Dynaudio’s top loudspeakers. JM: "How do they sound? Fabulous. But with high-quality parts, conservative (first-order crossover) design, and flawless execution, what’s not to like?" (Well, okay - the Euro-american design, the $4400 and up price tag; the Sigma’s cabinet is admirably rather stiff, yet the audible family resemblance to the Evidence and Confidence goes a long way in justifying that." Although further evaluation convinced JA that the Twenty-Five is "a superb loudspeaker," with a grain-free treble, a natural-sounding midrange, excellent soundstaging, and well-extended bass response down to 25Hz, its forward-leaning treble balance confines it to Class B. (Vol.26 No.1, Vol.26 No.6 WWW) Triangle Celsus Ex: $2699/pair The Celsus is the top model in Triangle’s new Ex range of loudspeakers, borrowing from the flagship Magell- an line such features as the single-point energy con- ductor platform, designed to drain away vibrations. With ultrasmooth treble, tight, fast, extended bass, the Celsus Ex proved a "seamless triumph," said ST. (Vol.28 No.1) B - RESTRICTED LF B&W 705: $1500/pair (stands necessary) The moderately sized, two-way, 50"

The Special Twenty-Five borrows technology from Dynaudio’s top loudspeakers. JM: "How do they sound? Fabulous. But with high-quality parts, conservative (first-order crossover) design, and flawless execution, what’s not to like?" (Well, okay - the Euro-american design, the $4400 and up price tag; the Sigma’s cabinet is admirable but stiff, yet the audible family resemblance to the Evidence and Confidence goes a long way in justifying that." Although further evaluation convinced JA that the Twenty-Five is "a superb loudspeaker," with a grain-free treble, a natural-sounding midrange, excellent soundstaging, and well-extended bass response down to 25Hz, its forward-leaning treble balance confines it to Class B. (Vol.26 No.1, Vol.26 No.6 WWW)
Gershman Acoustics is introducing the NEW Black Swan Incorporating the revolutionary S.S.A.S. Patent Pending system.

gershmanacoustics.com
Tel. 905-669-5994
Focal-JMlab Cobalt 816 S: $1895/pair
Focal-JMlab Cobalt 806 S: $1595/pair $$$
(stands necessary)

Two similar speakers, one floorstanding, one stand-mounted that uses the same 1" Ti/Co tweeter as the Electro 926, and the 6.5" bass/midrange driver and "W"-mounted that uses the same 1" Tioxid 5 tweeter as the Focal-JMlab Cobalt 806 S: $1095/pair SSE and deep soundstage, with precise imaging and excellent "s" electrostatic- like speed." Drawbacks included the graphic image that I got from the stand-mounted monoway I like it and the way to go," he sums up. (Vo126 No.9)

Harbeth Compact 7ES-5: $295/pair $$$
(stands necessary)

Originally introduced in 1988, the Compact 7ES-2 is now being distributed in the US by Fidelis Audio/Video. Used in the former Camp, 8" proprietary Radial cone driver and a 1" ferrofluid-coated, magnesium-alloy dome tweeter to achieve total freedom from listening fatigue. ST: " Rock fans would be needed to reach any deep lows, the S8e's 1.5% smaller than the S8, but with a 5.5" bass/midrange driver and 5.5" woofer. Perhaps a better choice for a small room, said ST. (Vo128 No.3)

Sonus Faber Cremona Auditor: $3995/pair
(stands necessary)

features the same upscaled cabinet and trebleloading grille as the floorstanding Cremona with a slightly different 1" ring-radiator tweeter and a 5.85" doped-paper bass/midrange cone. The Auditor was an "excellent, handler of power," capable of playing "very, very loud," and that "the lower end was fabulously extended...." Rock fans and others looking for excitement can go elsewhere.... Those looking for musical involvement with more serious musical genres might be thoroughly enchanted.... I was enchanted. Instruments were so full, so ripe, so lush I could almost pinch each musician's ass.... The Harbeth Compact 7ES-2 is one of the 10 or so finest speakers I have encountered in more than two decades of reviewing. Maybe not the last word in low-level rez, otherwise the Harbeth would be Class A all the way.

Add $200/pair for stands. (Vol26 No.12 WWW)

Harbeth HL-3 ES-2: $1595/pair (stands necessary)
(See John Marks' review in this issue.)

Joseph Audio RM7i Signature Mk.2: $1895/pair $$$-
(stands necessary, depending on
finish 8 (stands necessary)

JA decided that the original "was a mellow-balanced (but naturally detailed) minimonitor that represents good value. Of the Signature version, the word that popped up most often in JA's notes during auditioning was "sweet." He also noted that the RM7i's "rich, big-hearted balance" and "sound treble-laid bare all manner of recorded detail without spotlighting. Excel lent dynamics and imaging, as a bit of pummel down below - but not "one-note," our Ed. noted. CS found the ML2 to be "bigger, fuller, cleaner, and more open" than the original RM7i Signature. "There was more tangible weight and impact, greater transient speed and dynamics, with enhanced midrange presence, detail and focus. Better yet, the top end seemed more fleshed-out and better extended...." The diminutive Reference 8 Signature uses a 4.5" doped-cone bass/midrange driver with a large copper phase plug crossing over to a 1" silk-dome tweeter. Despite its size, the Reference 8 offered large dynamic swings and remarkable imaging, with their soundstage being magical, their imaging precise and stable, though the sound was ultimately lacking in terms of resolution and refinement. (Vol27 No.2)

Reference 3A MM de Capo 1: $2500/pair (stands necessary)
AD thought this speaker's name dumb but approved of everything else: "A nice-looking small speaker with much higher sensitivity than average for the breed. Goes loud and big easily, and has decent if not earth-shattering bass response. Some superfluous darkness in the mids, but everything's balanced nicely overall, and it communicates sonic textures brilliantly. Rhymically fine, with good pitch definition and an utterly superb sense of flow and human feel. Can be driven by some SETS in a small to moderate sized room with very-low-power amps in. Deceitful value, high recommendation." JA, however, points to the speaker's decidedly unfat frequency response, feeling its musically communicative nature has been achieved at the expense of a somewhat "snappy" midrange. (Vol26 No.12 WWW)

Reatham The Third Rethm: $4500/pair
The 3-way Third Rethm employs a 9.5" horn-loaded horn and a 6" Loewer driver, the DX55, both of which endow the speaker with great efficiency while requiring not much of an amplifier in terms of current or demand. When Loewer drivers are often guilty of an "upper-mid/low-high peakiness," AD found that "The Third Rethm was mostly, though not completely, free from that bite I associate with the Loewers I otherwise like.... Even placed to the rear, the Third Rethm was always present, with uncannily stable and precise imaging for a Loewer, and a fine sense of depth.... And then there's that Lowther presence, immediacy, and — yes — one of the singles, all of which the Third Rethm had in spades," added AD. While being "superbly efficient," they remained "sufficiently baffle-challenged." "Bass response disappears below 80Hz. Some people will find it breathtakingly dynamic, one of the best "affordable" speaker for the SET set; others will say it's bass- shy and aggressive. Both are right in their way. To the former camp AD would recommend it as a Class B limited LF, of course), but to the latter he'd represent it as low Class C or even Class D. (Vol26 No.5 WWW)

Sonus Fugue Cremona Auditor: $3995/pair
(stands necessary)

ST. "You won't get the ultimate in bass extension, but you'll get exquisite sound in terms of definition, detail, speed, and overall transparency." Lacks the isolation platform found under Triangle's more expensive models. (Vol28 No.3)

Triangle HiEndale Exa: $1199/pair $$$
The smallest of the three floorstanders in the Es series, the three-way bass-reflex HiEndale uses the 9" horn-loaded 6.5" Loewer tweeter, with its 5.5" bass/midrange driver and 5.5" woofer. Perhaps a better choice for a small room, said ST. "You won't get the best bass extension in this price range, you won't miss much by getting up for Antal," said ST. (Vol28 No.1)

S5e $1799/pair $$%

The reflex-loaded, floorstanding S5e is a 2.5-way system with twin 5" LF drivers. Despite its relatively small size, the S5e is "very, very loud," and that "the lower end was fabulously extended...." It had a tonal balance that was "crisply articulated but not bright, detailed but not sterile." The deepest bass notes were missing, but mid- to upper bass were surprisingly strong, while bass, midbass, and treble seemed seamless. Stands add $850/pair. (Vol26 No.10)

Spendor 5se: $1799/pair $$%

The reflex-loaded, floorstanding S5e is a 2.5-way system with twin 5" LF drivers. Despite its relatively small size, the S5e is "very, very loud," and that "the lower end was fabulously extended...." It had a tonal balance that was "crisply articulated but not bright, detailed but not sterile." The deepest bass notes were missing, but mid- to upper bass were surprisingly strong, while bass, midbass, and treble seemed seamless. Stands add $850/pair. (Vol26 No.10)

Phile enceen MUDD BOY Maca ID $1000/pair

The "elegant, unimposing, drop-dead gorgeous" DM603 is a 3-way, reflex-loaded floorstanding with a 6.5" Keval bas/midrange driver, and a 6.5" aluminum woofe. BJQ could detect no single flaw in the DM603 S3: "It exhibited no notable deviation from neutrality across its coherent frequency spectrum, and it excelled at reproducing music with the utmost in musical cohesion, transparency, and exemplary detail resolution and soundstaging." In addition, both he and his wife appreciated the B&W's "sexy, unobtrusive enclosures." Despite the
Stereophile editors pick the industry's best products

500 RECOMMENDED COMPONENTS

DM403’s rather lively cabinets, JA thought it exhibited “impressive and engineering at a very affordable price.”

(Vol.28 No.8 W.W)

Infinity Primus 360: $658/pair $$$

The front-ported, magnetically shielded 360 has a 14" Metal Matrix Diaphragm (MMD) tweeter, a 4" MMD midrange driver, and two 6.5" MMD woofers. In "dead neutral" midrange and "delicate, subtle, linear renderings of low-level dynamic articulations" made the 360 an extraordinary reproducer of vocals and acoustic guitar.

The 360 matched natural and extended high frequencies and interrepressible transient capabilities with a warm, rife midbass to offer "an attractive combination of strengths and weaknesses," said BJR. JA noted strong resonant modes in the speaker's lower frequencies but was ultimately pleased: "I was a little bothered by its lively cabinet but overall the Primus 360 raises the bar for designs that compete at more than twice in price." (Vol.28 No.6 W.W)

Jean-Marie Reynaud Arpeggione: $1590/pair

A floorstanding speaker with 6.5" midwoofer and 1.5" soft-dome tweeter, the individualistic Arpeggione was supposedly designed to re-create the experience of live music. It delivered "deep, full-bass and a wonderful sense of musical richness and fullness," found JM. While it was exciting and easy to listen to, he was not impressed by the speaker's transient information or high-frequency response and commented on interaction, thus requiring much attention to associated equipment. (Vol.26 No.11 W.W)

MartinLogan Montage: $1495/pair

The beautifully crafted Montage mates two 6.5" electrodynamic aluminum cones with a 1.5" by 2.25" dipole film tweeter. With the right amplification and source material, the Montage presented a seamless response, a wide and credible soundstage, and accurate reproduction of voices and instruments. However, when driven moderately hard, the speakers optimally set up, JA found that "the overall sound was still a little bright." This was complicated by the speakers' infinite low-frequency extension, which left him conflicted: "Taking its affordable price into consideration, the Montage is a well-balanced design. However, that lively cabinet works against a strong recommendation." After further investigation, he decided that "In smaller listening rooms, its limited dynamic range may well not be an issue." (Vo126 No.12 WWW)

Thiel CS1.6: $2930-$2390/pair, depending on finish

JA had to work hard to get these speakers to sound their best in his listening room, balancing low-frequency weight against musical realism in the low treble. With the speakers optimally set up, JA found that "the overall sound was still a little bright." This was complicated by the CS1.6's long break-in time: "At the end of a month of everyday listening, I was still not sure that they reached equilibrium," he wrote. "This should be a sensitive speaker with an astonishing resolution, matched by equally superb stereo imaging." JA determined the CS1.6 to be best suited for LP playback in rooms of small to medium size. He also ended up regarding their optional magnetic grilles ($200) as pointless, the speaker's internal drivers "tinted" the lower end of the optimal axis. (Vol.25 No.9 W.W)

C – RESTRICTED LF

Amphion Helium: $1150-$1350/pair (stands necessary)

"Deep" is a small, two-way, reflex-loaded, magnetically shielded, rear-vented satellite with a 1" titanium-coated aluminum-dome tweeter and a 5.25" Nomex-cone woofer. With rich and vibrant lower-midrange tones, perfect transients, extended highs, and the bass extension and high-level dynamics of a floorstanding speaker, its sophistication, articulation, and resolution of detail that BJR found "simply intoxicating." "A classic," he decided. JA discovered some midrange resonance problems that may have contributed to BJR's feeling that the speaker was sometimes "boomy." (Vol.28 No.11 W.W)

Epos MS: $650/pair $$$ (stands necessary)

The nicely finished MS is a shielded, biwireable, two-way bass-reflex design using a 5.4" mineral-loaded polymercone woofer and a 1" dome tweeter with a gold-anodized aluminum-alloy diaphragm. Offered midrange naturalness, detailed and delicate highs, perfectly reproduced transients, uncolored midbass, and a high-level dynamic presentation. "Epos has established a new benchmark at the very affordable price of $650/pair," said BJR. STS's dedicated stands add $200/pair. (Vol.28 No.4)

Epos ELS-3: $329/pair $$$ (stands necessary)

This Chinese-made 10"-tall, 10-lb speaker uses Epos' proprietary 1" aluminum-dome, neodymium-magnet tweeter and a 5" polypropylene-cone woofer. The ELS-3 had "superior midbass definition and realism on a wide range of musical material; high-fidelity dynamic bloom beyond what I'd reasonably expect from a speaker of its size; a level of detail resolution I normally associate with speakers approaching $1000/pair," said BJR. For its size, the ELS-3 exhibited well-extended midand upper bass, high-level dynamic slam, and starting detail resolution. Deep bass lacked drama, and when pushed to high volumes, the ELS-3 compressed the sound. Nonetheless, "I can think of no speaker that produces greater sound quality for the dollar," said BJR. JA concurred: "The Epos ELS-3 is a nicely engineered little speaker that its owner needn't apologize for." (Vol.27 No.1 W.W)

Horn Shoppe Horn: $775/pair

Despite its minuscule drive-unit, the Horn is very sensitive, at an estimated 94dB/2.83V/1m. The Horn is designed for corner placement and the cabinet amplifies the driver's rearwave with an internal, exponential horn constructed of numerous small panels. Colored, says JA, but AD likes what they did: "The Horns played music with guts and conviction. They had a sure, tight sense of pitch and rhythm, and the reproduction of texture and dynamics of the music while it was in their presence. The Horns were fun and communicative at all times, and faithful to the nuances and textures of my favorite instruments and singers." While the quantity of bass was always satisfying, the quality was neutral and sometimes sounding "plumply and too resonant." (Vol.27 No.1 W.W)

Kirkaiser Silverline 60: $849/pair (stands necessary)

While this German speaker displays a definite lack of low bass extension and a slightly uneven top end, it found that "Between the frequency extremes, the Silberline 60 had a vibrant, natural sound that seemed a touch forward but free from gross colorations." The soundstage wasn't deep, but was "coherent" and "seamless," and "stretched smoothly across the plane of the speakers and extended a few feet outside of each one." Similarly, while image dimensionality was only "okay," presentation of detail was "captivating" and "realistic." "A wonderful little speaker," JD concluded, and a solid value. (Vol.28 No.1 W.W)

Magnepan MGMC1: $750/pair $$$

Magnepan C3C: $990

The wall-mounted MGMC1 is a small (46" H by 1025" W), two-way planar-magnet speaker with a quasi-ribbon tweeter and a flax- and balsa-board speaker. It married a 1" dome tweeter to a 7" cone woofer, both of which are backlit, giving the sound a rather crisp presentation," and, my attention never wandered from the harmonic structures of sounds, their timbres, were as natural and realistic as I'd heard from any speaker," BJR said. "The reproduction of vocal texture, dynamics, and image structure was spooky in its accuracy." Minor quibbles: "HF range was slightly high-lighted, giving the sound a rather crisp presentation," and, while the bass was "extended, natural, quick, dynamic, and powerful," the cabinet was "a bit too large and slightly transparent in illusion with much goodchannel source material." "Their transparency and detail are what earns them a warm, ripe midbass to offer "an attractive combination of strengths and weaknesses," said BJR. JA noted strong resonant modes in the speaker's lower frequencies but was ultimately pleased: "I was a little bothered by its lively cabinet but overall the Primus 360 raises the bar for designs that compete at more than twice in price." (Vol.28 No.6 W.W)

Monitor Audio Silver 52: $749/pair (stands necessary)

This small reflex-loaded, magnetically shielded two-way carries a 1" dome tweeter to a 7" cone woofer, both of C-CAM aluminum-magnesium alloy. The S2's most obvious characteristic was its mellow treble, accompanied by a respectably low level of coloration and a clean upper midrange. The lower midrange, however, lacked clarity, and the upper bass was a bit exaggerated. Its stable, well-defined stereo imaging and dynamics were strong suits. JA: "While the speaker does have an identifiable character, being balanced to the warm, mellow side, this is probably a good thing, giving inexpensive electronics' tendency to have grasy treble. While I had some criticisms — that hooty cabinet bothered me perhaps the most — the Silver 52 never gave less than enjoyable results. It is very well considered and justifying its affordable price." (Vol.28 No.8 W.W)

Nola (Alon) L1'l Rascal Mk.II: $695/pair (stands necessary)

Two-way, reflex-loaded, magnetically shielded loudspeaker has three strengths unusual in a speaker of its size and price, according to BJR: lifelike dynamic passages; greater levels of detail resolution, transparency, and natural transient articulation; and a linear and uncolored mid-upper-bass region. It also got the midrange right. Current-production Mk.III are supplied with wide felt diffraction rings around the circumference of the tweeter dome. With the rings in place, the L1'l Rascal had a more balanced, musical, and involving overall presentation. The manufacturer will provide diffusion rings to owners of early-production L1'l Rascals free of charge. (Vol.26 No.12 W.W)

NHT SB-3: $600/pair (stands necessary)

"I had never been as impressed with a bookshelf speaker as I was with the NHT SB-3. It has an appealing color, a generally musical character, and an exceptional center point, sets a new standard for bookshelf designs in the areas of detail resolution, bass extension, and dynamic articulation." Last Stand speaker stands add $200/pair. (Vol.25 No.11 W.W)

Omega Grande Omnia: $795/pair

Recommended only to those who love high-sensitivity but admittedly idiosyncratic speakers, the Grande 6 uses a single 6.5" Fostex paper-cone driver: Having a 95dB sensitivity and no crossover made it an ideal companion for the Sun Audio SV+2AS SET amplifier. ST: "I heard excellent resolution, plenty of low-level detail, plenty of ambient information, and a very focused, coherent sound." Bass response falls off sharply below 60Hz. "Beautifully crafted cabinets. No crossover. Makes a big difference," sums up ST. (Vol.27 No.7 W.W)

Paradigm Reference Audio 20.50/900-$900/pair, depending on finish (stands necessary)

"From the upper bass to the upper midrange, the harmonic structures of sounds, their timbres, were as natural as I'd heard from any speaker," BJR said. "The reproduction of vocal texture, dynamics, and image structure was spooky in its realism," Minor quibbles: "HF range was slightly high-lighted, giving the sound a rather crisp presentation," and, while the bass was "extended, natural, quick, dynamic, and powerful," the cabinet was "a bit too large and slightly transparent in illusion with much goodchannel source material." "Their transparency and detail are what earns them..."
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THE KING:

In rock it was Elvis. In CD and SACD playback, it was, and definitely still is, the DCS LaScala/Verdi CD/SACD Transport and Elgar Plus 24/192/DSD Digital to Analog Converter.

As would be expected, a musical audience with the king of digital comes at a kingly price ($35,000). Fortunately, a musical interlude with what might properly be considered the Crown Prince of CD/SACD playback, the brand new DCS T8E upsampling CD/SACD Transport and DAC 8E 24/192/DSD Digital to Analog Converter can be yours for only $24,000. Incorporating the Ring DAC and audio board of the Elgar Plus with the upsampling and jitter free performance of the LaScala, the DCS T8E/DAC 8E, reproduces music without any perceivable difference in performance from the LaScala/Elgar in all but the most revealing and analytic audio systems. 95% of the performance for 70% of the price. Not bad.

But perhaps what is most exciting is the introduction into this royal court of the DCS P8i CD/SACD Player. At $14,000 the DCS P8i (The Archduke?) establishes a new level of performance for CD/SACD playback in the sub $20,000 category. Like the king and Crown Prince the Archduke uses the DCS Ring DAC. Unlike any other one box player in the world the DCS P8i incorporates the DSD upsampling circuitry of the LaScala transport along with the audio board of the DCS Delius Digital to Analog Converter. The result: Music fit for a king at a price any commoner can afford.

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not heard anything smaller and/or cheaper that is such a superb music-maker." Matching Premier stands cost $179/pair. (Vol.21 No.2, Vol.24 No.2, Vol.25 No.5 W.W/W)

PSB Image B25: $449/pair $55 (stands necessary)
The Image B25 is a two-way, reflex-loaded, magnetically shielded loudspeaker using a ferrofluid-cooled 1" aluminium-dome tweeter and a 6.5" metalized polypropylene- cone woofer. Setting a "new benchmark at its $400 price point," the i25 combined a midrange that "was dead neutral, liquid, and holographic" with "extraordinary level of detail resolution, perfectly articulate transients, and a broad, continuous, organic presentation of the entire dynamic range." The measured performance was indicative of its standard-setting sonic quality. SP-25i, a 25" tall precision, $179/pair. (Vol.21 No.2, Vol.24 No.2, Vol.25 No.5 W.W/W)

Audes Bravos: $999/pair (stands necessary)
The reflex-powered Bravo, the entry-level speaker in the Audes line, combines a 1" soft-dome tweeter with a 5" plastic-cone woofer. High frequencies were "natural and detailed, airy and quite sophisticated," the midrange was "compressed and marked by a transparency that allowed a considerable amount of inner detail," and the mid- and upper bass were "tightly, tuneful, clean, round, and fairly extended." Low bass was limited, but "quite satisfying," BJr sometimes heard a "slightly hoary quality" in the upper midrange and lower highs, which was corroborated by JA's measurements. JA noted "a severe peak-notch combination in the woofer's response around 1 kHz but in another" "well-engineered" design. Matching stands cost $299/pair. (Vol.27 No.9 W.W/W)

Jean-Martin Pouilly's twin Mk.III: $990/pair (stands necessary)
"An exemplary performer in the areas of delicacy, articulation, and overall sophistication," decided BJr about this two-way, transmission-line speaker. Tweeter is mounted on the bottom of the PPC-coated paper-cone, dual-voice-coil woofer. The Mk.III's "wide, deep soundstage, superb ambient retrieval, and low-level dynamic articulation" impressed BJr, and made it one of the "most naturally dramatic-sounding bookshelf speakers" he'd ever heard. Though it was only offered within high-level dynamics and low-bass extension, JA warned of the woofer location: "It doesn't go particularly low in frequency yet suffers from resonances in the upper bass and midrange." (Vol.27 No.6 W.W/W)

Polk RTi4: $320/pair ($ stands necessary)
"Even now, considering again the quality of construction and refinement of the remarkable little boxes and checking the price yet again, I'm still shaking my head."
(Vol.25 No.5 W.W/W)

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**SUBWOOFERS**

**A**

**REL Studio III:** $8995
This powered "sub-bass system" has an adjustable high-pass filter and a DC-coupled 300W amplifier. "It truly lives up to its billing as a sub-woofer system," said MF about the earlier Studio II. "And it seems to do so with speakers that I thought needed little or no bass reinforcement, as well as with those that benefit from an extra half (or even whole) octave of bottom end. But it does more than that. It also makes your primary loudspeakers possess even more of those magical qualities you bought them for: more airiness, more sense of space, more magic."

**Paradigm Reference Servo-15:** $2200
This compact, self-powered, servo- corrected subwoofer has multiple control settings, and so offers numerous setup options. LG found it well-engineered and "gives no sign of the distortion, overload, or blast that is heard with so many subwoofer units." He also says, "Combined with dynamic loudspeakers or dynamic satellite speakers, it delivers borderline Class A sonics; Class B is recommended." WP reviews the Paradigm with great success in his unchannel system. Price is for black ash laminate; light cherry or rosewood adds $250. (Vol.22 No.8 W.W.)

**Editor's Note:** There are currently no Class C or D subwoofers listed.

**K**

Velodyne SMS-1 subwoofer management system, Thiil SS-1 & SmartSub Integrator, Genelec HT54B.

**HEADPHONES & HEADPHONE ACCESSORIES**

**A**

**AKG K-1000:** $1260
The K-1000s feature a headband and adjustable trim- pad arrangement designed to hold the driver cages a variable distance away and acoustically decoupled from your ears. They thus operate as planar drivers in free space, with all the advantages of speed and transparency associated with this format. While getting bass from such an arrangement is not easy, the K-1000s were not at all bass-shy. "Glorious headphones," said JM. His only caveat was that their unique approach to the ear/driver interface means they provide almost no isolation from ambient sound or drive, notes WP. (Vol.14 No.4 & S, Vol.28 No.6 W.W.)

**Benchmark Media Systems DAC1:** $975-$988
Two headphone jacks but only digital inputs rather than analog. See "Digital Processors." (Vol.26 No.7, No.5 W.W.)

**Channel Islands Audio VHP1:** $349-$498
(See Wes Phillips' review in this issue.)

**Grace Design m902:** $169
This revision of the Grace m901 headphone amplifier includes an onboard DAC that now handles sampling rates of up to 192kHz, unbalanced analog outputs controlled by the front volume control, and a cross-feed processing circuit to provide a headphone-listening experience more akin to that with loudspeakers. Additionally, unlike the m901, the m902 can be used as a DAC- preamplifier. "A great, high-resolution DAC in a very cost-effective package" offering remarkable clarity and continuity and a roundness of tone, especially to the midrange, thought JM. "Highly recommended." (Vol.28 No.6 W.W.)

**MUSICAL FIDELITY X-CAN:** $450-$550
The X-Can's circuitry is derived from the Tri-Valta series, using a pair of ECC88 tubes. ST: 'Yes, it's much better than the V2. Given is the cylindrical chassis, its volume control knob so small as to be almost ungrabbable.... The amplifier sounds more pristine — more resolution, more dynamic authority, with nary a hint of hum.' Using a short adapter cord with a headphone jack on one end and two RCA jacks on the other, ST happily converted his X-Can into a headphone amp into its tube line stage with volume control. "Instantly tube line stage with — alas and slack — one input. "'Maybe there's a better headphone amp out there,'" he concludes, "but I haven't heard it." In comparing the X-Can with a separate headphone amp to the portable Ray Sanders SR-71, WP concluded: "If you're going to be listening through Sennheiser HD-600s or HD-650s (or AKG-1000s, for that matter) and you're going to be listening at home, the X-Can remains hard to beat." (Vol.27 Nos.1 & 12, Vol.28 No.9 W.W.)

**Sennheiser HD-600:** $899
WP, KR, and ST are unanimous in calling these the best dynamic headphones they've ever heard. "The only ones with which I have ever been physically or sonically comfortable," says KR. "Sennheiser has kept all of the qualities that made the HD 580 among the best of its breed, and in several areas has even managed to better it impressively," according to WP. Says ST, "The magic of the HD 600s is their midrange — a purity of tone, especially when driven by tubes, that is quite special. Astoundingly transparent when driven in a closed-back mode by a HeadRoom BlockHead, found J-10 in July 2002. (Vol.21 No.2 W.W.)

**Shure E5c:** $499
The tiny, unobtrusive, lightweight, and surprisingly comfortable, twin-driver in-ear E5c offer isolation that balanced mode by a Headroom Blockhead — canceling models while sounding "much, much better," said MF. (Vol.27 No.12 W.W.)

**Sugden HeadMaster:** $1095
The HeadMaster headphone amp also works as a "very fine Variable Valve Transformer amplifier that handles volume control and three-line-level inputs. Paired with ST's Sennheiser HD600s, the HeadMaster brought forth a "rich and full-bodied sound. Using it as a preamp to drive Sony CDA-805C monoblocks, ST found the sound was "superbly smooth, with little hardness or harshness."

**Ultimate Ears UE5c:** $550
These lightweight, sound-isolating, in-ear headphones feature dual balanced armatures, a passive crossover, and...
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500 RECOMMENDED COMPONENTS

CD player, BD likes using his with his PC. (Vol.27 No.12 WWW)

Shure E3C: $179 $$$

Lightweight, light-sounding, in-ear headphones. Treble was naturally balanced and clean, and, as long as there was an outright seal, low frequencies were impressively full. JA: “Shure’s E3C headphones are comfortable, sound great, and are an excellent value.” An ideal companion to the Apple iPod. Also included: Personal Fit Kit with three sizes of flex and ultra-flex sleeves, one pair of foam sleeves, and a nylon carrying case. Extra foam sleeves, $21.20/10; extra ultra-soft flex sleeves, $12.60/5. (Vol.27 No.5 WWW)

Editor's Note: There are currently no Class D headphones.

Deletions
Grace Design Model 901 replaced by model 902; HeadRoom BlockHead, Max, and HeadRoom Supreme replaced by new models not yet reviewed.

K
Ultimate Ears UE10C and Sony MDR-7506 headphones, HeadRoom Desktop and Desktop Portable amplifiers.

A

Fanfare FT-1A: $1159 &

The FT-1A improves on the earlier FT-1 in its ability to scan both up and down the FM dial in stereo mode by remote, and in its use of firmware that allows easy field upgrades. Like the previous model, the tuner is analog-toned with a digital frequency display and a choice of wide or narrow 10K bandwidths. Listening tests revealed that the FT-1A gave up none of the FT-1’s strengths, including excellent sensitivity, good quieting, and thoroughly musical sonics. (Vol.24 No.10)

Magnum Dynalab MD-108: $5850 &

“Gros [radio station] even after they’ve signed off,” marveled DAS. Tuner offers balanced mode, the sound of which, he thought, “did justice to the finest FM stations. In unbalanced mode, the audio quality had less refinement but was still very good.” 15bD capture radio is “adequate,” but he noted that the “sensitivity in Super-Narrow bandwidth position was lower than spec.” Stereophile’s “Analog Source of 1997.” (Vol.20 No.5)

Editor's Note: There are currently no Class B FM tuners listed.

C

Harman Kardon HK 3400: $449

One of the few two-channel receivers still available. See “Integrated Amplifiers.” (Vol.27 No.11 WWW)

Tivoli Audio Model One table radio: $119.99 &

“Tivoli Model One is a radio stripped to its essentials: no stereo, no station memories, no remote control, no tone control.” Said ST. This design from the late Henry Kloss didn’t like being played very loud, ST discovered, but was “pleasingly delicate.” One of the few two-channel receivers still available. See “Integrated Amplifiers.” (Vol.27 No.11 WWW)

Audience powerChord; $470/6ft &

“The wonderfully flexible powerChord, too, was a winner, significantly cleaning up the sound by lowering the noise floor, opening up the space between instruments, and significantly improving the system’s resolution of low-level and inner detail.” Though BD’s reference, Synergistic Research’s AC Master Coupler, offered better senses of space and ambience, the Audience was very nearly as good and much easier to use. (Vol.25 No.9 WWW)

Power-Line Accessories

Audio Power Industries Power Wedge Ultra 116 power conditioner; $1740 &

WP described this balanced AC line conditioner as a “well-built, intelligently thought-out solution to the problems of power-line-borne noise and the vagaries of ground-loop hum.” Though he cautioned that you shouldn’t look for any line filter to compensate for a lagging component, if your system is refined enough, the 116 “can take it to an even greater resolution.” In this context, it got his emphatic recommendation. (Vol.22 No.4 WWW)

AudioPrism LF-1 Mk.II Queteline Parallel AC line filter; $224/9.5 ft &

An important step in the war against noise. According to BD, these devices look like AC adapters minus the wires, and contain “extremely effective noise-suppression circuitry that works by shunting all the noise to the
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Offers sine wave battery backup, surge protection, automatic voltage regulation, and surge- protection in/outs for stereo A/V coaxial lines, a phone line, and a network connector. Total capacity is 1200VA/640W with a backup time of up to 40 minutes, depending on load. KR: “Belkin’s HTBB looks good, does the job, and, with a little Googling, can be found for less than its $500 asking price.” BB: “An excellent unit” that became louder than on battery power. (Vol.28 No.9 W/W/W)

Brick Wall PW815AUD surge protector: $249

This small, solid, black block is a series-mode surge protector rated for 15A loads and comes equipped with eight outlets in four filtered banks and a captive 14-gauge AC cord. Gave KR the sense that his equipment was safe from catastrophic insult without changing his system’s performance whatsoever. (Vol.28 No.5 W/W/W)

Empower EM200 surge protector: $179

The Empower can be programmed to power up different components in sequence to meet specific needs. Having four outlets in each isolated bank, the user is able to efficiently organize various components, separating digital from analog and video from video. In addition, KR found that the EM2100 lowered the quiescent noise level of his system by a small margin. “An extremely sophisticated and flexible power control center for a very large and complex system,” he said. (Vol.28 No.5 W/W/W)

Envirotech Components EP-2400 Home Theater Power Supply: $800

Environmental Potentials EP-2050 Waveform Correction Absorber: $500

The EP-2400, a lightweight, full-size chassis, has eight unisolated AC outlets that can pass 20 amperes of HP-filtered, ground-filtered, surge-protected AC, and comes equipped with a filtered and surge-protected coaxial line. KR used the EP-2450 to rid his system of noise generated from other surge protectors, including the outlet on each amp reporter’s system. He found his system “incredibly immune to AC noise by means of a tracking filter, and uses a metal-oxide varistor to clamp and absorb surges. KR: "An extremely sophisticated and flexible power control center for a very large and complex system," he said. (Vol.28 No.9 W/W/W)

EmFi-Q Tech Co.: $268

Equi-Tech Co.: $188

Two high-resolution braid-mounted wire transformers with magnetic and Faraday shielding. The Q60 that was reviewed, now called the Q1000, with increased capacity, is designed to be used with low-current draw front-end components. CS: “Everything sounded smoother and quieter, with blacker backgrounds — which set off rich colors in bold relief. Images were more centered and resolved. The bass was tighter and more tuneful, more forward and detailed, impressive improvements in midrange detail and resolution, greater depth, better pace ‘n’ rhythm. Raising the AC authority, harmonic body, and liquidity. ... My amp filtered digital AC receptacles. CS: “Low-frequency noise was reduced, and, KR noted, “the AVS 2000 into his front-end components, Chip saw the focus of images within the soundstage was improved, and the music, in general, became more involving. Upgrading to the EP-2400 High Current Output brought greater improvements to dynamics, deepened the soundstage, and increased bass clarity. (Vol.24 No.12 W/W/W)

Panamax MAX5510 AC Regenerator surge protector: $1499.95

Has 11 AC outlets in five banks, along with three coax loops, one analog loop, and two telephone loops. KR noted “the AVS 2000 had on his front-end system by a small margin. “An extremely sophisticated and flexible power control center for a very large and complex system,” he said. (Vol.28 No.9 W/W/W)

Panasonic Audio P300 Power Plant: $1495

Described as a “regenerative AC synthesizer,” the Power Plant is a two-channel, class-A/B bipolar balanced design with twin transformers — essentially, an audio power amp with a (variable) single-frequency output and a regulated output voltage. It is intended for use with source components at a maximum load of 200W. RD was much impressed with the P300. Runs hot, he warned, “Ile apparent lowering of the electrical noise floor [from clean AC] is audible another half-octave.” And JA: “Ile apparent lowering of the electrical noise floor [from clean AC] is audible another half-octave.” And JA: “The Digital AC endowed the music with more dramatic and, in some spots, downright louder.” He purchased The Digital AC to use with his Sony SACD player. (Vol.26 No.4 W/W/W)

Kimber PowerKord #10: $25/ft, plus $12 for termination

ST uses Kimber Kords throughout his system, and noted tremendous differences with a Jads Defy-7. But try this before you buy, he warns. (NR, but see CS’s VTL review in Vol.25 No.11)

JPS Labs The Digital AC Cable: $349

Uses terminal screws made of silicon bronze and inter- nal contacts made of “high-purity” brass plated with 15 coats of polished nickel. All of the AC receptacles in AD’s home that feed hi-fi components have been upgraded to PSA Power Ports. He heard "stronger music and blacker silence, with a slight, overall improvement in listening ease." BJR agreed: “The system reproduced far more midrange inner detail and delicacy. The improved dynamic range of the system was staggering. The system’s noise floor seemed to have lowered significantly. ...High-level dynamic slam seemed effortless. ... The lower bass seemed extended by another half-octave.” And JA: “The apparent lowering of the electrical noise floor [from clean AC] is audible another half-octave.” And JA: “The Digital AC endowed the music with more dramatic and, in some spots, downright louder.” He purchased The Digital AC to use with his Sony SACD player. (Vol.26 No.4 W/W/W)

The Hydra Model 8 is an entirely passive device that holds the output voltage within 1% of 120V, the AVS 2000 0.2% from 100 to 1200Hz. KR noted “the AVS 2000 had on his front-end system by a small margin. “An extremely sophisticated and flexible power control center for a very large and complex system,” he said. (Vol.28 No.9 W/W/W)

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PS Audio Director 3.5 surge protector: $999

Contains three of PS Audio’s high-current Ultimate Surge Protectors that can be programmed for on/off delay or to remain always powered on. In the event of a short on the rear panel to block voltage surges that might other- wise enter through cable or satellite input. Unlike the Brick Wall and Empower products, the 3.5 uses Trans- formers and MOVs for parallel-mode surge protection. Made KR’s SYM’s soundstage more open, giving images greater impact and size while creating more ambient space. (Vol.28 No.5 W/W/W)

PS Audio Power Port Classic AC receptacles: $299

Uses terminal screws made of silicon bronze and inter- nal contacts made of “high-purity” brass plated with 15 coats of polished nickel. All of the AC receptacles in AD’s home that feed hi-fi components have been upgraded to PSA Power Ports. He heard "stronger music and blacker silence, with a slight, overall improvement in listening ease." BJR agreed: “The system reproduced far more midrange inner detail and delicacy. The improved dynamic range of the system was staggering. The system’s noise floor seemed to have lowered significantly. ...High-level dynamic slam seemed effortless. ... The lower bass seemed extended by another half-octave.” And JA: “The apparent lowering of the electrical noise floor [from clean AC] is audible another half-octave.” And JA: “The Digital AC endowed the music with more dramatic and, in some spots, downright louder.” He purchased The Digital AC to use with his Sony SACD player. (Vol.26 No.4 W/W/W)

Shunyata Research Hydra Model 8: $1995

The Hydra Model 8 is an entirely passive device that has eight cryogenically treated, silver Shunyata Venom outlets — two digital-specific, two analog-specific — on the rear panel of its hermetically sealed, box-within-a- box aluminum case. Fe-St-1002 noise-reduction compound fills the space between the two boxes and is said to absorb electromagnetic noise. With the Hydra 8 in his system, PB noted “quieter backgrounds and inter- trance silences, and a more relaxed and organized presentation.” “The best I’ve heard!” adds MF, finding in his review of the Musical Fidelity kW-8 kW combo that the Hydra 8 proved to be “the real key to musical satisfaction,” smoothing out the highs, tightening the bass, and adding cohesiveness to the overall presentation. “An amazing product,” he concluded, “mysteriously good.” PB agrees, adding that he wouldn’t be without his Hydra 8. (Vol.27 Nos.1 & 8 W/W/W)

Siltech SP160 Classic G5 Mk.2: $600/m, $112/m

PS Audio Power Port Classic AC receptacles: $299

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...the Phantom delivered lightning strikes of deep, fast, utratight bass. Every performance parameter seemed expressed with greater confidence and authority, including image solidity and stability. ...the new Phantom is now the pivoted tonearm to beat..."

Michael Fremer, Stereophile September 2005

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For a full description of the Phantom please visit our web site at: www.graham-engineering.com U.S. sales: Musical Surroundings (510) 420-0379
dress." See also "Interconnects." (Vol.27 No.10 W/W)
Synergistic Reference Research AC Master Coupler X2: $3675/S, with Mini-PowerCoupler "Through that, I found that the tone control worked very well with it up with it," declares J-10 of the AC Master Coupler X. "Let's the music through more effortlessly." More expensive Master Coupler? — $1800 for 51 — is stiff and unwieldy, but one of the best out there, says J-10. Particularly suited to amplifiers and for other high-current applications. The more expensive "Designer's" Reference Master Coupler? ($2000/S.) is a J-10 favorite. (Vol.24 No.11)

ROOM ACOUSTICS TREATMENTS
ASC Cube Tower: $715 Each
"A smaller, more cosmetically acceptable, more affordable version of the classic tube Trap," writes BJR. "Very effective at taming mid- and upper-room anomalies. Looks like an attenuated Vandersteen speaker sitting in the stuff." (NR)
ASC Studio Trap: $379 Each
Adjustable tripod-mounted room-tuning device that represents the "latest in TrapThink from ASC," according to J-10, who uses an array of Studio Traps to great effect in Manhattan. The front half is triangulate-reflec-
tive for a brighter sound, while the back side is treble-absorptive for a drier acoustic. He highly recommended the Traps for "anyone whose family will allow them to populate the listening room with gobos." (Gobos are "sound-absorbing panels used to surround performers in recording studios." Stereophile's "Accessory of 1999." (Vol.21 No.12 W/W)

ASC SubTrap: $438 as reviewed
This "big, chunky black box" sits under a subwoofer to arrest acoustic problems caused by the interactions of a subwoofer's output and the room's modes. Improvements in room acoustics are immediate, thought KR, even with the subwoofer disconnected: "There was less apparent energy from clipping, loud conversation, or just standing around." With the system turned on, there was "less apparent bass energy from all wideband sig-
s." With a Paradigm Servo-15 sub sitting atop a Sub-
Trap, bass was deeper and more detailed: "Ah, yes —
glorious bass without the boom!" Available in three sizes: 151, 22" and 22" square model reviewed. (Vol.27 No.9 W/W)

ASC Tube Traps: $334-$798, depending on size and style
Relatively inexpensive but remarkably effective room acoustics treatment. Tube Traps soak up low-to-middle bass standing-wave resonances like sponges. WP agrees, using Traps to optimize the acoustics of his room for MartinLogan SL3 electrostatics, while BD used 'em to optimize his room while auditioning the Thiel CS72s.

RealTraps: $139.99-$299.99, depending on size
With these fiberglass panels set up across the junction of room boundaries and in corners, KR heard major improvements in imaging, detail, and soundstage width: "Every sound in the room, real or reproduced, is more defined in character and location." While KR was greatly satisfied with the results, he admitted that the panels were visually imposing: "The stand-mounted HF/Mini-
Traps are in the way all the time." MinTrap, $199.99; HF MinTrap, $179.99; MondoTraps, $279.99; stands, $60. (Vol.28 No.1 W/W)

RPG Diffuser Systems Acoustic Tools for Home Theater: $245-$590
RPG Diffusor Systems offers a complete line of room-treatment products and packages called CoreMusic(TM). Web: www.rpg-inc.com. (Vol.11 No.4, Vol.16 No.5; see also TJN's arti-
cles on listening rooms in Vol.14 No.10 W/W.)

Acoustic Zen Silver Reference II: $948/1m RCA; $998/1m XLR
The top of Acoustic Zen's line and made of seven-nines silver, the SI II offered, according to PB, a near-ideal balance of superb low-level resolution, harmonic rich-
ess, speed, and dynamics. "Bass was firm, deep, and defined, the midrange open, silky, and richly detailed."
The interconnects worked equally well with tube and solid-state components, he found, concluding: "I would have been surprised if their price had been twice as high." However, "not the best choice for a system that already sounds bright or forward."

"Brings out the best in whatever components you hook up to them," said BD of the Alpha-Core Triode Quartz Silver: $186/1m pair.

LOUDSPEAKER CABLES & INTERCONNECTS
Editor's Note: Rather than place cables in the usual "Recommended Components" classes, we've just listed those cables that members of the magazine's review team either have chosen to use on a long-term basis or have recommended to other users. Therefore we therefore implicitly recommended. Where a cable has been found to have specific matching requirements or an identifiable sonic signature, it is noted in the text. "Try before you buy" is mandatory with cables; many dealers have a loaner stock to make this easier.
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- Chord Electronics
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AudioQuest Cheetah: $1000/1m pair

This low-impedance, low-resistance cable "represents a major performance breakthrough for the price," said ST. Its secrets? Only the signal-carrying portion of the braid is silver — "too expensive," so copper. ST reported gains in clarity and quickness. "The sound is cleaner, quicker, less confused...I suggest you run with the Streak." BW adds that the Kimber's excellent resolution of detail and transients has to be balanced against the fact that it is "too much zig" to already bright systems. (Vol.19 No.11)

MIT MI-350 Twin CV Terminology Series II: $1495/1m pair (Vol.19 No.12 WWW)

No slouch, just a bit off the standard set by the very best Another. Compared to his inexpensive, homemade interconnects, the Cheetahs had "minutely fuller" bass transients, the Kimber leaving "a slightly better, smoother transition from the midrange to the treble." MF found that the Cheetahs added bass control and greater HF extension to his Holocene systems. (Vol.19 No.11)

Empirical Audio Holophonic-XPC: $630/1m pair (Holophonic-PC, $620/1m pair) (Vol.28 No.4 WWW)

(1) was initially underwhelmed by these interconnects. "There seemed to be some life and pizzazz missing from the music." However, after sufficient time with the Holophonic in his system, instrumental tones seemed purer and more delicate, and the higher-level subtleties were more accurately portrayed. Empirical offers a 30-day money-back guarantee. (Vol.28 No.4 WWW)

Harmonic Technology Pro-Silwray III: $479/1m balanced pair; $540/extra 1m stereo pair (Vol.27 No.2 WWW)

A hybrid of two filaments of copper and two of 6N-pure (99.999997%) silver. The braided copper outer shield is plated with pure silver and insulated with Teflon tape or air-foamed PE (polyethylene). These bubbles act as the main carrier conductors, the outer ones are "NASA grade," according to Harmonic Tech. Caused a significant change in the sound of the Audio Research VT2000 MF was reviewing. "The bass formed up and rejoined the music, the midrange took on a richer, more full-bodied life, and the top remained detailed, detailed, and ultra-revealing, but not quite as right." In comparison to the Analysys Plus Solo Crystal Oval 8, MF said, "The Harmonic Technology cable resulted in greater delicacy and transparency, an increased ability to experience information and microdynamics, and a slightly more tactile, bass...However, there was something less bass control; rhythmic flow was somewhat impeded, and transients, while crisper and more detailed, were also slightly edgier and less finely drawn. But the net effect of the more tactile bass and the crisper transients was an overall sound of greater warmth and apparent detail." (Vol.24 No.1, Vol.26 No.4 WWW)

Hovland Music Groove 2 tonearm cable: $795/any length up to 1.5m pair, with RCA or straight DIN terminations; $855, with 95 DIN connector (Vol.24 No.1, Vol.26 No.4 WWW)

This silver-plated copper cable — MF's reference for his equipment can dish out." However, he did find it "a touch biased toward the large-gauged and grand rather than the small and well-formed." J-10 reports a significant improvement in refinement and power handling with a Master Control Center and Active Shielding. CS found that adding Active Shielding "seemed both to illuminate and deepen the soundstage and generally firm things up." Timbres were "more natural...with enhanced bass energy, which adds to the height, and more holographic soundstaging, greater front-to-back imaging and focus...and greater retrieval of ambient information and microdynamics." (Vol.21 No.1, Vol.24 No.4 WWW)

K

D'Acquisto, Acustic 7N-DA6100 Mexcel.

AudioQuest Silver Stryke: $2250/1m pair (Vol.25 No.11 WWW)

Designed by Demian Martin, the Stryke Gold interconnects feature six different-sized copper conductors, and are wound with Micro's patented Micro-Fibre braid. Tonal balance was very neutral, neither too warm nor too cool, and provided the correct mix of delicacy and body. Speed, clarity, air, and extension at the top end were stellar. Edge definition and detail were superb, creating a sharply focused and obvious sonic picture. The reproduction of dynamic transients and the re-creation of images and soundstages were excellent. While image dimensionality and soundstage depth were impressive, Mason's couldn't quite match the Nirvana SX-Ltd. or Audio24 in these areas. BD: "The Monsters should sound great in any system." Full kit with speaker cables and interconnects costs $4500. (Vol.27 No.2 WWW)

Noordost Valhalla: $1239/1m pair, with RCA termination; balanced (RCA) configuration, $620 extra; additional length, $1000/m. (Vol.27 No.4 WWW)

Although these cables are "inexpensively expensive," BD was sure that you'll love what they do for your system. Images were detailed, distinct, and densely filled-in and three-dimensional. The soundstage moved out farther than BD had ever experienced. However, while it was obvious that the Valhallas were special, it was also obvious that they had a distinct tonal signature. BD wrote, "The Monsters have always had a 6N copper front, but with the Nordost—the total balance was shifted slightly upward, and the overall presentation was a touch cozier than with other wires." RD: "Expensive, but boy, are they good!" (Vol.22 No.11 WWW)

Pure Silver Connection (PSC) PST 8: $450/1m pair, $500/pair additional 0.5m (Vol.26 No.2 WWW)

Balanced interconnects featuring solid, silver-plated 6N copper and round conductors. LG reported that they reduced system hum problems and were "highly recommended." (NIR)

Silec SQ-110 Classic Mk.2 GS: $2600/1m pair, $500 additional (Vol.26 No.1 WWW)

The G5 Classic cables evolved from Silec's highly regarded G3 series, and are designed to minimize the pickup of RF and EM interference while maintaining low inductance, low capacitance, and low resistance. The wires were "open, extended, and smooth," with a "voluptuous and rounded" midrange, "beautifuely extended" top end, and "well-controlled, deep, and precise" bass. Due to their "slightly more laid-back presentation and less overall character," BD suggested they be used with components that are a bit forward. (Vol.24 No.10 WWW)

Silversmith Audio Silver Silver: $1400/3ft balanced pair; $1500/1m pair, $1000/2m pair, $2995/3m pair. Silversmith Audio's purist approach to interconnect design features two conductors (three for balanced) suspended in individual Teflon tubes and bunched into a single larger tube and a mesh shield of silver-plated copper. The Silverups occupied a "great middle ground" between the Nimbus SX-Ltd and Nordost Valhallas, combining tonal neutrality with well-defined images and a slightly laid-back presentation to provide a "nice combination of strengths and weaknesses that will make them a solid performer no matter the situation," said BD. (Vol.26 No.7 WWW)

Synergistic Research Alpha Sterling X2: $299/1m pair, with Active Shielding interconnects with Mini-Power Coupler (Vol.26 No.7 WWW)

With the Alpha Sterling's Active Shielding engaged, CS became suddenly aware of a wealth of spatial cues — specifying dimensions of soundstage layering. The heightened sense of dimensionality was intoxicating. (Vol.26 No.7 WWW)

Synergistic Research Designer's Reference X2: $1625/1m pair, with Mini-Power Coupler; $550/pair additional 0.5m. (Vol.25 No.11 WWW)

These interconnects do everything superbly, says BD, who found that they're essentially neutral in terms of total balance and dynamics across the frequency spectrum. Particularly well-suited to more serious systems, they are detailed, distinct, and densely filled-in and three-dimensional. The soundstage moved out farther than BD had ever experienced. However, while it was obvious that the Valhallas were special, it was also obvious that they had a distinct tonal signature. BD wrote, "The Monsters have always had a 6N copper front, but with the Nordost—the total balance was shifted slightly upward, and the overall presentation was a touch cozier than with other wires." RD: "Expensive, but boy, are they good!" (Vol.22 No.11 WWW)

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AD's homemade cables, the Most Blanxes "sounded deeper, bigger, blacker, fuller... all by a small margin." However, KR "loves them" (though he notes that "there's no "lifelike connection" argument, according to BD. "Without ever being over-etched or harsh... The portrayal was incredibly compelling from top to bottom, but the midrange..."

The bottom line: The Python is a good budget cable but no giant-killer. I certainly recommend that they be considered for inclusion in a low-to-midpriced system. (Vol.24 No.10)

**Analysis Plus Oval 9:** $349/8 ft pair

Hollow oval cable designed "by physicists and engineers who helped NASA, Motorola, Mitsubishi, and others," claims the documentation, "with particular regard to all members of the design team "find advanced degrees in electrical engineering or physics" and that their specialty is "the art of computer simulation." The best relatively inexpensive speaker cable Mikey has heard. "You won't be disappointed," he sums up. (Vol.24 No.1; see also MFP's comments on the Oval 8 in Vol.26 No.4 WW/W)

**Analysis Plus Solo Crystal 8:** $1060/8 ft set

See "Interconnects." (Vol.26 No.4)

**Audience Au24:** $1419/3 m pair, single wire, $339/additional meter; $259/3 m pair, biwire, $699/additional meter

"It was as a speaker cable that the Au24 really shone." BD actually preferred the Au24 to his reference Valhalla in terms of tonal balance, imaging, resolution of inner detail, and soundstaging. (Vol.25 No.8 WW/W)

**AudioQuest Mont Blanc:** $2125/10 ft pair, single bi-wire configuration, spade-lug or banana-plug termination

Each half of the twin lead houses a helical wind of four solid ultrapure copper conductors with one set for bass signals, the other for treble, while the overall twin-layer layout keeps the two sets separated in a true biwire design. BD found that the flexible Gibraltar was "easy to run and accommodated most extreme bends and crinks.... The Gilbraltars caught me off guard with their subtlety and nuance, and even by sounding slightly muted at times..." Totally, the AQs were slightly to the warm side of neutral and a bit bigger on the bottom than my other cables.... Their soundstage was a little narrower than that produced by my other cables, with images concentrated between the speakers and, if anything, slightly recessed. [They] also didn't seem to produce quite as much air, or reproduce the space around the images as well as I'm used to."

Nevertheless, KR has settled on a 6' double biwire run of Gibraltar as his standard cable for speaker connections. He says, "adds just a bit of tangibility, and slightly better resolution and accuracy at the frequency extremes." (Vol.21 No.5)

**Kubala-Sosna Fascination:** $800/m pair; $250/additional meter

Kubala-Sosna's "enabled me to hear what they call "crystalline barrier distortion." While reviewing the Audio Research VTM200's, MP, said, "With the AudioQuest speakers, the system finally began to communicate the music's emotional center... It was as if a switch had been thrown. I know that sounds a bit dramatic, but it was unmistakable." MP's long-term reference. He confirms that the current version of this speaker connects is "newly evolved." (Vol.24 No.1, Vol.26 No.4 WW/W)

**Kubala-Sosna Anticipation:** $350/m pair; $250/additional meter

"A different 1C cable design, the BiFocal-X offers a "well-balanced mix of characteristics that should make beautifully with a wide range of systems," according to BD. He adds, "these cables do just about everything right and are among the very best I've heard."" (Vol.21 No.5)

**Kubala-Sosna Absolute Reference Interconnects:**

The XL version of the BiFocal cable doubles the number of connectors, and "in the right system it is a big step up in every way," reported BD. The improvement, he says, "adds just a bit of tangibility, and slightly better resolution and accuracy at the frequency extremes." (Vol.21 No.5)

**Siltech LS-188 Classic GS Mk.2:** $4800/2 m pair, $500 additional 0.25m

"Truly excellent cables," said PB. See "Interconnects." (Vol.27 No.10 WW/W)

**Silversmith Audio Silver: $2950/6 ft pair**

The Silver cables consist of completely separate units for plus and minus, each composed of a silver ribbon suspended in a covered-Teflon tube and terminated with spade-type cutouts sized to match speaker binding-post diameters. See "Interconnects." (Vol.28 No.6 WW/W)

**Stereeowox LSP-600:** $6950/2.5 m pair

**Synergistic Research Absolute Reference Speaker Wire X2:** $6800/10 ft pair, with Mini-Power Coupler

"BD finds these speaker cables, like the Designers' Reference interconnects, to be essentially neutral. "They add so little character of their own to a system's sound that they'll likely seem unimpressive on first listen," he warns. CS agrees, adding that he was "impressed with the way they just get out of the way and let you zero in on the music... they throw a good image with a lot of air in it, natural highs, smooth midrange, and voice, rich, uncolored bass." J-10 concurs, "one of only a handful at the very top of the cable hill." (Vol.21 No.1, Vol.24 No.11)

**K**

Wireworld Gold Eclipse 2114, Harmonic Technology Improved Magic Woofer/Tweeter cables, Audiophiles 7N/$200 Moxel.

**Deletions**

Naim NACAS and Synergistic Research Alpha Quad Active X2 not auditioned in a long time.

This is the longest ever "Recommended Components" listing, which unfortunately meant that some product categories — "Books/Software," "Signal Processors," "FM Antenna," "Miscellaneous Accessories," and "Digital Data Intercon- nects" — have had to be omitted. You can find these listings at www.stereophile.com/features/405recommended.
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When you get only a few minutes with someone who’s lived as long and played as much music as Les Paul has—ie a genuine living legend, you have to pare down your thousand questions to a crucial few. As I waited for Paul to finish a soundcheck, a blizzard of possibilities whirred through my head: the guitar that bears his name, the Les Paulverizer, playing a private gig for FDR, hanging with Django Reinhardt, and inventing Alvin and the Chipmunks. As I was soon to learn however, the gracious and genial Paul also counts interviewing among his many skills. Like his guitar playing which remains vital, this nonagenarian is still a nimble interviewee, determined to lead the conversation in whatever direction he likes. At this point, most journalists (me included) just feel lucky to be there. As his sidemen and sound man put it, “Hey, he’s Les Paul.”

Paul and I sat down recently in his closet of a dressing room at the Iridium Jazz Club on 51st and Broadway (just north of the hell that is Times Square), ostensibly to talk about Les Paul and Friends (see sidebar), the new all-star duet record intended
With the stunning ACT2 composite triode preamplifier conrad-johnson has again dramatically raised the bar for line-stage performance and again that leap in performance has been transferred to a more affordable model. Introducing the CT5 line-stage preamplifier featuring the same zero-feedback composite triode circuit, 6N30P triodes, and CJD teflon capacitors that elevate the ACT2 above the competition. Visit your conrad-johnson dealer soon to hear just how life-like recorded music can sound.
was all over the place. That's great if you're a guitar player, but if you're trying to hear the singer well, it's not so good."

In the pantheon of guitar players who first popularized the electric version of the instrument, Paul is at or near the top. Being almost as good (some might say better) at tinkering and inventing as he is at playing guitar, Paul was by the late 1930s experimenting with guitar design and construction, a hobby that in the 1950s would bear extraordinary fruit in the form of the Les Paul guitar.

Blessed with a keen ear for rhythm and, especially, sound, Paul is also the father of multitrack recording, thanks to his pioneering experiments with what he called Sel-Sync: he added an extra recording head to a 1950s-era tape recorder so that he could perfect sound-on-sound recording. He's also responsible for many innovations in the electronic processing of sound—such as reverb, echo, delay, and phasing, all of them included in the racks of effects pedals that guitarists now use as a matter of course. He's also a member of the Inventors Hall of Fame.

**LES PAUL WITH MARY FORD**

The Best of the Capitol Masters: 90th Birthday Edition

Performance ****

Sonics ****

Back before rock'n'roll changed popular music forever, when the electric guitar was still only a gimmick, singers like Les Brown, Vaughn Monroe, Perry Como, and the Mills Brothers were frequent visitors to the upper reaches of the pop music charts. It was under those conditions—"in those days," as he likes to say now—that Les Paul released his version of Rodgers and Hart's "Lover." Packed full of sped-up guitar sounds, echo, delay, and the then-unheard-of technique of multitracking, "Lover" sounded as if it had come from another planet—literally. It became a classic example of what Paul called his "New Sound": a high, tinkling, echoey, phased string sound akin to what most often comes from an electric keyboard today, and that was then absolutely unlike anything else.

Paul's widespread popularity among nonguitarists and casual music fans lay in his guitar-and-vocal duets with Ford on "Mockin' Bird Hill" and "Tennessee Waltz," which were huge hits for Capitol. But while these Ford-Paul hits evoke a certain era in pop music, time has not been kind to them. Like much of the pop music of that era, they now sound dated and quaint.

Capitol has repackaged this material a number of times in the past decade or so, most notably in the 1991 boxed set Les Paul: The Legend and the Legacy. The previously unreleased tracks come mostly from Paul's popular early-1950s television show, co-hosted with Ford. A series of excerpts from the program are strung together to show how the Les Paulverizer, then more a bit of schtick created for the show than any box-with-knobs reality, actually worked. Ford or Paul would twist a knob on a prop box and the viewers would hear her multitracked voice and/or his guitar simultaneously playing different parts courtesy of electronics Paul had perfected in his New York City-area garage.

This was radical stuff in 1950, and the beginning of an electronics revolution that continues in the effects racks used today by nearly every guitar player of note. When Les Paul's inventive sound engineering side combines in this collection with his gifts as an instrumentalist, it's easy to hear again just what a force he was in the history of Anglo-American popular music. —Robert Baird

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BORN IN WISCONSIN IN THE SECOND YEAR OF WORLD WAR I, LESTER WILLIAM POLFUSS WAS A PRODIGY ALMOST FROM THE START. After stabs at the piano and the banjo, he settled on guitar, learning from such local Wisconsin legends as Pie Plant Pete and Sunny Joe Wolverton. By 1932 he was playing professionally, and in 1936 cut his first records, for the Montgomery Ward label, as Rhubarb Red. Around that same time he backed a blues singer, Georgia White, on a number of sessions.

"Young guitar players try and pack everything they know into every record, every trick you've learned into every number. Playin' it like it's your last. Man, on those sessions with Georgia White I
Today's youthful audio formats have definitely found their way into the world of traditional hi-fi. To facilitate the connection of an iPod, MP3 player, satellite radio or computer to your home stereo the GQ Mini series of multi-purpose cables is here. The GQ Mini cables utilize KIMBER'S cool and sophisticated GyroQuadratic (4-wire) braid which keeps the grunge (not the rock and roll type) away and the music powerful. Fitted with a 1/8" mini jack on one end and two RCA type connectors on the other end the GQ Mini cables are available in three styles, copper (GQ Mini Cu), hybrid (GQ Mini HB) and silver (GQ Mini Ag).

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Sonic wonders: Is that admiration or amusement on the face of Mary Ford?

"When Ampex first built us the recorders, I remember being at [RCA] Victor, and there was an eight-track machine sitting in a hallway with a cover over it. A producer there said to me, 'See what you've done!' and pointed to the tape machine. 'Where are we going to find another Les Paul and Mary Ford?' They didn't get it. They thought they needed us to make it work. It really wasn't until Tommy Dowd and Atlantic Records that people understood multitracking and what I was trying to do."

Never easily pinned down stylistically, Paul appeared in the first Jazz at the Philharmonic concert in 1944, but is equally known for the time he spent backing popular singers—Nat Cole, Bing Crosby, the Andrew Sisters. These days at the Iridium he's nothing short of miraculous. Advancing arthritis has made the blistering runs up and down the guitar's neck a thing of the past—he now swings in a tasty, one-note style and leans heavily on his namesake instrument's legendary sustain. What Paul has lost in agility—the speed he displayed in the 1940s presaged every rock guitar hero who's since come along—he's gained in wisdom and inventiveness. As he works his way through standards like "September Song" and "Sweet Georgia Brown," it's clear that Paul has an uncanny innate knowledge of the sounds his guitar can make. Sipping a nonalcoholic beer, he also gives his band members good-natured but occasional risqué hell, and tells corny jokes. The best I heard:

"A guy's laying in bed, has only a few hours to live, and he smells something cooking in the kitchen. He creeps down the stairs and looks in the oven and sees rolls baking. Just as he grabs a roll, his wife grabs his arm and says, 'You can't have that, it's for the funeral.'"

One odd thing about Les Paul is that while he's known as a guitar soloist of sorts—"When I was young," he says, "sure, I took on all corners—sliced 'em to pieces!"—his most lasting fame comes from his partnership with singer Iris Colleen Summers, who took the stage name Mary Ford. Paul is reputed to have picked the name out of a phone book. In the early 1950s the pair, who'd married in 1949 (and divorced in 1964), ruled the upper reaches of the pop charts thanks to such hits as "Mockin' Bird Hill" and "How High the Moon."

"I knew from the first moment we began playing together that it was magic," Paul says. "Mary was a Les Paul freak. She thought no one could play like Les Paul. She followed me around to concerts for five years." When I offer that one of the advantages of being 90 is that he can pretty much say whatever he likes, he grins and winks.

"She'd sung country and gospel tunes up until that point, but I finally realized that she was a singer who could be taught to sing pop songs. When I went to Capitol and asked them to change the contract to read 'Les Paul..."
LES PAUL & FRIENDS

American Made, World Played

Performance ***

Sonics ***

Let’s see if I’ve got this straight: This tribute to Les Paul’s 90 years on earth is based on the concept that a bunch of guitar players, mostly big dumb rock guys who all admire Paul, will play Les Paul guitars and cut whatever 1970s rock hit they feel like, poor Sam Cooke will be resurrected to sing on two cuts, Paul will add mostly inaudible accents on his namesake Gibson, and finally, the whole mess will be assembled, given an in-your-face, drums-forward, hard-rock mix, and marketed to whom, exactly? And people say the record business is out of good ideas.

While it’s dedicated to him (and presumably his guitar, though outside the title that’s never explicitly mentioned), and he’s clearly on the record, it’s strange that I constantly found myself asking, “Where’s Les?” His speaking voice appears in a short intro track and throughout Alsou’s cover of the Les Paul—Mary Ford hit “How High the Moon,” via sampled bits of audio from their 1950s TV show. His guitar playing appears in a new recording of “Caravan,” the jazz standard he first recorded in the late ’40s. Best of all, in the intro of a new recording of “Fly Like an Eagle,” (?) there’s Paul’s voice telling a five year old Steve Miller, “Steve, you’re really going to go places” after the child has crooned a carefree “Tra-la-la.” Less successful is Paul’s guitar being drowned somewhere in a loud, funky new recording, “69 Freedom Special,” which sounds like Sly Stone and the Saturday Night Live Band duking it out. And what are hired gun guitarists like Steve Lukather and Hiram Bullock doing on this set? Adding more static for Les to have to cut through?

Then there’s Sam Cooke. Yes, I’m talking about the same Sam Cooke who died 41 years ago but who, via computer juju, reappears here in two duets: with Eric Clapton on “(Somebody) Ease My Troubled Mind,” and with Jeff Beck on “Good News.” While these pairings work well enough—Clapton (who hasn’t regularly played a Les Paul since his days with John Mayall), is uncommonly tasteful, and the Beck cut is perhaps this disc’s standout track—what the hell does any of this have to do with guitarist Les Paul?

By track four, on which Peter Frampton for some reason sings and plays a rendition of the long-gone Atlanta Rhythm Section’s “So Into You,” it’s clear that this project has spun off into some perverse Les Paul (the guitar) jam in which rock guitar gods and assorted little fishes do whatever they feel like. The more I listened, the less I understood. The rave-up by Keith Richards, Buddy Guy, and Rick Derringer on “Good Morning Little Schoolgirl” is fun, but just as with Billy Gibbons’ cover of Robert Palmer’s hit “Bad Case of Loving You,” I wondered again about any connection, outside the guitars, to the birthday boy. Why didn’t someone—anyone other than the relatively unknown Alsou—stretch out and cover one of Paul’s own classic hits?

Anyone who loves loud rock radio or is obsessed by one of the names appearing here will think I’m being too harsh. And given the low threshold of innovation that’s expected from a rock covers album, you can say that this one “works.” But as a collaboration with and tribute to Les Paul—the man—American Made, World Played is a puzzling near-insult. The guy’s 90 years old—why saddle his birthday with a loud rock concept that damn near dishonors his own musical legacy? In the end, an awful lot of musical talent, some of which I suspect honestly wanted to honor Les Paul, has here gone to waste.

—Robert Baird

and Mary Ford,’ they said it was fine if I liked Mary as a person, but—and I’ll never forget the comment—‘She was a simple Wisconsin dairy maid.’ Little did they know that this simple Wisconsin dairy maid was going to be such a bit hit.”

For a time, Paul and Ford raced other pop stars. Patti Page recorded many of the same songs they’d made hits—she beat them to No.1 with her version of “Tennessee Waltz,” but lost out to their version of “Mockin’ Bird Hill.” The duo had a hit TV show, The Les Paul Show, for several years in the 1950s. The recently released Best of the Capitol Masters: 90th Birthday Edition (see sidebar) contains several audio tracks taken from the show, including a bit in which Paul accuses Mary of stealing his Les Paulverizer. The Paulverizer was what he called the effect he achieved by multitracking a single guitarist or voice to sound like a whole choir of them.

Speaking of guitars, Paul relieved me of asking the most obvious interview question by mentioning that the guitar that still bears his name is much better known than its inventor. “People say to me all the time, ‘You’re Les Paul? Do you know there’s a guitar with the same name?’

The classic Les Paul guitar design began with something slightly less graceful that Paul himself dubbed “The Log.” Built by Paul in 1941 out of parts from an Epiphone guitar nailed to a 4x4, it’s the guitar he played on some of his first late-’40s Capitol recordings, such as his memorable runthrough of Rodgers and Hart’s “Lover” (1947). Further experiments with making the guitar louder brought him face to face with the problem of feedback, which in turn led to his design for a solid-body guitar. Gibson Guitars, known for their hollow-body arch-top models, at first rebuffed him, but by 1952, prodded in no small way by Leo Fender’s experiments, they’d come around.

“Guitarists thought of it as an ironing board with a couple of pickups. It didn’t ring right with a lot of players, especially those who wanted to play jazz and blues. But [my design] took an apologetic instrument and turned it into a vicious instrument. It can be a bartender, a mistress, and a psychologist. No one’s gonna beat ya. You can just turn up the volume and blow anyone away.”

It’s those qualities that have made the Gibson Les Paul a favorite tool of rock’n’roll guitar players—whose music nearly put the guitar’s creator out of business. When I ask what he thought when rock’n’roll, much of it played on his guitar, swept the land, the 90-year-old quartet leader ran his misspelled but magical hands across his forehead and shook his head.

“Oh, man...I have a new piano player I have to train.”

Interview over.
Cary Audio Design
CD-303/300
CD PLAYER

Is it a trend or just a fad? That’s what some of us want to know when we stumble over a new way of doing things, the implication being that a trend is somehow better than a fad.

Every endeavor has its own place along fadism’s curve. Orthodox Judaism and the study of binomial coefficients are at one end, boy bands and Tiger Beat magazine at the other, and everything else is in the middle. But where does domestic audio fit? I don’t know—although I suppose an answer could be had by visiting the homes of all the audiophiles who’ve bought into various new ideas over the years, and seeing whether any of those things still apply. Are their speakers still sitting on spikes, or on sticky rubber pads, or on nothing? Do people still use long interconnects with short speaker cables, or are they doing it the other way round these days? How often do audiophiles clean their CDs—or do they even bother anymore?

Reviewers could give us some insights as well. Do they still use their VPI Bricks—or Shakti Stones, Shun Mook Mpingo Discs, Original Cable Jackets, Bedini CD Clarifiers, Walker High Definition Links, Gryphon Exorcists, Cardas Sweeps, or green magic markers? All of those things have been promoted as “essential” by various audio reviewers, some more so than others. Yet to believe that they’re all still in use is to believe that, for certain reviewers, the simple act of playing a record requires at least a half-hour of work before the music even starts.

Then there’s that newest of new tricks for old audio dogs: upsampling. We can all be forgiven for wondering Is it here to stay? Would you miss it if it were gone? Is upsampling a trend or just a fad?

No one is more fascinated by those questions than I am. At the same time, no one has fewer answers. However...

Hyphen shortage explained
In June of this year, the good people at Cary Audio Design offered me a chance to write about their latest product, the CD-303/300, an upsampling CD player. How could I resist?

If you’re one of those squares who thinks that Paris Hilton is a place and Jean Georges is a person, then you might also have missed when upsampling first hit the domestic scene, back in 1999. For your benefit: An upsampling digital filter is one that reprocesses the datastream retrieved from a CD at a higher sampling rate than the one used during A/D quantization, in an effort to improve replay performance—although, as far as I know, no one has yet explained why such a filter should work, given that the upsampled datastream contains no more information than the original. Upsampling is not the same as oversampling, which uses an increase in the sampling rate merely to shift quantization noise higher in the spectrum, thus making possible the use of more benign filters subsequent to D/A conversion.

For their new CD-303/300, Cary Audio has developed a proprietary upsampling digital filter module called the DSP-300, using components from Burr-Brown and Texas Instruments and running Cary’s own software. (The Cary DSP-300 filter also...
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Microsonics, enabling the CD-303/300 to decode HDCD discs.) Cary's filter can be set for the standard sampling rate of 44.1kHz, or the user can switch among five different upsampling rates: 96, 192, 384, 512, and 768kHz. Relays allow the upsampling rate to be changed on the fly, with only a brief silence between settings, and the switching can be done from the front panel or the remote handset.

The digital filter module feeds a dual-mono pair of Burr-Brown 24-bit delta-sigma D/A converters, and current is swapped for voltage with another dual-mono pair of Burr-Brown chips. That voltage goes to the grids of a pair of 12AU7 dual-triode tubes and a Burr-Brown op-amp: The Cary CD-303/300 has tube and solid-state analog output stages, both of which are always active. The user can toggle between them at will, also using either a front-panel button or the remote control.

Other interesting details: The Cary's CD mechanism is a Matsushita CD/DVD-ROM transport selected for its ability to minimize errors by means of multiple passes. (You may remember Gordon Rankin of Wavelength Audio praising that capability in my “Listening” column last month.) The CD-303/300 has separate power supplies for the analog, digital, and control logic sections, fed by three separate R-core transformers. And it's worth noting that the Cary is truly and fully balanced—another nice windfall from the dual-mono approach to the design of the conversion and output stages.

### MEASUREMENTS

With its integral volume control and its choices of balanced and unbalanced outputs, tubed and solid-state output circuitry, and 1-17.4x upsampling ratios, Cary’s CD-303/300 was considerably more complicated to measure than a conventional CD player. To simplify matters, therefore, I set the volume control to its maximum (indicated “73”) for all measurements, and mainly checked the measured performance with either no upsampling or the maximum upsampling (768kHz), with additional spot checks.

Assessed with the Pierre Verany Test CD and with me monitoring the error flags in the digital output with RME’s DIGICheck software, the Cary had the best error correction I have found. It played tracks with gaps in the data spiral up to 2mm in length without either glitches or flagged errors, and, even with gaps of 2.4mm in length, muted its output only occasionally.

The CD-303/300 preserved absolute polarity from all four of its outputs (the XLR jacks are wired with pin 2 hot). The maximum output voltage at 1kHz was different for the solid-state and tube output stages, at respective values of 6.236V/3.113V and 5.072V/2.589V, balanced/unbalanced. The difference between tube and solid-state is a very audible 1.6dB in favor of the latter, which will invalidate direct comparisons unless compensated for. The output impedances were very different.

The unbalanced solid-state output was sourced from a low 99 ohms, this doubling as expected to 198 ohms from the balanced jacks. However, the tube output stage appeared to have very high source impedances: 4k ohms at 20Hz, 3.5k ohms at 1kHz, and 2.6k ohms at 20kHz, these unbalanced and all much higher than the specification. The partnering preamp (or power amplifier, if the Cary’s own volume control is used) needs to have an input impedance of at least 47k ohms if the response is not to be tilted up.

Like Cary’s CD-303/200, which Brian Damkroger reviewed in May 2004, the ‘300 didn’t apply the appropriate de-emphasis with pre-emphasized discs (fig.1, top pair of traces above 2kHz). Fortunately, such CDs are very rare these days. The response of the solid-state output was ruler-flat (fig.1, middle traces), but rolled off very slightly—down 0.5dB at 20kHz—from the tube output stage, with a slight, 0.05dB channel imbalance evident (fig.1, bottom traces above 10kHz). Channel separation was excellent from the solid-state output (fig.2, bottom traces), but about 18dB less good from the tube stage (top traces). Both sets of traces in this graph reveal decreasing separation with increasing frequency due to capacitive coupling between the channels. However, with crosstalk below 90dB below 15kHz, even the tube stage is good enough not to compromise soundstaging.

Both the tube and solid-state outputs have very low noise floors, and the spectrum of a dithered tone at -90dBFS from the tube output is dominated by the
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Class A in Recommended Components, Stereophile (1995-Present)
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Art Dudley (ML2.1 review, Stereophile, October 2004)

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Installing the CD-303/300 in my system posed no problems and at least one pleasant surprise: Rather than perching on rubbery feet of the usual sort, the Cary came equipped with four chunky, well-machined cones, each one height-adjustable within a range of about ⅛". In addition to those, the Cary had a built-in bubble level—actually fastened to the CD mechanism's housing, and visible through a circular opening in the chassis cover—to tell me when those feet were dialed in just right. For experimentation's sake I tried unbalancing the CD-303/300 as much as possible, to see if that made any difference in performance. It didn't, but I'm still glad the adjustment is there.

I was also happy to find a little manhole of sorts on the CD-303/300: a perforated metal plate held in place with four machine screws, and removable without also having to remove the whole darn chassis cover. Its purpose, as you've no doubt guessed, is to provide access to those 12AU7 tubes. The ones supplied are from Electro-Harmonix, but alternatives are plentiful, and some might even take the Cary's performance a step further.

My Fi preamp isn't balanced, so I relied exclusively on the Cary's RCA output jacks, driving a meter-long pair of Nordost Valhalla interconnects. I also wound up replacing the power cord of the CD-303/300 with my 2m JPS Labs The Digital AC cord, which seemed to make the sound more open and vivid. VPI Bricks, Shakti Stones, Original Cable Jackets, Bedini CD Clarifiers, Gryphon Exorcists, and green magic recorded dither noise (fig.3). This was identical to the spectrum from the solid-state output and no power-supply or harmonic distortion products are visible. Similarly, the graph of linearity error (fig.4) really shows only the dither noise recorded on the test CD. No level errors are visible.

Switching in various upsampling ratios had no effect on any of these measurements, nor did it change the Cary's reproduction of an undithered sinewave at exactly -90.31dBFS (fig.5). This graph clearly shows the three voltage levels used to describe this signal, and no waveform asymmetry is evident. This is excellent digital-domain performance.

In the analog domain, the two output stages differed considerably when it came to distortion. With the Cary driving a full-scale 1kHz sinewave into 100k ohms, the spectrum of the balanced tube output (not shown) featured a third-harmonic component at -66dB (0.05%) and a second-harmonic at -80dB (0.01%). This is not a high distortion level, but switching to the unbalanced solid-state output, driving a low 4k ohms (fig.6), dropped the third harmonic to -112dB (!), leaving the
markers were not used during the course of this review. I did try a Shun Mook Mpingo disc, but this time it did nothing that I could hear.

Listening

Basics first: Set for 44.1kHz and auditioned through either of its user-selectable output sections, the Cary was a better-than-average-sounding CD player in a number of ways, including believable sonic colors, textures, and—especially—details. During an unplanned foray into early-'70s rock one sunny afternoon, I dragged out various versions of the Band's Stage Fright in a twiddly effort to compare their mixes. Two and, in some cases, three different versions of the songs on that album were released commercially over the years, and can be heard on the original Capitol LP (SW-425), the first Capitol CD version (C2-93593), the DCC gold CD version (GZS-1061), and the most recent Capitol CD version (25395-2). Close listening and decent playback gear are required to hear some of those subtle variations—such as the deepest bass notes in Garth Hudson's piano part on “Time to Kill,” or Levon Helm's vocal ad-libs during the instrumental break in “All La Glory,” or the way some apparently discarded backing vocals on “Strawberry Wine” remain audible in some mixes, having bled onto an adjacent track. Later the same day, when I played the archetypal Procol Harum song “Fires (Which Burnt Brightly),” from Grand Hotel (Castle ESM CD 291), I was pleased by the way the Cary highlighted rather than buried the distinctly different settings organist Chris Copping used in his solo, as compared with the rest of the song.

I didn't think the Cary sounded bright in and of itself—although its top end was more extended than that of the Naim CD5x, whose sound I'm used to, and whose musical performance appeals to me a great deal. At the other end of the spectrum, the CD-303/300 had a well-extended bottom end, with good clarity and sheer physical weight: The subtle bass-drum accents in Neil Young’s “My Heart,” from Sleeps with Angels (Reprise 45749-2), were wonderfully effective with this player. Notes in the bottom two octaves also had a welcome lack of pitch ambiguity through the Cary.

Although I'm not an imaging freak by any means, I can imagine that aspect of the Cary's performance proving the biggest draw to some readers. Playing the “Red Book” CD version of Alexander Dmitriev and the Saint Petersburg Philharmonic's new recording of Shostakovich's Symphony 7 on Water Lily Acoustics (see p.41), the CD-303/300 delivered a sense of stage width and sheer overall scale that rivaled the SACD version of that release. And on the recent album In Between Dreams, by

second harmonic the highest in level at just -96dB (0.0015%). However, as the signal level dropped, the tube stage began to approach the excellent linearity of the solid-state stage, and by the time the signal lay at -90dBFS, the two offered identically low distortion (fig.7). The only significant difference between the two stages at this level was the very slightly higher level of power-supply spurious from the tubed stage; but at -110dBFS, these will have no subjective consequences.

Only when it came to high-frequency intermodulation distortion did the tube stage stumble a little. Driving a full-scale mix of 19kHz and 20kHz tones into 100k ohms (fig.8), the solid-state output produced a 1kHz difference product at just -96dB (0.0015%), with higher-order products around the same, negligible level. By contrast, the tube stage (fig.9) produced a 1kHz product at -60dB (0.1%) and higher-order products at -50dB (0.3%). I don't believe this behavior will be audible with music, but it does suggest that the tubed stage has to work hard with this signal, even into the benign 100k ohm load.

Finally, I used the Miller Audio Research Jitter Analyzer to search for the effects of digital word-clock jitter in the CD-303/300’s analog output. There were no significant differences between the tube and solid-state output
Jack Johnson (Brush Fire B0004149-02), the deftly played drum kit, and especially the ride cymbals, were spread believably across the rear portion of the imaginary stage. Distinct sounds were present and solid without sounding etched or overly small and fuzzy.

And the CD-303/300 had the qualities I consider necessary for a CD player, or any component, to make piano music sound natural, compelling, and easy to listen to for long stretches: It had excellent dynamics, and it allowed lines of notes to sound fluid and natural rather than mechanical—although never with any sacrifice in timing or forward momentum. Jorge Bolet's deliberate and at times downright athletic approach to Liszt's *Liebestraum* No.3 (on London 444 851-2 and elsewhere) was reproduced well by the Cary player, which got across Bolet's attack without sacrificing the flow of the music or the tone and purr of the instrument. I was surprised, in fact, that the Cary had as good a sense of drive and pace as the obvious choice in that regard, the Naim CD5x, although the American player had a distinctly different sound overall (being especially wider in its useful frequency range). On a slightly different performance topic, my listening notes reminded me that, through the Cary, there was a moment toward the end of Liszt's *Mephisto Waltz* No.1 where Bolet's touch was so realistic, and the sound of the piano so present, that it literally startled me. Pretty cool.

As mentioned above, the CD-303/300 performed well through both its tube and solid-state output sections—but if I were forced to choose one or the other, I'd go with the tubes. Comparing the two was tricky, inasmuch as the output level of the tube section was obviously somewhat lower. Even when the levels were matched, the tube sound was "smaller" than that of the ICs, in terms of imaging and scale. But...
for all that, I thought the solid-state section wasn’t quite as natural, and didn’t have quite the same sense of flow.

Which brings us to the matter of upsampling; its own can of worms. My previous experience, with the dCS Verdi La Scala upsampling disc transport (see the January 2005 Stereophile), might have led me to expect upsampling to make for a more refined but possibly less involving sound. So it went here—although things weren’t quite as simple as that.

Working through the settings, from nonupsampled 44.1kHz through higher and higher rejiggerings, what was unmistakable with virtually all CDs was an increase in the smoothness and liquidity of the sound: rough edges were definitely being sanded off. But the effects of various upsampling rates seemed to vary from disc to disc. What was interesting was that some discs had a distinct “lock-in” point: I would reach a certain level of performance beyond which the sound would change drastically, becoming dull and colored and downright quaky. On Martin Newell’s “Call Me Michael Moonlight,” from The Off White Album (Humbug...
BAH25), there was a remarkable change in the sound—a really very noticeable difference—when moving from 96kHz upsampling (good) to 192kHz upsampling (not so good). But that didn’t hold true with other discs, some of which exhibited a similarly drastic sonic change, though at some other point along the scale.

Using the Cary CD player’s upsampling control resulted in clearly audible performance differences, and after using the CD-303/300 for almost two months, I found that I could work with it to optimize certain aspects of the sounds of many discs. I don’t think it’s possible to say whether some or all of those differences stemmed from the actual resampling of the digital data-stream itself, since the upsampling and nonupsampling portions of the Cary’s digital filter address distinctly different analog filters within the player—something that I believe is true of all such products on the market. Was I hearing the sonic benefits of different (re)processing rates, different filters, or both? For now, there’s no way of saying, although the possibilities are intriguing. But overall, and notwithstanding the positive changes I heard in the sound, I generally continued to favor using the Cary in nonupsampling mode, preferring it for what I heard as a more involving and, more to the point, less rhythmically ambiguous musical performance.

Conclusions
The most honest conclusion I can offer in the course of a review of a component—and the one that I can and very often do give my audiophile friends—is to describe precisely what was going through my mind when the time came to send the thing back. For instance, the thought of returning the Lamm ML2.1 amplifiers made me miserable, the thought of returning the ZYX Airy S cartridge left me indifferent, and everything else falls somewhere else: another continuum.

It didn’t kill me to do it, but I was sorry to have to tape the Cary back into its carton and drive it to UPS. I liked the way it looked and felt, and I liked the way it played music. Most of all, I liked the fact that it was easy to get good, colorful, dramatic, wide-open sound from the Cary. The upsampling features would have been there for me to return to and play around with on the next snowy day—scheduled for late October here in Cherry Valley—but I could ignore them if I wanted to and still love the thing.

Also, like everything else I’ve seen from Cary Audio Design, the CD-303/300 is solidly built and fairly priced. In terms of physical construction, ultra-high-quality parts, and brand-new, original technology, there’s a lot going on in the Cary’s 38-lb chassis. At its price of $4000, the Cary CD-303/300 should disappoint no one and tickle many: an easy recommendation.
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Wes Phillips

I'd heard rumors about Peak Consult. John Marks was all a-burble, having reviewed the InCognito in "The Fifth Element" in the September 2003 Stereophile (www.stereophile.com/amplificationreviews/932/index2.html), but I'd never actually heard anything designed by PC's Per Kristoffersen. Therefore, when US distributor Chris Sommervigo proposed that I audition the $25,000/pair Empress, I was intrigued. Well, who wouldn't be? But, as anyone who has ever been talked into a blind date will attest, getting fixed up with a complete stranger can be intimidating. Obviously, what I needed was the audio equivalent of the "safe" first date, hooking up in neutral territory—someplace where the Empress or I could safely withdraw if the chemistry weren't right. As it turned out, PC's American distributor, Signals SuperFi LLC, had sent a pair of the Danish speakers to Sound by Singer, where store owner Andy Singer was on his own blind date—which has since developed into an ongoing relationship.

And before I put that metaphor to bed, let me just say that the Empress wound up going home with both of us—even if I do come off as less than a gentleman for saying so.

I am one of the people who love the why of things

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- Transmission bandwidth: 1GHz
floorstander with a rear-firing port. Its drive-units comprise a 1”-diameter, non-ferrofluid-cooled ScanSpeak soft-dome tweeter, a hand-built 4” Audio-technology midrange, and a proprietary, hand-built, 8” Audiotechnology woofer. Per Kristoffersen worked closely with Audiotechnology’s Ejvind Skaaning’s son, Per, on the midrange and woofer designs.

The Empress’s cabinet is made of HDF with separate subenclosures for each driver and the crossover, the latter varying in thickness from 1.5” to 3”. All of this is sheathed in 1”-thick hardwood—not veneer—chosen by Danish woodworkers using the “knuckle-tap” test. Rosewood, oak, and beech are standard; my review pair was clad in gorgeous walnut. The cabinet’s multifaceted baffle is covered in pebbled leather. Removable grilles are provided, but I didn’t use them in the audition.

Kristoffersen describes the crossovers as an acoustical second-order filter for the tweeter/midrange section and a second-order for the transition from the midrange to the bass. The crossover points are 200Hz and 3800Hz. All solder is silver, and the wire is Stereovox’s silver elliptical tubing (SET) in air-articulated Teflon tape. The Empress is biwirable.

Oedipus, have you ever been fueled by passion? The Empress is rated at 90dB sensitivity, so I didn’t think twice about simply popping them into the system I’d used for my review of the Ayre C-5xe universal disc player in the July 2005 issue, which included Ayre’s K-5xe preamp and V-5xe 150Wpc power amp. After moving the speakers around a bit in my

MEASUREMENTS

The Peak Consult Empress was too heavy for me to lift it on to a high stand for the farfield acoustic measurements. I therefore had to window out the reflection of its sound from the floor in front of it, which will limit the midrange resolution of the response measurements.

With that caveat in mind, the Empress’s sensitivity was slightly higher than average, at an estimated 88.5dB(8)/2.83V/m, though this is less than the specified 90dB. Its impedance remains between unusually narrow limits (fig.1), only rising above 6 ohms above the audioband and never dropping below 4.4 ohms. Its electrical phase angle is also small, with the only questionable combination of low magnitude and high phase angle occurring at 31Hz: 5.4 ohms and -45 degrees. Even then, music rarely has high energy at this frequency, meaning that the Empress will be a relatively easy amplifier load.

The traces in the impedance graph are free from the midrange wrinkles and discontinuities that would indicate the presence of cabinet resonant modes (though something suspicious is happening around 1.2kHz). Examining the vibrational behavior of the cabinet panels—those that weren’t covered in textured leather, to which my accelerometer refused to stick—revealed a mode at 453Hz on both the top and side panels (fig.2), though this is not very high in level and at this high a frequency is unlikely to be audible.
13' by 25' by 8' living room, I found the best combination of bottom end, detail, and focus came with the speakers slightly toed in and 37" from the sidewalls, 57" from the front wall, 57" apart, and 13' from my listening position.

After several weeks of listening to the all-Ayre system, I began playing around with other components. Introducing the Conrad-Johnson ACT2 made a huge difference in soundstage depth, and ditto the Moscode 401HR—the Empresses really seemed to like tubes. The 200Wpc Moscode really clicked with the Peak Consult, causing me to wonder if it's a speaker that likes to be spanked a bit. When I later added the Tom Colangelo—designed, 200Wpc Viola Labs Symphony amplifier to the system, it seemed to coi...
relief.) But there was something there, and when I brought home Stairs and Elevators (CD, Fat Possum 1019), it was obvious what it was: Erika Wennerstrom's amazing voice. Her raw wail is like a combination of Jeff Buckley and Robert Plant, backed by a three-piece band (she's the guitarist) that channels the best elements of the Strokes and the White Stripes. Wubbawubba.

Husky, raw, primal, and compelling, Wennerstrom's singing is almost too personal to bear—right up to the point where you realize that it might be the most committed singing you've ever heard. Maybe you won't react that way, but by track 5 ("Rumiin'") I was hooked, and by "Pass or Fail" two tracks later, I was head over heels.

Here's where we get back to the Empress: It was a great rock 'n' roll loudspeaker. Even Stairs and Elevators isn't all that well engineered, a detail that wouldn't take a $25,000 pair of high-performance speakers wouldn't let you get past that. I'm sure you've heard audiophiles complain, "My system is so good I can't even listen to most recordings!" Squeeze me? That's not good—that's broke!

Yes, a good hi-fi will reveal whether or not a recording is technically good—and given our druthers, we'd all prefer to listen to the good stuff. Unfortunately, a lot of the good stuff doesn't sound as good as we'd like it to. I, for one, don't want my hi-fi deciding which records I can and can't listen to, which is why I was delighted that the Empress let me hear the passion and power of Wennerstrom's voice even as it clearly illustrated that the Heartless Bastards got what they paid for when they budgeted $400 for recording Stairs and Elevators. Oh yeah, the Peak Consults can rock and roll.

Speaking of clangy, I stumbled across my copy of Stereophile webmaster Jon Iverson's Alternesia (CD, Momentum/M-A Recordings M3) while seeking demo material, and listened to JI's great grunge gamelan disc for the first time in a long while. Holy cow—I hadn't remembered it sounding anything like this. From the disc's slowly swelling gong washes to its breakneck percussive core, Alternesia put the Peak Consults through the wringer, alternating the extended decay of its bells and chimes with its deceptively deep (occasionally enhanced) bass pulse. This is really hard music to reproduce—it requires a combination of harmonic delicacy and profound authority. To my surprise, the Empress supplied both.

I was surprised because my first impression of the speaker had been one of delicacy and elegance. I knew the Peak Consult could reproduce timbre and soundstaging from the first time I heard a pair of them, but it took me quite a while to pick up on how ungimmicked the speaker's bass and dynamic response were. Alternesia was a wake-up call.

So it was time to pull out the big guns, such as the recently remastered—sonically transformed and re-edited by engineer Paul Blakemore, really—Mahler Symphony 2 by the Saint Louis...
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World Radio History
Symphony Orchestra under Leonard Slatkin (SACD, Telarc SACD-60081). I’ve always liked this performance, especially Maureen Forrester’s contralto, which seems spot on and slightly vulnerable. The new SACD, transferred from the 50kHz Soundstream master, has a sense of space and quiet power that is spectacularly natural. The offstage fanfares sound as if they’re coming from another room. Yes, I know that’s the point, but most recordings merely place them somewhere off to the side of the central orchestral image. The Empresses made them sound as though they came from a room I don’t even have.

And the dynamic range, from the almost inaudible entrance of the chorus in the final movement to the last explosive tutti, was phenomenal. In fact, I’d have to call that the Empress’s best feature. No, that would be the tonal neutrality. No, it was the seamless soundstaging. Ah, the heck with all that—it had to be the balance of all those elements.

It didn’t hurt that the Empress is good-looking, too. There really is something special about the level of woodworking craft involved in these speakers. I feel almost shallow even bringing that up, but the Peak Consult Empress does cost $25,000/pair. The main point, of course, is how they sound, but if I were going to spend that kind of money on a pair of loudspeakers, they’d better look good. The Empress does—not in some wiggled-out modern way, but in a straightforward manner that won’t clash with your Stickley Morris chair.

While auditioning the Empress I truly enjoyed its sound, but I kept obsessing over that price tag. Twenty-five large is not the most expensive loudspeaker I’ve ever auditioned, but it isn’t inexpensive. Heck, it’s not even affordable for me or the crowd I run with. Maybe it is for you. Whether it is or isn’t, I suspect you’ll know that long before you decide whether or not you should consider them.

It finally occurred to me that it wasn’t the question of value that was bothering me—I reckon that’s for you to decide for yourself—it was my awareness that the weak US dollar has made the Empress more expensive here than it would have been a year or two ago. But that’s beside the point in evaluating the Empress’ performance, which I found seductive.

Should I pluck it, my hands would defile the flower

Why was it unfair of me to be thrown so far off by the Empress’s price? I didn’t have the same inner conflict over the Dynaudio Evidence Temptation ($30,000/pair) or Aerial 20T ($23,500/pair)—precisely the competitive neighborhood the Peak Consults belong in. Not, I hasten to add, because they’re similarly priced, but because that’s the level of quality I’m talking about. If you’ve got a really big listening room, you might be better off with the Dynaudio or Aerial, both of which seem to play louder and deeper than the Empress. Surprisingly, all three speakers are rated within 1dB of one another at their bottom limits (PC, 29Hz; Dynaudio and Aerial, 28Hz), but the Evidence Temptation takes the prize in my listening room for perceived bass impact.

In its ability to shake my house’s foundation with its impact and pedal-to-the-metal dynamic extension, the Evidence Temptation has no peer in my listening room. But other than that or when I was torture-testing the Dynaudio, that’s not something I’ve had much occasion to require. For the sort of listening I do day in and day out, the Empress satisfied.

The Empress’s deep bass was warmer and a tad woollier than the Temptation’s or the 20T’s—not a huge indictment in my book. Mostly what impressed me down there with the Empress was what I didn’t hear—such as extra emphasis caused by ripples above the port resonance. JA’s measurements may force me to eat these words, but I’m guessing the Empress doesn’t add a lot of cabinet noise where it’s too audible.

At the other extreme, the Empress didn’t have a prominently forward tweeter, as seems to be the fashion these days. I’m thinking here of the seductive but ultimately too-hyped detail I hear from the Dynaudio Special Twenty-Fives, which I’ve been listening to lately. (Where’d that one come from? Every reviewer needs a near-reference, stand-mounted two-way for those times when he worries of moving 150-lb floorstanders around his listening room.)

In fact, in its precision and balance, the Empress reminded me of nothing so much as a speaker that combined the ideals of a precision monitor with a speaker that actually goes down to 30Hz. And because it’s one heck of a lot smaller than the Evidence Temptation or the 20T, that might be the best way to think of it: as a full-range compact loudspeaker.

The throne is a glorious sepulcher

The Peak Consult Empress is a pretty special loudspeaker. It may not be your cup of tea if you relate to a specific sort of speaker “sound”—the Empress ain’t got one of its own. And I’ve heard from other speakers more extended highs; deeper, tauter bass; and greater SPLs. What I haven’t heard is many speakers that do so little wrong or so much so very right. The key to such rare overachievers is balance.

If the standard is whether or not I would live with a speaker, the Empress is about as highly recommended as they come. If the standard is whether or not I could see myself buying them, that’s a different matter—one predicated entirely on the vagaries of my being an ink-stained wretch, and a freelance one at that.

Would I buy ’em if I had $25 grand? Oh, heavens to Betsy, yes. It wasn’t love at first sight, but I could listen to the Empress for a lifetime.
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EQUIPMENT REPORT

Bozak
B-410 Concert Grand
LOUDSPEAKER

Peter Breuninger

DESCRIPTION

DIMENSIONS
52" (1333mm) H by 36" (925mm) W by 19" (485mm) D. Weight: 225 lbs (102kg).

SERIAL NUMBERS OF UNITS REVIEWED
None found.

PRICE
$1872/pair in 1972; ca $8730/pair in 2005 dollars.

MANUFACTURER
Bozak, Darien, CT (no longer in existence).

The Bozak B-410 Concert Grand loudspeaker with non-vintage RadioShack supertweeter (top).

The Bozak Concert Grand is a loudspeaker dreams are made of. I was just a boy, but I remember to this day the impressive pictures of them in Audio magazine. I thought they must be the best loudspeakers ever made because they were so big—they would let more of the music come out. I suspect the Bozaks beckoned to me in some primal way, just as those giant construction trucks do—the ones that have tires bigger than a man.

My dad owned a beautiful pair of Fisher XP-15s speakers, which sat on either side of the fireplace. He would polish their walnut cabinets until the grain popped out, then sit with his eyes closed as the music played. I would hide around the corner in the hallway so as not to disturb Dad. I'd hear marching bands playing Sousa, and orchestras playing Mahler and Beethoven, with a sound so sweet my arms would get goose bumps. But no matter how good the Fishers sounded, I would go to bed and dream of the big Bozaks playing Fantasia in my audio dreamland.

Few could then afford the Concert Grand's 1972 price of $1872/pair; fewer still could accommodate their size. Standing 52" tall and as wide as a side-by-side refrigerator-freezer, the CG was an audiophile holy grail in the early 1960s. Each speaker had eight aluminum-diaphragm tweeters, two 5 1/4" midrange cones, four 12" woofers, and weighed 225 lbs. The Concert Grand was introduced in 1951.
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As fate would have it, that very same pair of Symphonys would end up at my seashore bungalow 15 years later, where they did vacation-home duty. My goal was simple—set up a utility system that would fit a beach house decorated with a hodgepodge of hand-me-downs. Assuming I'd use the system only for background music, I broke every audiophile rule and rigged the system with cheap Ace Hardware speaker wire, which, using a kitchen knife, I stuffed out of sight between the carpet and wall molding. And what better source for background music than radio? I had an old Fisher receiver in the attic that looked cool and fit the Bozaks' retro style.

I fired up the system. Bang! I was taken back to my dad's 1965 system. The sound was huge and so realistic, but most of all, it was smooth—the opposite of my high-resolution system. Altogether it had cost less than $1500, and made better sound than most of the high-end systems I've heard. I instantly knew that I'd found what I'd searched for since boyhood. (The Symphony B-4000A is more plentiful on www.Audiogon.com and www.ebay.com than the Concert Grand. You
Rudy Bozak and his designs

Rudy T. Bozak (1910-1983) was a hi-fi pioneer and a bit of a maverick, as famous for his loudspeakers as for his pro audio mixers. Bozak raised many eyebrows by refusing to submit review samples to audio magazines for lab testing. Nor did he like to discuss the sonic aspects of his speakers with reviewers and industry experts. It’s been reported that he was annoyingly adamant in his belief in the importance of driver-cone material. He thought the “sound” of the cone itself so important that he cooked up in a large cauldron his own raw cone material, using a secret formula of 50% wool and myriad off-the-shelf and more exotic materials. Bozak’s woofer cones varied in density from the core to the surround, to achieve a fast but relaxed voice. He changed the composition of the Concert Grand’s woofer magnet from alnico to ceramic in mid-year 1970. Bozak fans remain divided as to which sounds best. I have a pair of ceramic-era Symphonys that offer startlingly crisp bass, but have not heard a pair of ceramic-era Concert Grand mixers.

Although the Concert Grand is Rudy Bozak’s grand achievement, the Bozak speakers group does on yahoo-groups.

Still, the Concert Grandes presented some problems that gave me pause even as I suggested to John Atkinson that I write a review of them. First, they’re very rare and are seldom seen on the second-hand market. Second, they’re huge—practically impossible to ship from Philadelphia to New York City so that JA could measure them.

The diaphragms. By contrast, the blue trace in fig.3 above 300Hz shows the response of the Bozak in the farfield, averaged across a 30° horizontal window on the tweeter axis. A series of notches and peaks can be seen in the midrange and low treble. Though these appear severe, they result, I believe, from interference between the multiple woofers and midrange units and will therefore be position-specific. Even taking into consideration the exaggeration of low frequencies due to the nearfield measurement technique, the Concert Grand’s low frequencies exhibit a mid-bass boost that, in conjunction with the relatively slow roll-off below the woofer tuning frequency, will give the impression of powerful bass.

The Concert Grand’s treble balance is actually quite flat, though it rolls off sharply above 11kHz. Without help, the Bozak tweeter will sound rather lifeless. In his everyday listening PB supplies that help in the form of a horn-loaded RadioShack tweeter, connecting it in parallel with the Concert Grand and relying on the tweeter’s own low-pass filter. PB faces the tweeter to the rear, but to give a baseline for this ancillary unit, I faced it forward and repeated the response measurement.

The result is shown as the red trace in fig.3. A series of peaks and dips can be seen between 4kHz and 20kHz, resulting from interference between the Bozak tweeters and the RadioShack unit, which comes in an octave too low in frequency. In addition, the RadioShack tweeter appears to be about 5dB too sensitive to integrate properly with the Bozak. This is presumably why Peter uses the unit facing away from him, which will allow it to fill in the octave above 10kHz in-room at a reduced level. Even so, in my own auditioning of the Concert Grand with the RS tweeter, I found the octave between 5kHz and 10kHz a little prominent. I would try rolling in the RadioShack an octave higher in frequency.

Because I measured the Concert Grand on location, I couldn’t perform a complete set of off-axis measurements. However, the peaks and dips in the on-axis response do vary according to the mike position, as I conjectured above (fig.4). In-room, their effect may well be relatively innocuous, which is to a large extent confirmed by fig.5. This is the overall spatially averaged, 1/3-octave response taken for
sound is also available in his smaller designs. The Concerto B-302A offers the CG’s midrange in a much smaller package (28” H by 24” W by 20” D). The Symphony B-4000A is closer in performance to the CG but in a size that’s slightly easier to handle (44” H by 26” W by 15” D).

Description
The heart of every Bozak speaker is the 5 1/4” midrange driver, whose magnet structure is the same size and diameter as that of the 12” woofer. Bozak stated that, “based on the laws of physics, [this unit] is so sized that the diameter of the speaker cone does not exceed the wavelengths of the sounds they are designed to reproduce.” The cone itself is made of uniform-density aluminum coated with a thin film of latex rubber on each surface. The aluminum is perforated to help bond the rubber coatings and damp the cone. Legend has it that Rudy Bozak worked on the each speaker individually. (To measure the Bozak’s in-room response, I played pink noise through each speaker in turn and recorded the microphone’s output on my laptop with a Metric Halo ULN-2 Firewire interface.) PB’s corner placement for the Concert Grands results in a smooth, extended bass register that rolls gently off below the 40Hz band. The curve is impressively flat overall, though the region between 125kHz and 10kHz is slightly shelved-down. And, of course, without the supertweeters the speaker’s response plummets like a stone above 10kHz.

In the time domain, the Concert Grand’s step response (fig.6) is complex. You can see, as they arrive successively at the microphone position, the steps of the tweeters, the midrange units, and the woofers, all positive-going. The cumulative spectral-decay plot (fig.7) is disappointing, suffering from a series of resonant ridges in the mid-treble region.

In some respects, the Bozak Concert Grand’s measured performance stands up well four decades after its commercial heyday. The bass extension and definition are first-rate, and its in-room balance is impressively flat. Its rather resonant tweeters are definitely a weak point, however, lacking extension and offering an unflat mid-treble. The Bozak’s horizontal dispersion is also wayward compared with modern designs. While amplifiers from the Golden Age can still be competitive today, as revealed by PB’s review of the Fisher 500-C receiver in June, speaker technology has made enormous progress since the early 1960s.

—John Atkinson

![Fig.5 Bozak B-410 Concert Grand, spatially averaged response in PB's listening room without RadioShack supertweeters.](image)

![Fig.6 Bozak B-410 Concert Grand, step response on tweeter axis at 50" (5ms time window, 30kHz bandwidth).](image)

![Fig.7 Bozak B-410 Concert Grand, cumulative spectral-decay plot at 50" (0.15ms risetime).](image)
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The tweeter is a standard, dual-cone design. The inner aluminum diaphragm handles frequencies above 10kHz, the outer diaphragm the frequencies below 10kHz. Both are coated with rubber and damped with an abutment of foam rubber. Early Concert Grands had a multitweeter array in the shape of an Altec sectional horn; later designs had a line array.

There are a couple of different driver configurations for the Concert Grand. One pair I own places the midrange drivers almost 20" apart on the horizontal plane. I experimented with physically covering one of these to reduce combing artifacts—this made a big improvement in the imaging and increased the seamlessness of the integration with the woofers.

The CG's large (52" H by 36" W by 19" D), massive, particleboard enclosure is designed to be close to an infinite baffle (a large wall) as possible. In fact, Bozak sold many Concert Grands in kit form where the buyer supplied the enclosure—a wall of the house. (Imagine the wife catching you drilling 14 good-size holes in the living-room wall.) From the mid-60s through the early '70s, CGs were available in three distinctive cabinet styles—Classic, Contemporary, and Moorish—and were built to a standard of fine furniture at the Bozak factory in Darien, Connecticut. The old-world craftsmanship is a far cry from the robotic look of more modern designs.

The CG's front face, or baffle, is 1.5" thick. The drive-units are mounted to the inside of the baffle with standard wood screws and hooked up with ordinary stranded copper wire. The midrange units are isolated from the woofers and tweeters in a semispherical inner enclosure of plastic, to reduce interference from the backwave. To access the drive-units, you remove the rear of the cabinet by unscrewing 40 large wood screws—no easy task. The enclosures have minimal cross bracing, which gives the cabinets some life when you rap your knuckles on the top and sides—it's as if they're living, breathing things.

Setup
If you live in a walkup apartment, forget about the Concert Grands. If you have a small room, forget about them. If you have neighbors, forget about the how it came across. This isn't disturbing if you're not obsessed with re-creating a scale model of the performer in your living room, but I did find it hard to ignore.

I also listened to Ryan Adams' "Sweet Carolina," from Heartbreaker (SACD, Mobile Fidelity UDSACD 7002), which, for all its tonal purity, has a soundstage balance that sounds too "left-channel-centric" on most systems. The Bozaks put Adams more center stage and Emmylou Harris' backup vocals extremely close to his lead rather than fairly deep in the soundstage, as I'm used to hearing them.

This sounds like a litany of complaints, but listening to the Concert Grands was, by and large, simply lovely. Yes, the bass could have been tighter, and there was almost none of the sonic holography many audiophiles now consider indispensable. On the other hand, the sound was big and detailed without sounding etched or edgy. In the same way that some performance spaces amplify and enhance the sound of the music taking place in them, the Bozaks seemed to exalt the music I played through them. I loved listening to the Bozak Concert Grands the way I love going back to my hometown. They were familiar and different at the same time—and while I was listening to them, I kept fantasizing about how nice it would be to live with them.

But later that evening, I sat down in my listening room and cranked up "Sweet Carolina" on the Canton Vento 809 DCs I reviewed in the June issue. This is where I live now, I thought, as I was transported into Adams' sonic world. It may be a smaller and more complicated place, but it's the way I hear things now.

The past is another country. I wouldn't want to live there, but I can certainly understand its appeal. That goes double for the Bozak B-410 Concert Grand.
CGs. These imposing speakers dominate a room, and should be placed far apart—they need room to breathe. Their bass response is amazing enough that you can also forget about placing them in a room adjacent to a room anyone else is going to use.

It's funny, but the CG looks so "old world" that it's hard to imagine it producing a "modern" sound. Now for the surprise—it's friendly to single-ended-triode (SET) tube amplifiers. I get rock-concert levels with 845s (300Bs for chamber music or jazz), and have found the CGs wonderfully match with 18W, 6BQ5 SET amps to produce a clean, articulate sound. I've had excellent results from a number of such amps, including the EICO HF-81, Stromberg Carlson ASR 433, and Heathkit AA-151. Each served up tight bass and airy highs with three-dimensional images and springwater-like clarity. You'll get more punch as you move up the power curve to 845 and EL34 SET amps, but not better sound.

Currently, I'm doing a reality check to make sure I haven't lost touch with the solid-state side of the universe. The CGs are responding well. With vintage class-A, 25W designs ranging from the rarest of the rare Pioneer M-22s to the hard-to-find Classe DR-2, the Bozaks deliver a big, easy, straightforward sound that's less confined than with the lower-powered amps. I toe them in with their tweeter arrays along their inner sides. The CG must be spiked; I recommend replacing the rectangular wood frame they sit on with braced 2 by 6s.

Bozak speaker crossovers are the polar opposite of the Infinite Slope designs attributed to Richard Modaffieri, of McIntosh fame, and currently licensed by Joseph Audio. The crossover rate is an "easy" 6dB/octave, which results in a gradual transition from driver to driver. Bozak made available a biwire biampl model of the Concert Grand, which removes the low-to-mid dividing network from the cabinet and replaces it with an active outboard crossover box for two separate power amplifiers per side. This does not allow for adjustment of signal amplitude and is not buffered, and so is best suited to amplifiers with similar transfer functions. I have a pair of CGs configured this way using low-powered Wright Audio SETs, and the midrange clarity is extraordinary.

One school of Bozak experts believes that a flatter frequency balance can be obtained by modifying the crossover.² The philosophy of these reviews, however, is to evaluate vintage components as they would have sounded at the time of manufacture. My sonic valuations are based on stock units, though one change I did make was to reverse the polarity of the midrange drivers—their output then seemed to better blend with that of the woofers. [See the "Measurements" sidebar. —Ed.]

There is some scuttlebutt over this midrange unit polarity. It seems the factory miswired some units (also some reports have prior owners replacing drivers and miswiring them). There appears to be no rhyme or reason to it. Some Symphonies/CGs/302s have correct midrange polarity, others do not.

Sound
My first foray into Concert Grand magic was on the day I brought them home. I played the LP of Georg Solti's recording of Mahler's Symphony 4 with the Concertgebouw Orchestra (London/Decca CS-6217). I was not prepared for the size of the orchestra that the Bozaks...
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allowed into my room, nor was I prepared for the true 28Hz low-end notes the speakers reproduced. I suspect that the sound’s scope or size was a factor of the size of the baffle, and that the bass was due to the enormous cabinet. I was also shocked at how smooth the sound was while still being detailed and lifelike. You can have your cake and eat it, too. The word to describe the sound would have to be effortless.

The other night I was spinning Suzanne Vega’s “Lolita,” from Nine Objects of Desire (CD, A&M 31454 0583 2), and the bass transients were knocking the wind out of my chest. The Bozaks could really get my pants flapping, and without any midband distortion. The soundfield on this track is nicely layered, and Vega’s voice punched through very 3-D. I heard her really shine with this music. Samsa’s “Long Since Gone,” from the compilation disc Convergent Evolution (CD, Greenhouse GHM 99.01), has endless electronic winds that remind me of Contact. In that film, Jody Foster seems to travel in time to another planet, where she stands on a virtual beach in a new world and speaks with her long-dead father. The Bozaks reproduced the sonic equivalent of this setting, transporting me far from my listening room.

As if that weren’t good enough, I could also rock my brains out with the Concert Grands. Nine Inch Nails’ “All the Love in the World,” from With Teeth (CD), Interscope HALO 19), starts off as a winding ballad and mounts to a growling finale that will jar your fillings loose. The Bozaks’ bass was powerful and gripping—I felt it throughout my body—and Trent Reznor’s vocal is repeated in a trance-like loop. He seemed to be in the room with me. This fantastic track is a great respite from the audiophile-approved nut I sometimes find myself in.

For the grand finale, and to complete my journey back to teenhood, I spun “Soldier,” from Destiny’s Child’s Destiny Fulfilled (CD, Columbia CK 92595). A lot of money is being pumped into the production of R&B pop artists, and the influence of the urban hip-hop scene has added a beat flavor that appeals to the owners of boom cars. This gives the music a very youthful feeling—again, a refreshing change from Patricia Barber and the 30th reissue of Miles Davis’ Kind of Blue. Plus, “Soldier” has a great beat and is flush with pace, rhythm, and drive—qualities the Bozak Concert Grand laid down better than any other speaker, in my opinion. The natural transients the CG reproduced were anchored by the speaker’s extraordinary bass and a solid, hump-free lower midrange, giving the music a quality of forward momentum unlike anything I’ve heard from any other speaker, regardless of size or cost.

**Adding Snap**

In my listening experience, the Bozak midrange driver delivers the most velvety sound I’ve ever heard. It excels at reproducing transient decay, resulting in a better reproduction of harmonic overtones than other speakers manage. Bozak’s signature “house” sound was indeed smooth—no Bozak system ever sounded fatiguing. However, this “soft approach” takes a little getting used to and some listeners may find the CGs a bit too polite.

When I need more high-frequency energy, I augment the Concert Grand’s top end with one RadioShack super-tweeter per side, firing to the rear. This gives more snap to the sound, but increases the sibilance of vocals.

**Conclusion**

You read about speakers that perfectly image but have limited bass, or hyper-detailed speakers that, over time, fatigue the listener. But the Bozak Concert Grand does everything well while not excelling at any one sonic parameter. I believe this is its greatest strength. It is dynamic beyond belief, with gobs of musical detail and harmonic richness. A pair of them are magical in their ability to deliver space and ambience cues, but they image more like what you hear at a concert—not “pinpoint” imaging, but a more blended sound. And the speaker has extraordinary but not superfast bass. The Bozak Concert Grand is the most musically satisfying loudspeaker I’ve heard. It may be the best non-horn vintage speaker you can own.

All of the bigger Bozak loudspeakers have the midrange magic of the Concert Grand, but only the CG can reproduce the scale and drive of live music. Expect to pay up to $3500 for a pair of mint CGs; if you have them shipped across country, add another $500. The Symphony B-4000A ranges in price from $400 to $800/pair, and the 302A from $200 to $400/pair, depending on condition. But no matter which model you try, your ears will smile. I have found no other vintage speaker system that delivers so effortless and musical a sound.
From Airplanes to Amplifiers...

This gorgeous hand-crafted line of tube gear comes from a Chinese aeronautics company that happened to have a couple of audiophile higher-ups. So, back in 1993, China National Aero-Technology took an interesting turn and began designing and manufacturing audio equipment under the name of Cayin, and Acoustic Sounds is thrilled to have been named their exclusive mail-order dealer. Cayin products have only been available in the United States for a few years. Believe us, these folks have taken their designs very seriously, a quality you’d hope for from people charged with making airplanes. These pieces are meticulously hand-crafted. They look and . And they . This is a very exciting acquisition for the Acoustic Sounds catalog. Give us a call, and let us tell you more.

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— Wayne Garcia, The Absolute Sound, August/September 2005

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“...something that every analog lover should hear for him — or herself...Highly recommended.”

— Brian Damkroger, Stereophile, May 2005
Conrad-Johnson's "ACT2" continued the Bill and Lew saga of art through tube amplification into sort of an audio cliffhanger. Where was ACT2 to go? Obviously, into an amplifier. Finally, it is here.

Consider the LP140M 140 Watt per channel tube monoblock power amplifier ($6,000 each). Logically, it would be called the ACT3 since it represents CJ's declaration of the current state of the art in tube amplifier design. Featuring a single triode voltage amplifier direct-coupled to a cathode coupled phase inverter, the LP140M incorporates only the finest available parts including the extensive use (for the first time in a tube amplifier) of the new teflon CJD capacitors employed to such great effect in the ACT 2 preamplifier. Even the main power supply reservoir uses high-quality film-type capacitors (polypropylene) - there are no electrolytics in this amplifier's audio circuits or its power supply. Resistors are precision metal-foil types. Input connectors are machined from oxygen-free copper, and gold plated. For those requiring less power, Conrad-Johnson has created the LP70S ($6,500) which shares the same circuit architecture as the LP140M in a 70 watt per channel stereo tube amplifier that will drive all but the most inefficient speaker loads.

Like the ACT2, the LP140M and LP70S present the music with perfect integration from top to bottom. Neither dry nor warm, the LP amplifiers reproduce all the harmonics with the verisimilitude we have become used to in the ACT2. A near perfect amplifier for nearly any speaker.

NEXT ACT : Enter the CT5 (Composite Triode) preamplifier. The CT5 ($7,500) offers penultimate performance to the ACT2 in a tube line stage made in the tradition of the Premier 16LS. The dramatic casework of the CT5, while simpler in execution, strongly evokes the styling of the ACT2 and closely matches the LP power amplifiers in looks as well as sound. And what a glorious sound it is! Just a shade less revealing than the ACT2, but with the same nuanced harmonic accuracy.

Build quality is to the same standard as the ACT2: all resistors are precision metal foil types only CJD Teflon capacitors and CID polystyrene capacitors are used in the audio circuits and their power supplies (no electrolytic capacitors), sealed relays with gold plated contacts for all switching, including the discrete, stepped attenuator, gold plated input/output connectors machined of oxygen-free copper.

ACT2, LP140M, LP70S and the CT5... Any other artists could end their master opus at this point but with Bill and Lew you can be sure that the play will go on and on.
Channel Islands Audio
VHP•1 & VAC•1
HEADPHONE AMPLIFIER & POWER SUPPLY

Wes Phillips

EQUIPMENT REPORT

VHP•1 headphone amplifier.
THD+noise: 0.00014% (no reference level specified). Frequency range: 10Hz-100kHz.
SERIAL NUMBER OF UNIT REVIEWED: HB7309.
PRICE: $349.

SERIAL NUMBER OF UNIT REVIEWED: AB3186.
PRICE: $159.

Both
DIMENSIONS Each: 4.40" (113mm) W by 2.65" (68mm) H by 4.40" (113mm) D.
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Back in March, I wrote a reviewlet of Channel Islands Audio’s VHP•1 headphone amplifier for the Stereophile eNewsletter.1 (What—you aren’t receiving that free download yet? Well, log on to www.stereophile.com and opt in.) The VHP•1 has continued to enchant me—reason enough to examine it in greater detail, I reckoned. But the real reason I returned to the VHP•1 ($349) is that CIA’s Dusty Vawter recently sent me his new VAC•1 ($159), a replacement power supply for the VHP•1’s stock wall wart supply. Could a new power supply really offer a substantial improvement in performance?

Little darlin’
The VHP•1 is tiny for a home headphone amp, but it’s quite a bit larger than such portables as the Ray Samuels Audio Emmeline SR-71 (reviewed in the September issue). The extra real estate afforded by its 4.4" W by 2.6" H by 4" D extruded-aluminum chassis means that the VHP•1 can offer a 1/4" headphone jack appropriate for a home unit, a pushbutton gain switch, and two pairs of RCA jacks: one for

1 Available at www.stereophile.com/images/newsletter/305nph.html.
signal input, one for unity-gain feed-through.

The heart of the VHP•1 is a surface-mount 1C current-feedback amplifier (instead of an op-amp, usually a voltage-feedback device) designed specifically for use in pro-audio headphone monitoring. Vawter decided to employ the chip because headphone amplifiers present a challenge, given the wide range of load impedances they're required to work with. "Low-impedance headphones need a lot of current and high-impedance headphones need a lot of voltage," said Vawter. "After I experimented with headphone amps for a while, I realized that you really can't dial in a compromise that works for both low- and high-impedance headphones—it became obvious that we had to have some method to select gain."

The stock power supply is fairly hefty by wall-watt standards, offering 14VAC with 850mA. The VAC•1 uses a better transformer than the stock unit, with larger wire and an output voltage of 14V at 1.44A. "I didn't reinvent the wheel or anything with the VAC-1," Vawter said. "It's just a good step-down transformer with a cap across the AC line where the power comes in and a couple of ferrite beads where the power goes out."

The VAC•1 offers 115/230V switching and an IEC mains socket, "so that consumers can add an aftermarket power cable that costs more than the VHP•1 and VAC•1 combined—assuming they want to," said Vawter.

**Little revelations**

I didn’t want to, but I had an Audience powerChord to hand, which, at $379, does cost more than the VHP•1, if not the combo—so I used it just to be per-

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**MEASUREMENTS**

I measured the Channel Islands VHP•1 using the VAC•1 AC power supply. The maximum voltage gain was 16.2dB or 5.9dB, depending on whether the front-panel gain button was pushed in or not. The VHP•1 preserved absolute polarity, and its input impedance was a fairly low 6.9k ohms across the audioband. Its output impedance was a low 11 ohms at all frequencies.

The frequency response was wide and flat, and just 0.2dB down at 200kHz (fig.1). The negligible infrasonic rolloff below 20Hz seen in this graph, which was taken into 150 ohms, disappeared when the amplifier was measured into 100k ohms. The volume control was set to its maximum position for this measurement; at 12:00, a 0.75dB imbalance had crept in (not shown). Channel separation was better than 100dB at 1kHz (fig.2), but decreased in the treble due to capacitive coupling, and at low frequencies due to the presence of some low-level low-frequency noise. The unweighted, wideband signal/noise ratio, ref. 1V output with the input shorted, with the VHP•1’s volume control set to its maximum and its gain set to High, was a slightly disappointing 73.75dB due to this noise, improving to 90dB when an A-weighting filter was used. You can see a couple of AC-supply spuriae in this graph; I couldn’t eliminate these no matter how I adjusted the ground connections between the amplifier and my Audio Precision test set.

Fig.3 plots the percentage of THD+noise present in the VHP•1’s output against output voltage at 1kHz into loads ranging from 100 ohms to 100k ohms. Only into the lowest load did the amplifier break a sweat, and even then the distortion remains below 0.01% in the region where the THD products start to emerge above the noise floor. The output voltage at clipping (1% THD) was 9V, well above that required by typical headphones. Into a load imped-
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verse. When I took the VHP•1—VAC•1 minisatck to the recent Cantus sessions in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, to watch John Atkinson record There Lies the Home, the choral group’s 2006 release, I forgot the powerChord and used a standard AC cable from John’s trunk o’ wires and noticed no significant degradation in sound quality.

Around my house, I connected the VHP•1 to a Musical Fidelity stack—X-Ray2 CD player and X-DAC3 digital/analog converter with Sterevox Studio HDSE interconnect—and used a Sterevox HDXV S/PDIF cable to pass the hits from player to DAC. I listened to my Etymotic ER-6S and AKG K-501 headphones through the VHP•1 set to its Low gain setting, and my Sennheiser HD-600 and HD-650 phones at the CFA’s High gain position.

Little wonder
That sounds like a lot of gear to attach to a cheap’n’cheerful headphone amp, but $349 isn’t really all that cheap—add a $160 power supply and it’s even less so. More to the point, the Channel Islands amp acted like a high-end piece of kit, so I treated it like one.

I was very impressed by the VHP•1’s silence when driven by its stock 14V, 850mA power supply. This is particularly important in a headphone amp because the transducers are only fractions of an inch from your ears (or, in the case of the Etymotics, from your eardrums)—any noise, even a millivolt’s worth of offset, is audible. And remember, there’s no ambient room noise to mask it, as there is with a loud-speaker-based system.

Once the music started, however, it was the VHP•1’s bass power and extension that next impressed me. Trevor Horn’s pop production of Belle and Sebastian’s Dear Catastrophe Waitress (CD, Rough Trade 83216-2) just lopes along atop rock-solid bass and drums. Pure pop doesn’t have to be lightweight, and DCW isn’t. In fact, as Horn piles instrument on top of instrument, Belle and Sebastian seem to be channeling such great 1960s-era singles bands as the Box Tops, the Kinks, and the Stories with dense, layered, and above all, light pop fantasies.

I was just talking about the VHP•1’s slam, wasn’t I? Actually, I said that its slam was the second thing I noticed. What kept bringing me back for more was the way it resolved complex arrangements and overlapping voices—such as those on the Hilliard Ensemble’s recording of the Motets of Guillaume de Machaut (CD, ECM New Series 1823). The Hilliard’s lineup of two countertenors, two tenors, and a baritone is ideal for this music, which is written primarily for three or four vocal lines that twist and twine about one another, seeking the limits of melodic connection (and sometimes exceeding them—Machaut wasn’t afraid of a little dissonance).

The VHP•1 delivered all of the vocal warmth and hurl of the Hilliards, but I was most impressed by its ability to capture the way those voices filled and defined the acoustic space they inhabited. It’s one of those things that seems so basic, yet is actually very difficult to get right. The VHP•1 placed the Hilliard Ensemble bodily into the reverberant acoustic of Propstei St. Gerold, one of producer Manfred Eicher’s favorite recording venues, and captured that hall’s long, lingering decay with a precision and clarity that startled me every time I returned to the CD, which I did repeatedly. Sound that good is like audio crack—no sooner had I finished listening to those Motets than I began jonesing for my next fix.

I had the Ray Samuels Audio Emmeline SR-71 battery-powered headphone amp ($395) in-house while I was auditioning the VHP•1, so I did some comparative listening. The two share many characteristics—like the VHP•1, the SR-71 is dead quiet, warm,
and detailed. In fact, using my favorite on-the-go headphones, the Etymotic ER-6Ses, it was hard to choose between the two. The SR-71 sorted out the layers of Trevor Horn's pop operatic flights of fancy on Dear Catastrophe Waitress with aplomb, albeit with perhaps a tad less sparkle. Was the VHP-1 bright or the SR-71 dark? I couldn't decide. I finally left it as a matter of perspective—the tonal difference was very, very subtle.

There was less timbral difference with the Machaut. Like the VHP-1, the SR-71 gave me voices and hall with startling clarity and low-level detail. If I had to choose between the two, I wouldn't find it easy to do on the basis of performance—my choice would come down to features.

One of the most essential differences I experienced was that the CIA amp had enough gain to handle the heavy-hitter Sennheiser HD-600 and HD-650 headphones I favor for serious monitoring and at-home listening. The SR-71 could drive the HD-600s, just not to the higher volume levels I require when monitoring a recording session. That's probably beside the point—as its 1/8" input and headphone jacks indicate, Ray Samuels designed the '71 primarily for on-the-go listening. The Sennheisers. Now there's a match made in heaven.

**Little miracle**

Especially if you add the VAC-1. I'd been listening to the VHP-1–HD-650 team for several months when I finally received a VAC-1, and I wasn't sure I expected a big difference. I hoped there would be, but I was so happy with the VHP-1's stock performance that I wasn't anticipating a slam dunk.

You'd think I'd get tired of being so consistently wrong.

Adding the VAC-1 didn't make much difference in the elements of the VHP-1's sound that I most admired: It continued to be warm, detailed, and dead quiet. But the VHP-1's already impressive bass response became even more powerfully solid with the heavy-duty power supply. Not deeper, simply more physical. If the bane of headphone listening is that "it's all in your head" sensation, the VAC-1 went a long way toward making music a total-body experience.

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**Fig.6** Channel Islands Audio VHP-1, spectrum of 50Hz sinewave, DC=1kHz, at 2V into 150 ohms (linear frequency scale).

**Fig.7** Channel Islands Audio VHP-1, HF intermodulation spectrum, DC=24kHz, 19+20kHz at 1V peak into 8k ohms (linear frequency scale).
What does *ne plus ultra* mean?

ne plus ultra \(\text{nay-plus-UL-truh}\); noun:
1. The highest point, as of excellence or achievement; the acme; the pinnacle; the ultimate.
2. The most profound degree of a quality or condition.

As more and more audio retailers around the country embrace convenience, control, and gadgetry over audio and video performance, they effectively abandon the music and film lovers who desire a real experience from their systems at home.

At *ne plus ultra*, our passion is designing and installing systems that provide a compelling, engaging, and realistic experience of music and film in our clients' own homes. We invite you to our new showroom located in a Victorian mansion in downtown Austin, Texas. We have created an ideal environment in which you can relax and revel in just how amazing and exciting truly realistic music reproduction can be.
This was no small improvement, but it wasn't the biggest change the VAC-1 wrought. That would be its increase in dynamic contrast. I don't mean that the VAC-1 allowed the VHP-1 to play any louder. It may have done, but that wasn't what had me mining my CD collection for lost gems. With the VAC-1 powering the amp, there was more contrast between music and silence: where there was music, it seemed as if there was more of the stuff it was made from; where there wasn't, there was more nothing.

Is that clear? No—but it wasn't clear to me at first, either. I initially thought about it in criticspeak, throwing around such terms as increased palpability, transcendent transparency, and layered immediacy. But that was just late-night listening-session twaddle.

Listening to Fritz Reiner and the Chicago Symphony's recording of Prokofiev's Lieutenant Kijé Suite (CD, RCA Living Stereo JVM-XR24026) finally made the difference manifest: I was hearing Reiner's trademark precision with phenomenal clarity. All of the tiny accents, shadings, and dynamic and metric shifts were rendered with greater contrast. In other words, everything that made Reiner Reiner came across better.

And don't even ask about those big brass and low-string flourishes in The Burial of Kijé. That was emotional to the point of intimacy—and a gentleman never gossips.

Little known
The week of June 19, I accompanied John Atkinson to Sioux Falls, South Dakota, where he again recorded Cantus in the Washington Pavilion. As usual with these projects, JA set up several different pairs of microphones so he could blend their feeds together to achieve an artistically true sonic perspective than any single pair of transducers could produce. Because even the editor of Stereophile has only two ears, this presents a minor problem for monitoring the microphone feeds at the sessions. John tends to listen to the two pairs of omnidirectional microphones, alternating between two different sets of headphones, while Cantus' music director, Erick Lichte, and I monitor the cardioid feed—Erick listening for artistic and performance issues, and I basically listening for anomalies.

Except this time out, at the beginning of Day 2 of recording, there I was, hunkered down with the VHP-1, the VAC-1, and a pair of Sennheiser HD-600s. Erick slated a take, and I heard a hum almost buried below the noise floor—a hum that was immediately buried by the sound of 11 men singing. I struggled and failed to hear the hum throughout the take, then couldn't hear it over the talk-back afterward. I signaled to Erick to quiet the stage; when he did, the hum was there, deep in the hall sound.

"How loud were you listening to hear that?" Erick said.

Not all that loud—but I had help. The VHP-1 and VAC-1, despite their relatively modest prices, were definitely studio quality. (By the way, the hum was caused by a cable with a bad solder connection, and it took a while to find—but we might have wasted a lot more time recording noisy takes if it hadn't been for the CIA products.)

Little difference
To put the performance of the VHP-1 and VAC-1 in perspective, I compared the $498 CIA combo with the $449 Musical Fidelity X-Canv3 I used to monitor 2004's Cantus recording sessions in Goshen, which resulted in Comfort and Joy: Volume One (CD, CTS-1204) and the soon-to-be-released Volume Two.

The X-Canv3 served me well in Goshen—and at home. It's no slouch when it comes to solid bottom-end recovery, and was just as impressive as the CIA stack in delivering the big tutti of Lieutenant Kijé. Big sound, check; hall detail, check; dynamic contrast, check—in terms of the big picture, the MF and CIA were awfully close.

However (you knew there had to be a "however," didn't you?), they weren't identical. The VHP-1 had more upper-midrange bloom—or maybe I should say that the X-Canv3 sounded drier through the upper mids. Either way, this was especially apparent listening to the Chicago Symphony's superb string section.

The question is, which one was right? I think it might have been the X-Canv3, because the Sennheiser HD-600s do have a slightly de-richified upper-midrange balance, a quality that keeps many headphone users from completely falling in love with them. Does that mean I preferred the X-Canv3 to the VHP-1?

Yes. No. I don't know.

On one hand, I can't really approve of a deviation from absolute accuracy. It would be a bad career move—and it makes me squirm. On the other hand, the Sennheisers are my preferred headphones, and they sounded more right with the VHP-1. It's hard to argue with pleasure.

Either would make me happy. I think the Channel Islands combo makes me happier.

Little giant
At $349, the Channel Islands Audio VHP-1 is a heck of a good headphone amplifier. It's versatile and it's tiny, which means you can pretty much put it where you need it. It's also convenient, possessing an impedance switch and a unity-gain feed-through, both thoughtful features. By itself, it would have made my short list of must-audition headphone amps.

Add the VAC-1, however, and the VHP-1 rockets to the top of that short list. The increases in bottom-end extension and power—and, more important, dynamic contrast—make it a serious rival for the best of class in its price range—and maybe way above it.
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LOUDSPEAKER CABLE

Brian Damkroger

Nirvana Audio's cables have long been fixtures in my audio system: first the SL interconnects and speaker cables, and, after their debut in 1998, the S-X Ltd. interconnect. In 2002, after a long development process, designer Stephen Creamer introduced the companion S-X Ltd. speaker cable ($2780/2.5m pair, add $50/pair for biwire configuration). He explored a wide range of options during development, including dramatically different structures and materials, but always returned to the elements he’d used before. The end result was a design that combined elements of his two existing speaker cables, the SL and the entry-level Royale.

At its core, the S-X Ltd. has the Royale's two conductors, each a symmetrical Litz element consisting of 285 isolated strands of high-purity copper of several different gauges. In the S-X Ltd., the conductors are spaced slightly apart to minimize capacitance, wound into a twisted pair, and wrapped in FEP insulation.

The S-X Ltd. eight smaller, 95-strand Litz-type conductors—also high-purity copper, in different gauges, and with FEP insulation—are then wrapped around the core in a direction opposite the pair's twist, to promote noise cancellation. A complex array of wire guides locates the conductors and damps vibrations; this assembly is wrapped in an insulating jacket of amorphous PTFE (Teflon) and air, and then an outer sheath of a polyurethane-based composite engineered to reduce static.
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EL34 Output tubes, 35 wpc.

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- Premium parts featuring fully-vented ceramic sockets; Nichicon and Realcap capacitors; WBT-style speaker terminals; ALPS volume control; and gold-plated input jacks.

Adaptive AutoBias™ (a PrimaLuna exclusive) reduces distortion 40% to 50%. No need for matched tubes or bias adjustments.

EL34 Output tubes, 35 wpc.

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It all sounds pretty formidable, but the resulting cable is quite manageable, about 3/8" in diameter, and reasonably flexible. Like all Nirvana cables, it's beautifully constructed and finished, with solid, high-quality hardware and terminations.

**Sound**

After a year with the S-X Ltds., I had a pretty good idea of how they performed, but I wanted to specifically address two questions: whether or not the S-X was a big performance jump up from the SL? Yes, absolutely, and in every way, but the biggest differences were the sharper transients, improved detail resolution, and increased transparency. With the S-X, Beverley Sills's notes had crisp, clean leading edges instead of the SL's smooth flow. Her vibratos were sharply defined with the S-X rather than softly rounded, and her timing was sharper and more precise. Finally, with the S-X Ltd. in the system, all traces of the SL's golden warmth and slightly liquid texture were gone.

The bouncing oboe lines near the end of Act I of La Traviata were a great example of the comparison and of the S-Xs' strengths. With the S-Xs, there were sharp, tangible images of both the instrument and the column of air rising above it. In contrast, the SLs' oboe was solid and had a rich, woody tonal structure, but wasn't as detailed as with the S-Xs—and the column of air didn't have the physical presence that it did with the S-Xs.

The S-X Ltd. did it all, but a few things stood out. I was struck by how powerful and dynamic Beverly Sills's soprano was, and by how definitive seemed the inner details of her vocalizing and her articulation. I also noticed the Nirvanas' incredible transparency, which showed up in instruments' tonal purity and, even more dramatically, in the uncanny reproduction of the hall's ambience between and around the performers. The echoes trailing Sills's notes vividly described the space with a consistency and clarity that made it seem real.

The only nit I found to pick with the S-X Ltd.'s performance was a compression of front-to-back depth. This was pretty formidable, but the resulting cable is quite manageable, about 3/8" in diameter, and reasonably flexible. Like all Nirvana cables, it's beautifully constructed and finished, with solid, high-quality hardware and terminations.

**What about my other reference wires?**

I've long relied on Nordost's Valhalla and Audience's Au24 speaker cables as references, and of late have begun to include the Silversmith Silvers as well. All three are excellent, but they differ slightly in tonal balance and in how they portray the subtleties of a performance. The Nirvana S-X Ltd. has now firmly established its position in this group, providing another excellent, and again slightly different, set of attributes. Interestingly enough, I found that of the other three cables, the S-X Ltd.'s performance most resembled that of the Valhalla. This was a surprise, given that the two interconnects are polar opposites: the Nirvana interconnect is tonally warm, and relaxed and coherent, whereas the Valhalla is cool, and emphasizes detail and edge definition.

For starters, the S-X Ltd. speaker cable was tonally quite similar to the Valhalla—very neutral, with, if anything, a tinge of coolness on some material. On the other hand, there were other, more subtle differences between the two that drew attention to different frequency regions. The violins in La Traviata were a good example. With the Nordost, I was more aware of the details and dynamics of the players' fingering and bowing and their initial transients and vibrations. With the S-X Ltd., my attention was instead drawn to the textural differences in the body resonances of the individual violins, and how these resonances defined each instrument and its position.

Expanding the comparison to include the Silver and Au24 spreads things a little further—each has a tonal balance that's slightly but consistently warmer than the Nirvana S-X Ltd.'s. Similarly, whereas neither the S-X Ltd. nor the Valhalla had any trace of background texture, the Silver had a faint, golden sweetness, and the Au24 the tiniest bit of liquid smoothness. Neither was really detectable as an overlay on instruments or voices, but instead as a component of the ambience, a slight thickening and coloring of the air in the spaces between performers.

Nor did the S-X Ltd. concede any ground to the Valhalla in terms of detail resolution or definition. The reproduction of the oboe in La Traviata that I described earlier—the instrument, the column of air—was equally tangible with the Nirvana and Valhalla.

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**ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT**

**ANALOG SOURCE**: VPI HR-X turntable & tonearm, Lyra Titan cartridge.

**DIGITAL SOURCE**: Burmester 001 CD player.

**PREAMPLIFICATION**: Ensemble Fonobrio Phono, Sutherland PhD phono stages; Placette remote volume control; VTL 7.5, Burmester 011 preamplifiers.

**POWER AMPLIFIERS**: Simaudio Moon Rock, VTL S-400.

**LOUDSPEAKERS**: Thiel CS6.


_Brian Damkroger_
image was a bit less distinct with the Silversmith Silver; with the Audience Au24, the instrument and column of air were there, but not the sharply drawn transition between them.

The Nordost Valhalla did emphasize image edges slightly more than did the Nirvana S-X Ltd. In some cases this resulted in better edge definition, but in others the emphasis overshadowed the initial portions of a note's body—I felt I was hearing more of the note with the Nirvana. On the other hand, the S-X Ltd. painted pitch and volume transients with a bolder, slightly coarser brush than the Valhalla, and occasionally obscured the most delicate associated details. Reproducing a dynamic transient, for example, both would precisely move the level from pp to ff. With the Nirvana, however, I always visualized the transition being drawn with a thick Magic Marker; the Valhalla seemed to draw this boundary with a fine-point Sharpie.

Overall, listening to La Traviata through the Valhalla and Nirvana was like hearing the same performance led by two different conductors, one asking for more body and power, the other using a lighter, more precise and delicate touch. With the Valhalla I had the sense that Sills was projecting a bit more from her throat and mouth; with the Nirvana, it was unquestionably from her diaphragm. There was more inner detail with the Nirvana; Sills’s voice sounded richer and more complex. With the Valhalla’s more refined, more delicate touch, the tiny details surrounding Nicolai Gedda’s voice when he returns at the end of Act I of La Traviata were clear, and more precisely located him on the stage. And, as noted earlier, that stage was a bit deeper with the Valhallas, and more correctly scaled to the other dimensions and the listener’s perspective.

**Bottom line**

Nirvana’s S-X Ltd. speaker cable is a big jump in performance from the company’s SL. I hate to foster discontent by suggesting that SL owners trade up, but with all due apologies, it’s worth it. The S-X is just better; it’s in an entirely different league. It’s one of the very best speaker cables I’ve heard, and every bit as good as the references I’ve selected over a decade of careful auditioning. Like the S-X Ltd. interconnects, the S-X Ltd. speaker cables are likely to stay in my regular rotation for a long, long time. Very highly recommended.
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Wilson Audio Specialties Sophia loudspeaker

At the 2005 Consumer Electronics Show in January, John Atkinson asked if I would like to do a “Follow-Up” on the Wilson Audio Sophia ($11,700/pair). I was happy to accept the assignment. Not since my days at The Absolute Sound, where I reviewed the first generation of Wilson’s Cub, have I had the opportunity to listen to a Wilson speaker at length.

I’d quite admired the Cub for its dynamics, resolution, and surprising bass, but ultimately I respected it more than I could love it. For all the performance the Cub packed into its reasonably sized box, I could never quite warm up to it. That had been my usual impression of Wilson speakers—until I heard the Sophia at the 2002 CES. (Can it already have been more than three years since the Sophia appeared on Stereophile’s July 2002 cover?) The Sophia charmed and captivated me from that first hearing, the traditional Wilson virtues of clarity and dynamic range, accompanied by a more relaxed top and a richer, more fleshed-out midrange. That introduction of the Sophia was the scene of one of David Wilson’s more famous “gochus” on the audio press. During the demonstration, a pair of costly Spectral monoblock amps was visually prominent; at the end of the presentation, Wilson revealed that, in fact, a modestly priced Parasound stereo amp had been doing the honors. His point? That the speakers are still the most important factor in a system’s ultimate sound.

Given what I’d heard of the Sophias at shows and JA’s enthusiastic recommendation—see www.stereophile.com/loudspeakerreviews/619—I looked forward to their arrival. A friend with considerable experience in setting up Sophias and Wilson WATT/PUTEPPYs came over to lend a hand getting them out of their sturdy, foam-lined crates. Within an hour, the speakers were locked in. And yes, once you get their a-time adjustments make the difference between good and great in final setup. The Sophias wound up 55” from the front wall and 31” from the sidewalls (distances measured to the tweeter centers). A bit more than 9’ apart, they were toed-in so that none of the cabinet sides were visible from my listening position.

THE QUALITY OF A WILSON SPEAKER’S PAINTWORK WOULD BRING TEARS OF ENVY TO THE EYES OF THE FINISHING MAVENS AT LEXUS AND BENTLEY.

I auditioned the Sophias with my usual analog setup: SOTA Cosmos Series III turntable, Graham 2.2 tonearm, Dynavector XV-1S cartridge, and Manley Steelhead phono preamp. The line stage was my longtime reference, the VTL TL-75. CDs were spun on the splendid (and reasonably priced) Plinius CD-101 player, and amps were the stupendous Chord SPM 14000 monoblocks and the Lamm M1.2 Reference monoblocks. (Reviews of the Plinius and Chord are in the works.) Interconnects were Acoustic Zen Silver Reference and Silver Reference II and Harmonic Technology CyberLight. Speaker cables were Nordost Valhalla and Shunyata’s new, ear-opening Orion. AC cables where Shunyata Anacondas, and power conditioning and filtration were supplied by Shunyata’s Hydra 8 and a pair of Hydra 2s.

On the many audio chat rooms and bulletin boards, one often reads dismissive remarks about the cost of Wilson speakers. I wonder how many of those naysayers have ever taken a close look at the way they’re finished and packaged, much less listened carefully to a properly set-up pair of Wilsons. The speakers are covered with a plastic “risk” to protect the finish during transit and setup. They are then bagged and crated, supplied with superb multipart spikes, protection discs to keep those spikes from marring wood floors, a tool kit, and the most thorough setup instructions I’ve seen supplied with any speaker. And the finish! Wilson’s proprietary M and X materials, which they use for the cabinets, are sealed with a gel undercoat and three layers of color primer, then finished with eight layers of automotive-quality paint and buffed to a dazzling mirror finish. The quality of a Wilson speaker’s paintwork would bring tears of envy to the eyes of the finishing mavens at Lexus and Bentley.

There’s no point in being coy about it—the Sophia is a tremendous speaker—but it’s worth describing what makes it such a great all-around performer. If I could ask Dave Wilson one question about the Sophia, it would be, “How do you get that kind of bass performance out of a single 10” driver?” Yes, it’s a proprietary aluminum-cone woofer, but I mean, really. This “little” Wilson (41” H by 12” W by 18” D) delivered some of the most exhilarating bass performance I have ever heard in my listening room, with tremendous control, a massive dynamic envelope, and unexpectedly subterranean depth. Bass guitars were individualized the way I hear them when I play them myself. Jon Camp’s twangy, trebly Rickenbacker (played with a pick) on Renaissance’s “Can You Understand,” from Turn of the Cards (LP, Sire SAS 7502), and Rosko Gee’s funky Fender Jazz Bass (played with the fingers) on Can’s “Animal Waves,” from Saw Delight (UK LP, Virgin V 2079), were as completely and viscerally satisfying as could be. Those hair-trigger bass-synthesizer transients on my favorite Sugar CDs rattled the room as if produced by a speaker twice the Sophia’s size.

The Sophias also played big—I mean, BIG. When I drove them with the Chord SPM 14000 amps, which can deliver a rather excessive 2000W into each Wilson’s 4-ohm load, they presented a gigantic, wraparound soundstage on “The Battle” and “The Might of Rome,” from the Gladiator soundtrack (CD, Decca 467-094-2). More impressive were the weight and density of the bass and the way it projected into the room. The Sophia’s woofer moved...
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more air per inch of diameter than any I have heard. The sense of space was also spectacular on "Each Small Candle," from Roger Waters' *In the Flesh* (CD, Columbia C2K 85233). This live recording had the immediacy and intimacy of a small-venue gig, but the Sophias put me squarely in the best seat in the vast auditorium.

Low-frequency heroics aside, the midrange is where the Sophia really shines. The lower and middle registers of Earl Wild's piano on Rachmaninoff's *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, from the splendid boxed set *Romantic Rachmaninoff* (LPs, Reader's Digest/RCA RDA-29A), spoke with alluring palpability and perfect clarity. And when a speaker gets the voices of both Emmylou Harris and Frank Zappa dead-bang right, it's a fine speaker indeed. Eva Cassidy's "Tall Ships" (CD, Blix Street 10046), was incredibly pure and touching through the Sophias. The speaker's resolution floor was strikingly low, its settling time incredibly quick. The Chord and Lambda amplifiers showed not only their distinctive strengths through the Sophias, but their decidedly individual personalities came through distinctly as well. The Chord's awesome quietness, speed, and dynamics were not shortchanged; nor was the Lambda's otherworldly solidity and continuous palpability.

Treble is a textbook example of balance. The only time the Sophia's Focal-sourced titanium-oxide tweeter called attention to itself was when there were a lot of high frequencies in the program material. Then it was smooth, well-detailed, and as civilized as the recording allowed it to be. It didn't highlight the darkish, strangely fluorescent-lit mix of Zappa's "Don't Eat the Yellow Snow," from *You Can't Do That On Stage Anymore*, Vol. 1 (CD, Rykodisc RCD 10561/62). Neither did it tone down the aggressive EQ on Sugar's addictive "Misty Blue" (Korean CD single, Starworld/Jeil JIDA-6616). The sense of air and space around soloist and orchestra on Ruggiero Ricci and the London Symphony's still-sensational *Carmen Suite* (LP, London CS 6165) and the Rachmaninoff were exceptional, though not quite up to the level of ribbons or Focal's own beryllium tweeter.

Compared to any speaker of similar price, the Sophia's ultimate trump card was its freakish dynamic range. Together with the Chords, the Sophia put large-scale music into the room with power that was uncannily convincing. Listening to "The Battle," I managed to light three of the Chord's front-panel warning lights, which had to have meant something like 1500W peaks. The Sophia sailed along, entirely in control, on peaks that my old RatShack meter said topped 105dBSPL.

There were some limits. Following a night of especially, uh, vigorous listening, there was something definitely wrong with the speakers. An ear to the midrange drivers while music was playing met with silence. When I shame-facedly informed Wilson's John Giolas that I'd blown up the review samples, he laughed and informed me that all I had done was to "open up" the heat-sunk Caddock resistors that Wilson uses for driver protection. According to Giolas, no one had ever managed this feat with the Sophia's midrange drivers before, but there's a first time for everything. New resistors were dispatched and installed, and the speakers were none the worse for wear. I suspect it's unlikely that anyone will pair the $75,000/pair, 2kW (into 4 ohms) Chords with Sophias in the real world, but it's good to know that the Wilsons are up to the task.

A few months ago, I spent a weekend with some friends who own a pair of the $45,900/pair Wilson MAXX2s that Michael Fremer reviewed in August. The Sophia sounds like nothing so much as a smaller-scale version of its big brother. They share the same highly detailed but natural, completely serene, and stress-free character. Where some earlier Wilson speakers rapped your knuckles and said "sit up straight and pay attention," the Sophia and MAXX2 invite you to lean back and lose yourself in the music. The bigger and much more expensive MAXX2 plays even bigger, with more resolution and dynamics—as, at four times the price, it should—but there's no doubting that the MAXX2 and Sophia are products of the same vision.

I repeat: The Wilson Audio Specialties Sophia is a very special loudspeaker, and so close to being a "super-speaker" that it's silly. Nearly $12,000 is expensive, but when you hear it, see it, and live with it long enough to come to know the total quality it offers, the Sophia is a bargain. I could live happily with the Sophias for a long time. I can offer nothing but the most fervent "Hear, hear!!" to JA's enthusiastic recommendation of three years ago.

—Paul Bolin
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It constitutes the only known live recording of the Quartet while it was a working band. The monophonic sound is clean and clear. From the opener, a slow, fervent search along the irregular contours of “Monk’s Mood,” it is startling simply to hear the two of them together. On paper, it should not have worked. Coltrane, in 1957, was a vertical player, a compulsive harmonicist. Monk was a linear, horizontal thinker, a melodist. Coltrane fired 16th notes, evenly spaced. Monk broke up rhythm and left holes of silence.

But it did work, sublimely. The two had instinctive rapport. Their contrasts were synergistic. After they punch out “Evidence” in rough unison, Coltrane runs off, proclaiming, and Monk chases with clanking, contrapuntal jabs. On “Creepescale With Nellie,” one of Monk’s jagged, suspended ur-ballads, Coltrane does not even solo, but allows his powerful voice to be additive, overlaying it on the theme statements, deepening Monk's message. Coltrane does not just run the chords of such compositions as “Nutty” and “Epistrophy” and “Bye-Ya,” but structures his solos on the fullness of Monk's melodic and rhythmic ideas. Often, Monk lays out and lets Coltrane fly on the updrafts of energy created by bassist Ahmed Abdul-Malik and drummer Shadow Wilson.

At such times, the fascination of this musical relationship lies in nothing night off. For such music, so well recorded, to suddenly surface feels like a miracle. Voice of America was allowed to record performances at Carnegie Hall for many years, free of charge, so long as the material was used exclusively for overseas broadcast. There are 50,000 Voice of America tapes in the Library of Congress, stored in a dark, climate-controlled room. No one knows for sure what is in there. Hopefully, Mr. Appelbaum will keep poking around.

—Thomas Conrad
DEBUSSY
Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune, Nocturnes, La Mer, Berceuse héroïque

Randolph Bowman, flute; Women of the May Festival Chorus, Robert Porco, dir.; Cincinnati Symphony; Paavo Järvi
Performance ****½
Sonics ***

On the heels of an earth-shattering Telarc recording of Stravinsky’s Rite of Spring, Paavo Järvi and the Cincinnati Symphony offer a fine collection of works by Debussy, but one that hardly registers with the same magnitude on the Richter scale as their previous effort, owing largely to an interpretive strategy that seeks out warm and fuzzy Impressionism to such a degree that the musical result is sometimes gutless and vacuous.

The playing is beautiful in any case. Warm strings support a commendable and lazy Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune that elicits sensual drowsiness, as it should. In Nocturnes, the mournful woodwinds of Nuages are framed by something approaching menace in the strings. Everyone steps lively in the second movement, Fêtes, but a bit more conviction might have cemented the party spirit. In the concluding Sirènes, buoyant violins and harp are somewhat hampered by the overly grounded Women of the May Festival Chorus, whose heavy sound is given too much presence in the mix. (This is somewhat corrected in the SACD multichannel track.)

Debussy’s dazzling oceanic voyage, La Mer, here unfolds grandly if somewhat laboriously. Still, the deliberate, epic pace of De l’aube à midi sur la mer is delightful and convincing, and the movement’s expansive finale captures the ocean’s endless possibility as well as any recording I have heard. Jeux de vagues is especially nimble, with lightness in the strings and playful woodwinds. The closing Dialogue surges robustly and further captures this masterpiece’s grand sweep. A reflective Berceuse héroïque closes the disc. This seldom-recorded work, written to honor Belgium’s independence, is written with the same magnitude on the Richter scale as their earlier work, and the quality of the product is undeniable.

This disc was recorded late in 1988, just five years before Augé’s early death at 53. In demand all over the world, she sang at the Met, La Scala, Carnegie Hall, Vienna Staatsoper, and the Wigmore and Royal Festival halls, to name just a few, and her repertoire ranged from Bach to Schoenberg. She was awarded a posthumous Grammy. Many recall her with fondness, and I’ve always been a fan of her singing—her pure, lightish voice had great character and remarkable flexibility, and her musicianship was impeccable. But I never heard much drama in her work until this superb re-release.

Haydn’s vocal music is undervalued; the problem probably lies with Mozart’s primacy. (When asked, in 1787, to compose an opera for the Prague Opera, Haydn refused, explaining that “I should be risking a good deal, for scarcely any man can brook comparison with the great Mozart.” The impresario took Haydn’s advice, and the result was Don Giovanni.) Haydn’s operas can be long-winded, and seeing that they were composed for a specific venue (the Esterházy Palace), they seem, somehow, bound. But in the cantatas recorded here he gave the world concise mini-operas, and the two arias are simply lovely.

“Son pietosa, son benina” is a sweet complaint by a girl who always tries to please but has to tolerate so much—poor womenfolk! Augé sings it lightly but with no soubrette pouting—it’s adorable. And “Solo e pensoso,” a Petrarch setting, finds the singer pondering on loneliness and nature and, eventually, that love is always with her. It’s gentle and smooth with an outbreak of flawless coloratura near the end, and the clarinets under Hogwood add a fine touch of color.

But the masterpieces are the cantatas. The most modest of the three, Miseri mi, miser patria, laments the horror of war. A sad, resigned recitative gives way to a beautifully melodic andante, which Augé sings with great warmth and a welcome lack of melodrama. That is followed by images of fire and destruction, filled with florid expression that never seems mere decoration. Scena di Berenice takes the title character through madness at the impending death of her beloved, and Augé immediately puts weight into her tone from top to bottom. She spits out the self-lacerating text and expresses the drama vividly through Haydn’s extremely wide vocal range and fearful coloratura and floriture. This is serious stuff.

Finally, there’s the celebrated, 18-minute Arianna a Naxos, an ideal mixture of vocal and orchestral textures. Much of the tale of Ariadne’s abandonment by Theseus is expressed in recitative, and Augé gauges every tone, every word, naturally and conversationally. Without her ever bending a
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note, we understand the heroine’s grief, helplessness, and despair, and the final aria, in which she pleads for death, is a grand, manic showcase for voice and feelings.

It isn’t only Augér’s ability to communicate all of the varied emotions this music demands, but also her refusal to resort to histrionics or affectations that make this recital so effective. With the instrumentalists playing with as much verve—or reserve—as Augér, and an acoustic that favors neither players nor singers but features both honestly and with warmth, this CD is a knockout.

—Robert Levine

rock/pop

RICKIE LEE JONES

Duchess of Coolsville: An Anthology


Performance *****

Sonics ****

Only in the lyrics of Bruce Springsteen will you find more heroes, angels, and images such as “Eddie’s got one crazy eye, that turns him into a cartoon” than you will in the songs of Rickie Lee Jones. A singer-songwriter best known for her little-girl voice, her radio hit “Chuck E.’s in Love,” and the fact that the late and very great Lowell George provided her with her big break when he recorded her “Easy Money” on his solo album, Jones eschewed celebrity and commercialism, actively dodged a nascent rivalry with Joni Mitchell, and in general chose how and when her jazz-folk music progressed. Her career path, not to mention her powerful songwriting, continues to influence singers as diverse as Jewel and Michelle Shocked. From jazzy scat workouts like “Woody and Dutch on the Slow Train to Peking” to evocative hipster miniatures like “The Last Chance Texaco,” with its cars-whizzing-by vocal effects, the low-key Jones’ rich and varied work has made her a cult hero, and also made for a number of uneven albums studded with more mainstream moments such as “We Belong Together” (from Pirates, 1981) and the ubiquitous “Chuck E.’s in Love” (from her self-titled debut, 1979).

The same kitchen-sink principle applies to this 48-track survey, which Jones assembled by ordering the songs alphabetically, by title. Any sense of how she developed as a songwriter, or the way her often carefully sequenced albums worked, is jettisoned in favor of a jumble of her soulful, unpredictable vocal gems. Some of the resultant unexpected juxtapositions—on disc 2, the spidery “Scary Chinese Movie” (from Ghostylloud, 1997) is followed by the sad and serious “Skeletons” (from Pirates)—add another welcome

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layer of spontaneity to the work of a performer who's spent a lifetime following her muse and making her own rules. A disc of soundtrack cuts, guest appearances, and unreleased tracks is interesting for fans but is otherwise unremarkable. More impactful are the new remasterings, made just for this set, which add much life and dynamic range, and are yet another reason to own this long overdue and aptly titled career survey.

—Robert Baird

CHARLIE POOLE
You Ain’t Talkin’ to Me: Charlie Poole and the Roots of Country Music

Performance ★★★★½
Sonic ★★½

While vintage country blues is widely available on CD reissues, old-time country music has been largely neglected, especially by the major labels. A welcome exception is Columbia/Legacy’s ambitious three-disc Charlie Poole boxed set, which sheds new light on the brief career of this seminal singer and banjo player, whose late-1920s recordings helped popularize the string-band style and pave the way for modern bluegrass.

Produced and annotated by bluegrass-turned-klezmer musician Henry Sapoznik, You Ain’t Talkin’ to Me is an idiosyncratic package whose most generic feature, perhaps, is the cover illustration by cartoonist R. Crumb. The CDs rest on a flimsy cushion of folded cardboard inside an oversized mock cigar box, though there's no indication that Poole had anything to do with cigars. The music is not presented in chronological order, and it's not all by Poole: discs 2 and 3 include tracks by different artists, most illustrating Poole's sources or his influence on other musicians, some just displaying related banjo styles of the day.

In many ways, the jug-eared, boyish-looking Poole was the archetypical rounder, an irresistible rambler and hell-raiser who had drunk himself to death by the age of 39. Born in Randolph County, North Carolina, Poole was working in a cotton mill in Spray, near the Virginia border, when he formed the North Carolina Ramblers with fiddler Posey Rorer around 1918. In July 1925, the group, with Norman Woodlief on guitar, made its first recordings—for Columbia, in New York.

That session produced "Don't Let Your Deal Go Down Blues," which sold more than 100,000 copies, making Poole a star and opening the market for other string bands. Listening to the song today—an entertaining but unspectacular hodgepodge of more or less traditional verses set to a sprightly dance tune and driven mainly by Rorer's fiddle—
it's hard to tell what the fuss was about. It may have been sheer novelty: only a few string bands had recorded previously, and Poole's drawling, nasal tenor and claw-hammer banjo epitomized the backwoods sound.

By the time the Ramblers returned to the studio in September 1926, Woodlief had been replaced by guitarist Roy Harvey, whose buoyant bass lines propelled some of the group's finest recordings. Among these is "White House Blues," about the assassination of President McKinley in 1901, with Rorer's lilting fiddle and Poole's dry vocal imparting an eerie air of melancholy to lines such as "Roosevelt in the White House, drinkin' out of a silver cup / McKinley in the graveyard, he'll never wake up." Another hit from the same sessions was "Good-Bye Booze," a turn-of-the-century temperance song that Poole never lived up to; a slightly earlier and considerably better version by Gid Tanner and Fate Norris, with different lyrics, is also included.

In July 1927, the Ramblers recorded "You Ain't Talkin' to Me," in a sense Poole's most characteristic performance. Poole's version is based on white vaudevillian Eddie Morton's 1909 recording (also included here) of a song by African-American songwriters Mat Marshall and Shelton Brooks, one of several similar pieces published under such titles as "I May Be Crazy but I Ain't No Fool." Poole alters the melody and garbles the lyrics, but it's his deadpan delivery that transforms the song from a routine comedy number to a chilling, almost cruel declaration of indifference—Seinfeld without the laughs.

After Rorer quit in 1928 in a dispute over royalty payments, Poole tried to update his sound with an expanded band, recording for other labels under pseudonyms when Columbia balked. But his sales declined, due in part to competition from groups his success had inspired. Returning to Columbia and the trio format, he showed some of his old fire on songs such as "Milwaukee Blues," but with the Great Depression setting in, Columbia dropped him and he returned to the cotton mills. In 1931 he got an offer to record for films and celebrated the laughs.

Sapoznik's notes make much of Poole's instrumental skill, but as the comparison tracks reveal, Poole, who permanently injured his right hand catching a baseball, could not rival such banjoists as ragtime virtuoso Fred Van Eps or country-music godfather Uncle Dave Macon. His three-finger picking on "Flop Eared Mule" anticipates Earl Scruggs' later bluegrass style, but for the most part, Poole sticks to the old claw-hammer technique and lets his fiddlers take the instrumental breaks.

Not as primal as Dock Boggs or as polished as Jimmie Rodgers, Poole was a transitional figure who rearranged folk and Tin Pan Alley songs to create a new, highly individualistic sound. His 1929 recording of "Sweet Sunny South" is modern compared to DaCosta Woltz's 1927 rendition, while his "Girl I Left in Sunny Tennessee," from 1925, seems old-fashioned next to the 1930 version by the Floyd County Ramblers.

The British JSP label released an even more comprehensive, 4-CD Poole box in 2004, but You Ain't Talkin' to Me is the more attractive collection, and not only because of its beautifully illustrated booklet. Besides providing insight into the early development of country music, the other artists' material offers rewards of its own. For example, there's Charlie Parker and Mack Woolbright's "The Man That Wrote Home Sweet Home Never Was a Married Man," a 1927 adaptation of another old Eddie Morton song that's richer and funnier than anything Poole recorded.

—Larry Birnbaum

SON VOLT

There was cause for rejoicing last year when Jay Farrar announced that he would be working once again with Son Volt, the band he fronted for the half decade immediately following his split with Uncle Tupelo. Son Volt had recorded a trio of albums together and had never formally broken up, though Farrar had recorded four solo albums in the new millennium. But the buzz began when the group—Farrar, drummer Mike Heidorn, multi-instrumentalist Dave Boquist, and bassist Jim Boquist—recorded "Something" for the 2004 Alejandro Escovedo tribute album, Por...
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Vida. The reunion was real enough for Farrar to announce it on his website. Then, suddenly, everything changed. Not only was the band not getting back together, but Farrar was creating an entirely new unit and calling it—Son Volt. Thus began the alt-country acolytes' rending of garments and gnashing of teeth.

What Farrar did, however, was not simply recast the band—with guitarist Brad Rice, bassist Andrew Duplantis, and drummer Dave Bryson—but reshape it entirely. Where Son Volt 1.0 was marked by touches of violin, lap steel, and dobro, version 2.0 is a hard-rocking guitar army. It's not just a new lineup; it's a new band entirely.

Okemah and the Melody of Riot is Farrar's most explicitly political album and Son Volt's best effort since Trace. "Been thinking about the ozone, thinking 'bout lead / Thinking about the future and what to do then," Farrar sings on the opening cut, "Bandages & Scars." He cites the "words of Woody Guthrie" as a possible corrective for our wicked ways, clarifying somewhat the album's quizzical title: Guthrie was born in Okemah, Oklahoma. The "melody of riot" presumably is the music made by Guthrie and like-minded musicians such as Farrar.

"Jet Pilot" is a scathing attack on our boy president, though it never mentions him by name. "Junior liked to let his hair down," Farrar mocks, "Only trouble is, word gets around." He's more direct in "Endless War," claiming there's "no moral face" to our current direction.

Farrar's records, either with Son Volt or on his own, have tended to be bleak and melancholy, but Okemah contains a pair of beautiful, attitudinally upbeat tunes. "Afterglow 61" is about driving the highway from Mark Twain's
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Hannibal, Missouri (just north of Farrar's own current residence, St. Louis), to the Mississippi Delta. "6 String Belief," meanwhile, deals with the healing power of rock'n'roll and grassroots politics.

On the closing track, "World Waits for You," Farrar practices what he preaches, encouraging listeners to "Find strength from the words of those that went before / Take what you need but leave even more." That's a sentiment that Okemah's favorite son could certainly get behind.

For those keen to compare the current version of Son Volt with the previous one, *Retrospective: 1995–2000* couldn't have come at a better time. The 20-track collection contains all of the band's stone classics, among them "Windfall" (perhaps the high-water mark of the alt-country movements of the last 15 years), "Drown," "Route," "Tear Stained Eye," and "Loose String" (the latter two in demo versions). The set also contains a number of Son Volt rarities, including versions of Del Reeves' "Lookin' at the World Through a Windshield," Townes Van Zandt's "Rex's Blues," and—a nice connection to the new CD—Woody Guthrie's "I've Got to Know."

The Escovedo track is somewhat conspicuous by its absence, but *Retrospective* does its job and then some. Pair it with Okemah and the Melody of Riot and you get a look at a band that not only has a great past, but a great future as well.

—Daniel Durchholz

**THE SOUNDMTRACK OF OUR LIVES**

*Origin Vol. 1*


**Performance ****

**Sonicst ****

Epiphanies are made of this: It's January 2003 and yours truly has settled in for some late-night Letterman viewing; roughly 3½ minutes after the musical guest is introduced, I'm fumbling around on the floor for my jaw. The band is Sweden's The Soundtrack of Our Lives, the song is "Sister Surround" (from their third album, *Behind the Music*), and when I recover, I grab a pen and scribble down this memo: "like the Who, Stooges, and Sex Pistols all jamming on the Stones'..."
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‘Street Fighting Man.’

TSOOL has been kicking around Europe since 1995; after BTM got picked up for US distribution in ‘02, the group landed a surprise Grammy nomination. Origin Vol 1 aims to pick up where BTM left off, momentum-wise, and it opens with a killer one-two punch, the glamy “Believe I’ve Found” and the churning “Transcendental Suicide”—the latter an irresistible Who-meets-Blue-Oyster-Cult anthem rife with pumping bass, pounding ivories, clarion guitars, thumping tambourine, and vigorous vocals. Roughly three-quarters of an hour later—the CD includes a pair of bonus tracks not included on the overseas edition, released last fall in Europe—the listener’s taken in everything from woozy, candy-floss pop (“Midnight Children,” featuring slinky ’60s songstress Jane Birkin on guest vocals) to Mellotron-laden, Beatles-esque psychedelia (“Lone Summer Dreams”) to brawny, convulsive hard rock (the MC5-like “Royal Explosion”).

TSOOL wears its influences on its sleeve, but that didn’t seem to bother the fans crowding the stage at a March 2005 performance I took in. As the group thumped out “Transcendental Suicide” and “Sister Surround,” I looked around. Sure enough, mouths were wide open, either awestruck or yelping ecstatically. I was witnessing something that was pure, unadulterated rock’n’roll. This group has taken its inspirations and alchemized ‘em into something uniquely visceral, full of menace and mystery. Epiphanies are made of this.

—Fred Mills

STARS
Set Yourself on Fire

Performance ***½, Sonics ***

Stars, the Montreal-based group that shares space in the Arts&Crafts stable with indie-popp brethren Broken Social Scene and Apostle of Hustle, attempt to move from the head to the heart to the very source of physical and emotional feeling with their third album, Set Yourself on Fire.

Before a single note is played, we hear a courageous spoken-word imperative: “When there’s nothing left to burn, you have to set yourself on fire.” After a few listens—perhaps after you’ve
allowed yourself to accept the kind of romantic cheese and melodrama that you hoped to leave behind in your high school locker—you'll know that Set Yourself on Fire apologizes for nothing, leaves no scar alone, and simply begs to be played, scratched, and fondled over and over again.

The album itself is a chance meeting, a reunion with an ex-lover whose name is almost lost. It's a plea to feel all the pain and excitement and confusion of such an encounter—not to indulge in the doldrums of wallowing, but in an attempt to live fully. The male/female conversational duets, exquisitely performed by Torquil Campbell and Amy Millan, lure the listener into choosing a role and acting along as the singers exchange points of view. In the opener, "Your Ex-Lover is Dead," they finally come together to agree: "I gave what I gave / I'm not sorry I met you / I'm not sorry it's over / I'm not sorry there's nothing to save."

In the title track, which easily matches the sweetness and danceability of Postal Service's 2003 anthem "Such Great Heights" (which also employs male/female vocal interplay), Campbell's nearly asexual, nearly robotic vocal is surrounded by Evan Cranley's driving bass lines and drummer Pat McGee's disco-punkish breaks, all the while reminding that, no matter where we are, "there is only one thing / there is only one thing / there is only one thing." Within the context Stars has created, one can be sure that that special thing is love.

Stars reach their own greatest heights in "One More Night," carving out space so grandiose and brutally beautiful—lush strings and blankets of ascending horns suddenly dropping off to be entirely swallowed by a simple bass line, tight drumming, and that inimitable vocal duo—that even the likes of Chris Martin's Coldplay would have to nod, smile, and cry.

The album's liner notes conclude, "By the time you hear this, the world might be ending, or beginning...whatever happens, BURN." Is Stars over the top? Yes. But this kind of love leaves no room for regret—and what if they're right?

—Stephen Mejias

**Dwight Twilley**

**47 Moons**


TT: 55:37 Performance ***' 6 Sonics ****
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As there ever been a showbiz career more snakebit than Dwight Twilley's? A power-pop superstar in the making when he teamed with Phil Seymour for such songs as "I'm on Fire" and "Twilley Don't Mind" three decades ago, the Tulsa, Oklahoma, native is today regarded as a cult figure who woulda-shoulda-been as big a star as his Shelter labelmate and friend Tom Petty.

Twilley was sabotaged by happenstance time and again: "Shark (In the Dark)," the follow-up to "I'm on Fire," was dumped for fear the hit film Jaws would render it a novelty; an appearance on Don Kirshner's Rock Concert was shelved due to controversy over the headlining Sex Pistols; Seymour, fed up, split the band and later died of lymphoma.

Amazingly, the years have accorded Twilley a few triumphs, such as the hit single "Girls" and a cover of his "Why You Wanna Break My Heart," which appeared on the multiplatinum soundtrack album of Wayne's World.

47 Moons is Twilley's first album in four years and his first for the Digital Musicworks International label. In the booklet, he notes that the disc "took 1 year, 3 months, 2 weeks, 2 days, 1 hour and 36 minutes to create." It sounds as if the same sort of precision that went into timing its creation went into the creation itself. Twilley sang and played most of the instruments himself, aided by original Dwight Twilley Band guitarist Bill Pitcock IV, longtime drummer Jerry Naifeh, and several studio hands.

The classic Twilley sound is still here, with layers of keyboards, guitars, and chiming bells creating a springboard for the singer's rapt vocals. The album opens with the taut rocker "Better Watch Out," and there are other high-energy tunes as well, including "Flippin'" and the voyeuristic confession "Jackie Naked in the Window."

But much of 47 Moons is given over to lush ballads such as the title track, "King of the Mountain," and "Ice Captain." It's easy to get lost in those songs' sonic splendor, but the spell doesn't always last. Half of the album's dozen tracks extend beyond the five-minute mark. Had they been reined in a little bit, or perhaps mixed with a few more uptempo tunes, 47 Moons would be pure magic. As it stands, it's still a welcome return for a great singer who has seldom gotten his due.

—Daniel Durchholz

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—Daniel Durchholz
KEITH JARRETT

Radiance

Keith Jarrett, piano
Performance ★★★★★

It is surprising, in the liner booklet to Radiance, to see the photos of the covers of Keith Jarrett's other completely improvised solo piano albums and to realize that, in 33 years, there have been only 10. Jarrett's "solo concerts" are, after all, a genre unto themselves, as fearless and detailed an exposure of the improviser's creative process as exists in recorded jazz. Radiance is the 11th, and the first in nearly a decade. It contains a complete, unedited 100-minute performance recorded in 2002 in Osaka, Japan. There are also excerpts from a concert in Tokyo recorded three days later. (The complete Tokyo concert will be released on a DVD, ECM's first, this fall.)

Radiance differs from its 10 predecessors in that it consists of "discrete pieces" (13, in the case of the Osaka concert) rather than huge continuous arcs of invention. Jarrett, in his liner notes, insists that each piece is "drawn from" the previous piece. But there are no connecting threads so obvious as melodic or motivic content. Jarrett's spontaneous elements conjugate through creative resonance and sparks of spiritual insight, not through linear musical logic.

Many of those elements are sublime. In Part 1, disparate sets of concurrent variables (left hand, right hand) coalesce. In Parts 3 and 6, new songs are uncovered that have always been there. In Part 9, the process of investigation slows over a few suggestive figures, turned and twisted in the light. In Part 10, 13½ minutes evaporate in a seance of lyric distillation. In Osaka's final section, Part 13, firm affirmations quietly ascend to resolutions. But as with all of Jarrett's improvised solo concerts, along the journey he must find his way. There are forays into thwarted efforts, notes in big awkward blocks as transitions, dissonant clusters like broken fragments displayed but not assembled, scurrying keyboard crises, and even headlong momentums in which, for long moments, he sounds helplessly trapped.

Radiance has more dead zones than most of Jarrett's solo albums, and does not reach the cumulative sweeping power of the best ones, such as The Köln Concert (1975) or Vienna Concert.
But it is a demanding, transformative listening adventure. Its many breakthroughs to the beauty of musical truth make it Jarrett’s most important recording in the new millennium.

—Thomas Conrad

**ÖZEL TÜRKBAS**

How to Make Your Husband a Sultan: Belly Dance with ÖZEL TÜRKBAS

Özel Türkbas, finger cymbals, vocals; Mustafa Kandirali, clarinet; Cevdet Cagla, violin; Ahmet Yatman, kanun; Tank Bulut, piano; Gerhard Rudolph, bass; Leszlo Kubinyi, drums


**Performance ****

Sonics ***

The cover will strike some as kitsch, others as politically incorrect: Who’s the big-haired brunette with the coin-encrusted bra, gauzy leg drapery, high heels, and come-hither look? Özel Türkbas, the unabashed siren, demonstrates a routine suitable for banquet or bedroom in a series of liner photos, and sings with alluring enthusiasm on one track of this 1960s bachelor-pad staple, which purportedly sold 150,000 copies in its initial release. But the real action, and undoubtedly the reason playboys of that era kept the LP on hand, is the genuinely beguiling, not to say decadent, Turkish Gypsy nightclub music provided by Mustafa Kandirali’s sextet.

Kandirali, born in 1930 and nicknamed “Turkey’s Benny Goodman,” and Ahmet Yatman, who plays the kanun, a

hammered or plucked dulcimer, are frequently cited as leading instrumentalists of the fasıl genre, a popularization of Turkish classical music. As in most such déclassé forms, refinement and restraint take a back seat to expansion and exultation. That can be a good thing, if invention and emotion are not lost.

Kandirali doesn’t lose them. More like klezmer’s Naftule Brandwein than Swing King Goodman, Kandirali retains his instrument’s tonal purity while fingering improbably intricate lines, suspensefully held long notes, and passionate embellishments. In eight tracks, including a 17-minute piece intended to accompany a complete belly dance, Kandirali’s modal improvisations range from chalumeau meditations to keening squeals finishing off bebop-like flights. Yatman strikes or plucks fascinating counterpoint, on one tune cat-scratching a mean glissando.

With most of the pieces lasting three minutes or less, there’s some sense of abbreviation (“Anadolu” ends with a fadeout); one wants this ensemble to dig in and stretch out. But the group interplay is fine and unforced; the rhythm section, which in “Kandirali Çiftetelli” is led by Çagla’s violin and seems to include both a cylindrical darabouka and a frame drum (sounds as if there’s an uncredited percussionist), grooves mercilessly, and can pull off mad accelerandos or resolute slowdowns without sweat. The piano and bass are underrecorded, and the overall sound is more reverberant than necessary, but this album introduced Turkish Roma fervor to America, and still serves that purpose well.

—Howard Mandel

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Michael Fremer
Stereophile magazine

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World Radio History
Locus Design Group
DampClamp

Editor: Thank you for spending time with our products. Michael Fremer's review was filled with some very good information regarding the resonances that abound in a vinyl playback system and from where they originate.

In designing the DampClamp we used constrained-layered damping, which is essentially a sandwich of two similar materials separated by a viscoelastic material. The medium chosen for our weight was aluminum machined by one of the pre-eminent machine shops in the nation, which generally does military and medical contracting work. Constrained-layer damping converts energy (in this case, low-level vibration) to heat when the weight flexes on encountering vibration. This causes the damping material to change shape and "shears" the adjacent material sections.

As MF surmised, the DampClamp is not suitable for all turntables and analog setups. Many sprung-suspension tables will not be able to be balanced correctly with the DampClamp in place due to the clamp's extra weight—a BasiClamp would most certainly be a better choice when using a sprung-suspension table. We also encourage potential purchasers to contact us before ordering to ensure that we can accommodate the height of the spindle of their chosen table. And, as MF noted, it is important when you spin an LP with either weight in place that you are careful to not let the stylus run all the way out to the end of the runout groove, as a nasty sound will most certainly be heard when the headshell contacts the weight! In our prototyping and listening tests of both weights, we kept going back to the final production size, and we wish you and Stereophile all the best.

Bill O'Connell
Morningstar Audio Imports
www.morningstaraudio.com

Cary Audio Design CD-303/300

Editor: Wow, now that's some kinda review! Once again, with the CD-303/300 review, you all have put a smile on my face. If I may, I would like to use this privilege of writing in "Manufacturers' Comments" to add some further technical information to add some further technical insight into the Cary Audio CD-303/300. Hopefully, this will not read as ad copy.

First, I am not a digital design engineer. I am the audio-crazed analog tube and transistor designer of all the Classic Cary Audio products. I believed that long-held notions about the sonic limitations of standard CD playback could be overcome. I yearned for the startling credibility of the natural ambiances of performance spaces, the spontaneous emotion of the human voice, the sinuous bowing of strings, and the visceral brunt of percussion—credibility I enjoyed with my good of record player. So in 1997 my partner, Billy Wright, and I decided to make a serious investment in digital designs and engineering talent. Our players needed to be all Cary: ground-up, fresh, new designs. No mid-fi players with thick aluminum panels and trick wires and caps, but an absolute fresh approach to CD-player design. The first player was the CD-303. This player expanded the 16-bit audio signal to 24 bits and featured multiple balanced parallel DACs powered by seven individual regulated power supplies, Pacific Microsonics PMD100 digital filtering, and proprietary digital engines. This was all Cary.

Well, now we have eight years of Cary Audio Design digital CD-player designs with the new CD-303/300. I believe, as Brian Damkroger does, that the CD-303/300 transcends previous Cary CD players, which were well respected for their own musical virtues. This sonic achievement is not an accident. We use a specially selected CD/DVD-ROM drive that allows multiple laser passes to be made, ensuring correct data recovery from the disc. This improves the standard CD error-correction capability a hundredfold by allowing complete buffeting of the recovered data.

The digital signal path incorporates both proprietary error correction/concealment circuitry and Cary's acclaimed Resolution Enhancement digital signal processor (DSP). Here, the 16-bit audio signal is expanded to 24 bits. Upsampling from the standard 44.1kHz rate to 96, 192, 384, 512, or 768kHz occurs in one of the three 48-bit processors operating at 190 MIPS. The overall DSP algorithm with selectable upsampling supports D/A conversion filtering far above the range of human hearing. The result is the elimination of audible sonic artifacts and the release of pure music from both HDCD and standard "Red Book" CDs.

Well, guess I have used my allotment of manufacturer's words. In the words of John Atkinson, "Overall, the Cary CD-303/300 offers excellent measured performance." Then Brian Damkroger proclaims, "The CD-303/300 is a superb CD player that competes with the best I've heard. I'd be happy to install it in my system and never look back." Then the main man, Art Dudley, closes with "At its price of $4000, the Cary CD-303/300 should disappoint no one and tickle many: an easy recommendation." I say, "I love it!" Thanks again for the privilege of this space. I also say, "Stereophile Rocks!"

God Bless you all.

Dennis J. Had
President, Cary Audio Design

Peak Consult Empress

Editor: I am writing to thank Wes Phillips for taking the time to review the Peak Consult Empress loudspeaker, and also to thank John Atkinson for his measurements and technical observations. "In fact, in its precision and balance, the Empress reminded me of nothing so much..."
as a speaker that combined the ideals of a precision minimonitor with a speaker that actually goes down to 30Hz," wrote WP. For those of us who have, at one time or another, fallen under the spell of a truly great monitor, this statement speaks volumes. In fact, when I heard the first Empress at our CES show together in 2004 (Stereovox, Peak, Lamm, Classé), I was really struck by how this three-way floorstander was able to completely "disappear" and project a huge, deep soundstage while maintaining living, breathing, three-dimensional images within. Before I heard the Empress, I was convinced that this kind of performance was the exclusive domain of finely crafted two-way monitors.

Coupling WP's listening notes ("This was audio illusionering at its very best...") with JAs "Measurements" notes ("The Peak Consult Empress offers impressive measured performance overall, indicating some respectable audio engineering talent") reminded me of my first impression of Peak Consult's engineering philosophy: namely, that Peak offers a "have your cake and eat it, too" proposition. They do that another way "point-source" monitor. Many have tried but few have achieved this. I believe Peak's accomplishment is a superlative example of musical achievement.

I'm grateful that we were given the opportunity to share Peak Consult with Wes, John, and Stereophile's readership. For those who require china-cabinet quaking bass, there exist models above the Empress that will achieve this without sacrificing the basics of musical resolution. The essential soul of a Peak speaker, no matter how large or seemingly complex, is the magic of a truly superb two-way "point-source" monitor. Many have tried but few have achieved this. I believe Peak's accomplishment is a superlative example of musical achievement.

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“Whenever people were in the control room talking business, they never paid any attention to me. I heard a lot of things…”

Invisible, heard but not seen—that’s what most sound engineers have always been.

One consequence of Mark Moor- mann’s 2003 film, Tom Dowd & The Language of Music, is that suddenly the pioneering sound engineers are finally being recognized for their vital role in shaping much of the past half-century’s worth of popular music.

The quote above, from engineer Jim Malloy’s new self-published book, Playback, refers to Frank Sinatra’s cronies, who, defying the singer’s hair trigger temper, spoke freely in front of Malloy. It’s that kind of insider access that makes Playback a fun, informative read. Based on notes Malloy, 74, kept during his 30 years as an engineer, Playback is 123 pages of reminiscence that, while not professionally written or even printed, is a rough-cut window into the music business. Less the artistic force that some engineers like Dowd came to be, Malloy was more a quiet technician, content to get the very best sound down on tape and leave the artistic judgments to others. By the end of the book, after he’s told off Benny Goodman and been threatened by Ike Turner’s bodyguards, you come away sure that Malloy is a mensch.

“My recording career was so unusual because everybody, I guess, liked me so much,” surmised Malloy in a recent interview from his home in Nashville. “All these artists and I would hang out. It was an unusual situation for an engineer to become that friendly with all those people.”

Friendly indeed. Malloy’s “great ride,” as he calls it in Playback’s introduction, began with a recording of gospel great Mahalia Jackson, in what he thinks was about 1957 (dates are not his strong point). That ride has yet to end. He recently finished a recording of 87-year-old country singer Eddy Arnold that’s just been released by RCA. Between Jackson and Arnold he recorded an impossibly long and impressive list of artists, including Roy Orbison, Johnny Cash, Frank Sinatra, George Jones, Louis Armstrong, The Beach Boys, and many more. He even worked for animators Hanna-Barbara, recording Ann-Margret singing a song that appeared in an episode of The Flintstones. He’s the only person to ever win both a Grammy for Engineering (for Henry Mancini’s Charade, 1963) and the Country Music Association’s Producer of the Year award (for Sammi Smith’s “Help Me Make It Through the Night,” 1971). He worked with Mancini (whom he calls “Hank”) on The Pink Panther (1964), and engineered Elvis Presley’s Grammy-winning gospel album, How Great Thou Art (1967).

The book is divided into entries that focus on individual artists. He recorded them mostly in mono and two track which meant almost no fixing or mixing down. In general, although most of these entries list the microphones used to record each artist, Playback is not about the minutiae of the recording process.

Playback is full of funny, often telling snatches of life with the stars. Strangely enough, when they’re not being ignored or denigrated, engineers, whom the musicians tend to see as middlemen unaligned with either the record label or the artists’ management, often become their confidants. Elvis, for example, seems to have opened up to Malloy at one point, acknowledging to the engineer that he knew that his career as a musician was being crippled by a restrictive publishing deal. But when it comes to Presley’s infamous dark side, Malloy remains puzzled.

“I don’t know about all that,” Malloy told me on the phone. “Some guys around him were rude, but he was one of the nicest guys I’d ever met in my life. It blows my mind to hear these stories. I never did see any of it. But then, I never recorded him again after December ’69. Last I saw him, his weight was down and he was fine.”

Frank Sinatra, not too surprisingly, had no compunction about displaying his less than savory side. To me, Malloy recounted a story that’s not in the book: “One day I was recording Sammy Davis, and I was just getting ready to fade out this last number. I was bringing everything down slow ‘cause it was a fade thing, and all of a sudden I heard the door into the studio and I thought, ‘Oh God, the janitor’s opened the door or something,’ and then the door slammed, which just ruined the take. I had mikes hung high because of the strings, I had about 40 pieces in there. Frank came in leading a gorilla—this guy dressed in a gorilla suit. Andy Williams used to record across the hall from us for his TV show, and he was using a gorilla, and Frank got this guy to come with him. He said, ‘Hey, Sammy, I brought some of your relations to see you.’ Of course, everybody in the band laughed, but even though it was a sick joke, they felt like they had to laugh because they knew how Frank was.”

Always glad to befriend the artists he recorded, Malloy says that in the end what really brought him satisfaction was watching players such as Miles Davis react positively to hearing themselves on tape.

“I always thought, ‘Well, at least I made a believer out of you.’ ”

---

Jim Malloy and his wife Judith.
"Ten minutes after spinning the first CD... I realized my mouth was open."

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