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“BRIDGE WILL BE RAISED AT 1:45 PM,” said the road sign. I looked at my watch. 1:35. I sighed and let my right foot become even moreleader.

I was driving back to New York from North Carolina, chasing a winter storm northward. I wanted to get to Peter Bruning's place in Philadelphia before the roads froze over, to drop off a pair of vintage AR3a speakers for him to review, as well as pick up an antique EICO HF81 integrated amp for measurement. The last thing I needed was to be stuck in stalled traffic on the Washington Beltway.

North Carolina? Raleigh, to be specific, where I'd taken part in two evenings of music presented by dealer Audio Advice. Why? I feel it's time for action.

Back in Stereophile's mid-October e-mail newsletter (see www.stereophile.com/images/newsletter/1005b5thp.html), I had alerted readers to a call to action by the High-End Community, from a group led by retailer Ted Lindblad. “Are the doomsayers right? Is high-end audio headed for extinction? Is it true that people no longer respond to high-quality music reproduction?” asked Ted and his colleagues in their open letter. “Not at all,” was their answer. “It's up to us to prove the doomsayers wrong. And we can.” They went on to announce the formation of the “A5”—the American Association for the Advancement of the Audio Arts.

Following the ultimate failure of the Academy for the Advancement of High End Audio in the 1990s, I have my doubts about industry-wide organizations. But I certainly agree that a disconnect has developed between the audio industry and its traditional customer base. I offered some thoughts on this subject in January's "As We See It," concluding that "perhaps the high-end audio industry's woes stem from its no longer being able to persuade baby boomers that they need what it has to offer."

Jim Spainhour, of Musical Fidelity distributor Signal Path, is convinced that, at least to some extent, the audio industry has forgotten the importance of demonstrating the benefits of what it has to offer. He therefore initiated a series of events he calls "Music Matters," in which manufacturers, joined by Stereophile writers and editors, present evenings at participating dealers in which music is played back in a congenial setting with the highest possible quality.

The first such event took place last August, at Seattle's Definitive Audio, with Michael Fremer representing the magazine. The second event was the one I attended, at Audio Advice. There must have been 150 audiophiles and music lovers present over the two evenings, enjoying good Italian wine, good Italian food, and good music. Lots of music.

Wilson Audio Specialties' Peter McGrath played some of his incomparable live recordings in surround sound; Chris Browder of B&W and Dave Nauber of Classe played some of their favorite recordings on B&W 802D speakers and Classe's stylish new electronics; Walter Schofield from Mark Levinson put together a sys tem based on the Harman company's new gear; and the first pair of Wilson Sophia Mk.2s to leave the factory; and Transparent's Karen Summer provided all the cabling.

I played the hi-rez masters of some of my Stereophile recordings on the B&W-Classé system, and on Wilson WATT/Puppy 7s driven by a Musical Fidelity kW750, each of these comigos driven by the SD/DPD output of my Mac PowerBook and Metric Halo FireWire rig fed to a Musical Fidelity DAC. I enjoyed people being able to hear my recordings in their original full 24-bit/88.2kHz resolution, particularly tracks from upcoming albums by Cantus and pianist Robert Silverman. But what impressed me the most was how much fun it was—how much everyone got from listening so long to music with such a high quality of sound. This seems so obvious, but it's something that the industry, pursuing the bucks, has perhaps lost sight of.

Thanks, Jim, for inviting me; and thanks, Leon, Gregg, Brandon, and everyone at Audio Advice, for hosting such a stimulating event. I hope it has the necessary effect.

Bridges of People

As I was reading G. Matthew Wong's letter analyzing the statistics of Stereophile's equipment reviews (p.11), it struck me that the year just passed saw, and the year just started saw, a significant number of anniversaries. Magazine publishing traditionally suffers from a high rate of staff turnover. Yet as I checked my back issues for people's starting dates, it struck me that Stereophile is unusual in how long so many of its people have been bringing you their thoughts.

Some might regard the list below as evidence of aural ossification. I disagree. While the hairs on some of our heads are definitely acquiring a distinguished-looking silver sheen, Stereophile is wider and deeper in its coverage of audio-related subjects than it ever has been. We have outgrown our paper pages, expanding into the most fact-filled audio website in existence, along with reader forums, daily blogs, an annual Buyer's Guide, and our bimonthly e-newsletters. We release recordings. We promote an annual Home Entertainment Show. And every day, we look for ways to further expand our franchise—participating in the "Music Matters" evenings, for example. None of this would be possible without a committed long-term team of talented individuals.

So I feel it appropriate to offer my recognition, in order of appearance on our stage, of: Sam Tellig (it's been 23 years since his first column on inexpensive gear appeared, in January 1983); Larry Greenhill, who's been with Stereophile 22 years (his first review was of Tandberg, Nakamichi, and B&O cassette decks, in January 1984); ad salesperson Laura LoVecchio, who joined us from Audio magazine in January 1988; Robert Deutsch, who crossed over from our record-review staff 15 years ago with reviews of Conrad-Johnson and Threshold preamps, in December 1991; photographer Eric Swanson, whose first Stereophile cover shot appeared in December 1993; Wes Phillips, whose literate word-spinning first appeared in our pages in August 1994; vinyl maven Michael Fremer, now well into his 11th year with Stereophile (Mikey's first "Analog Corner" column was published in July 1995); Kalman Rubinson, whose first review was of the Audio Alchemy DDS-Pro CD transport, in September 1996; self-proclaimed "Web monkey" Jon Iverson, who walked through my virtual door nine years ago this month; assistant editor and blogger Stephen Mejias, who joined our staff five years ago last August; managing editor Elizabeth Donovan, who celebrates her fifth anniversary in March; editor at large Art Dudley, who has been adding to the magazine's controversy quotient for three years; and, last but not least, Richard Lehrnert, who has been copiedediting the words you hold in your hand almost without a break since July 1985, when he worked on Vol.8 No.3. (I should also look forward to our September 2006 issue, which will witness both music editor Robert Baird's 10th anniversary and the beginning of my 21st issue year as Stereophile's editor.)

Thanks, guys. That you're all still here is, I am sure, as much appreciated by the magazine's readers as it is by me. And to those active contributors I have not mentioned: You are just as important, just not yet as bedded in.
Thank you to all our guests who visited our booth at Alexis Park, CES 2006

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If the house is on fire what do you save first? The wife? The kids? Nah, the records of course! Stereophile presents our annual Records To Die For extravaganza.

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As We See It
One reason for the depressed state of the high-end audio market might just be the lack of awareness of what good systems can do. John Atkinson reports on the efforts some industry notables are making to put this right.

Letters
This month, readers write in about high-end audio's growing primetime charisma; the use of like-minded friends, etc. to help us make our decisions; a suggestion for a "best letter to the editor" award; and a review of our reviews, in numbers! Get on your Soapbox! Visit www.stereophile.com.

Industry Update
High-end audio news including dealer-promoted seminars, plus: ShoreView buys MartinLogan, Danish speaker maker Jamo, the Internet's Magnatune, and Acoustic Energy's Internet Radio. Want to know more? Go to the "News Desk" at www.stereophile.com for up-to-the-minute info.

Sam's Space
Sam Tellig takes us on a tour of his favorite music: from Ben Selvin to Duke Ellington.

Analog Corner
Michael Fremer has five new phono preamplifiers in rotation.

Listening
Art Dudley listens again to the Horning Pericles Lowther loudspeakers.

The Fifth Element
John Marks in the presence of greatness... if only for a short time, the Kind of Blue - sian visit and further reading and viewing.

Record Reviews
This month's "Recording of the Month" is alternative rock/country chanteuse Neko Case's latest Fox Confessor Brings the Flood.

Manufacturers' Comments
This month we hear from Viola Labs, Cyrus Audio, Continuum Audio Labs, Alesis/Balanced Power Technologies, and Finite-Elemente about our reviews of their products.

Aural Robert
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World Radio History
Household names
Editor:
Anybody notice the SOTA turntable used by Dr. House on the Fox network's House? The man may be a pain in the butt, but he certainly has some class.
John Huxhold
jhuxhold@charter.com

Yes, but what are the electrostatic speakers Dr. House uses?
—John Atkinson

Brussels sprouts and the Great Debate
Editor:
I'm generally not one to wade into a meaningless debate, but why not? This whole discussion of blind testing is not applicable to music reproduction. All of us in this hobby know that each and every one of us has varying tastes in what we are looking for in sound. Some of us like articulate reproduction, while others like house-moving bass with a delicate sense of the mids.

In an article I read in Stereophile last year, someone said that audiophiles don't like music, they like the way music sounds in their systems—or at least that's the gist of the quote. The point being, audio equipment is more like food and wine than medical treatments and aviation safety systems. We've all tasted wine that was reviewed positively and not liked it. Why? Personal taste. We could conduct blind tests all day about brussels sprouts, but in the end, all it's going to show is whether the participant liked them or not. It's not going to tell me whether I will like them. We all have different ears and different processing equipment (our brains), so conducting an objective test that will tell us whether we are going to like something is impossible. So, what do we do?

For audio equipment, we do the same thing we do for movies, foods, wines, and blind dates. We find a critic or a friend whose taste is similar to ours and see what they have to say. We then go in and judge for ourselves. We go to the dealer with a decent listening room, sit, and listen. As for the blind date—don't do it.

Is spending more always going to sound better? Nope. So, Stereophile, keep doing what you are doing. Review the cheap stuff and the equipment that only the folks at Halliburton can afford.

Also, I have a feeling this argument is like debating abortion and gun control.

Excellence vs crapulence
Editor:
About once a year, a letter to the editor stands out in its ability to rhetoricallly hatch-slap the pompous, uninformed, or otherwise pathetic readers who are somehow compelled to keep writing letters to the editor. So many letters are so very worthless that many of us read them for much the same reason we rubberneck past a crash site—morbid curiosity—but curiosity, in this case, for the mental state of our fellow audiophiles. This is why the legitimately well-crafted letters strike such a chord.

Kerim Fidel's letter in December (p.14) is an example of such excellence. It was especially ironic considering the utter crapulence of a pair of letters to the editor found in the same issue.

In honor of Kerim's letter, I suggest an annual award for the best letter to the editor, perhaps included alongside Stereophile's annual Products of the Year. No, not the one whose writer selflessly takes the time to list the components in his reference system and to correct Dudley/Fremer/Phillips/Tellig's reference to an incorrect-value coupling capacitor, but one whose comments capture the year's ethos for Stereophile's readers. There would have to be some advertiser who could sponsor such an award and be willing to throw the winner a pair of solid-measuring interconnects or something.

Dan Dzuban
Stereo Times
Wake Forest, NC, dzilban@earthlink.net

The hardest-working men in audio
Editor:
Regular readers of Stereophile should be familiar with the debate about the prices of the equipment reviewed by the magazine. While one side threatens to cancel their subscriptions for the apparent editorial preoccupation with unaffordable components, the other defends the practice by making the trite (if not irrelevant) claim that auto enthusiasts don't complain when their magazines review a Lamborghini or Ferrari that carries a price tag of $300,000 to $500,000 (see "Letters," June 2005). It strikes me that, as entertaining as the numerous letters from these two sides have been throughout the years, not one single letter has provided any statistical information about the price of the audio components covered by Stereophile. What I offer in this letter are some presumably useful but rudimentary statistics that hopefully will take the debate beyond the usual chest-thumping by both camps.

My approach was simple: Re-read recent issues of the magazine, keep track of all components reviewed and related information, and put it all in a spreadsheet for subsequent analysis. Over a few Dickensian weekends (and on Christmas Day, too), sitting at my candelit, too-small desk covered with sheets of paper from God knows where (I elaborate for effect, but not by much), I went through 16 issues (January 2004 through April 2005), tediously scanning every page of every issue for what I would consider a review: "full" equipment reports and "Follow-Ups," excluding mentions of equipment from news, show reports, and sentimental reminiscences, reviews of related items, such as musical instruments and wine (a review is a review; work is work and credit is given). Although some components are reviewed more than once (as in a "Follow-Up") or by different reviewers, all reviews are included if they are indeed reviews and not references or mentions.

To make it easier for myself, I lumped various types of equipment together. For example, the Amplification category includes preamps, amplifiers, and integrated amps; Digital includes digital sources, transports, Dacs; Misc. Accessories includes items such as platforms, room treatments, air purifiers, cleaners, record racks, and, of course, the Musical Fidelity chronograph watch reviewed by Sam Tellig in his June 2004 column. Only the lowest cited retail price is used, regardless of options and subsequent price increases.

Price Statistics: There are a total of 235 equipment reviews in the 16 sample issues of Stereophile, an average of 14.7 reviews per issue. Given the $1.08 cost per issue (based on the discounted annual subscription rate of $12.97 per year), the average cost of a component review to the reader is $0.07—a
most remarkable value!

Loudspeakers make up 25% of the sample reviews, with amplification 20%. Table 1 details all the equipment types for the 235 reviews. Total cost of all equipment reviewed in all 235 reviews is $1,801,724, with an average component price of $7667. The oft-cited $10,000 tag for an “audio component” appears to me a more accurate value for the equipment that is priced less than or equal to $6204. However, given the wide variety of equipment and the range in prices between the different types, these numbers are hardly useful.

Table 2 shows the lowest, average, and highest prices for four of the 13 equipment categories (comprising 65% of the reviews). Average price is chosen over median price because it seems to me a more accurate number, given the wide range between lowest and highest prices for any given type of audio equipment. The Amplification category lists values including and not including the $350,000 Wavac amp. The oft-cried $10,000 tag for an “audiophile-quality” system is shy (even with the nominal customer discount that dealers offer) of the $20,000 (based on Average Price from Table 2) it would take to purchase a system made up of the components covered in these 16 sample issues. The average price does seem high, substantiating the criticism that Stereophile reviews only expensive equipment—but such a conclusion would be wrong.

Using a price point of $2000 (my conservative estimate of the price of a component for a $10,000 system), Table 3 shows that about 4 of every 10 reviews are of equipment that is priced less than or equal to this amount, which undermines the criticism to some extent. My only caveat here is the assumption that $2000 is an “affordable” price for a component. Perhaps a better method for determining the threshold is to base the price point on some combination of income and price of luxury goods here in the US.

One observation no one can deny is the wide price range regardless of equipment type. The standard deviation for the prices of the 59 loudspeakers reviewed is $14,100. For the 47 amplification components, the standard deviation is a whopping $50,440 with the Wavac, a more realistic $7559 without it. The wide dispersion in pricing says more about the hi-fi industry than about Stereophile, and likely contributes to the flagging state of the business. It is difficult for a buyer to justify the presumably large difference in cost of subjectively better components, given the diminishing return of the higher-priced equipment.

I leave it to others more qualified than I to elaborate on how the pricing of low-, mid-, and high-end equipment have affected the industry. For now, my point is that the criticism directed at Stereophile about the affordability of the components reviewed has less to do with prices per se than with pricing as a whole, and with the lack of a way to determine comparative values among components. As I already had the data, I did some additional analysis to address other questions and criticisms that have been raised by readers. One criticism related to pricing is that the “Recommended Components” class hierarchy seems to be related to price, with Class A going to the highest-priced equipment. To my surprise, there is only a 56.9% correlation between loudspeakers and the recommended class, and for amplification only a 49.8% correlation (without the Wavac, which would have decreased the correlation to 16.9%). Another frequent criticism is that the magazine reviews too many Musical Fidelity products. The manufacturer does indeed have the most reviews in my sample: 15, with Sam Tellig contributing 9, Michael Fremer 4. However, that represents only 5.5% of the 235 reviews. Triangle has 6 reviews (2.6%), McIntosh 5 (2.1%), and a number of other manufacturers—DNM, Linn, Linn, Rega, and Sugden—have 4 reviews each (1.7%). The 16 sample issues reviewed products from 157 manufacturers. The criticism of too many Musical Fidelity reviews may be unwarranted in this light.

A related criticism that I do not address is the claim that advertising determines Stereophile review policy. It would have been a simple matter of counting the advertisements from the sample issues, but this occurred to me only after I had collected the data. I am happy for any reader to take up this investigation.

So, who was the hardest working man at Stereophile from January 2004 through April 2005? Table 4 declares Mike Fremer the workaholic, with 59 (25%) reviews. (The double volume this year has 64 reviews.) Although it may appear. I enjoyed the bits about European trips, arguments with the New York Times, wine-tasting, and politics in America as much as learning about the audio components themselves. It truly was a pleasure reading these 16 issues, and this finally is a testament to the fine writing of Stereophile's staff.

G. Matthew Wong
wwmng2002@yahoo.com
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World Radio History
In the final stages of a new loudspeaker design, Dave Wilson sits alone in a specially built sound room, fine tuning the crossover by ear. You may notice, however, that the loudspeaker in the photograph isn’t new. It’s the X-1 Grand SLAMM, Wilson’s previous flagship model, no longer in production.

Nevertheless, there are more than 600 pairs of X-1s out there in the world, and Wilson Audio feels a loyalty to the owners who’ve invested considerable sums of money in them. So, as our ongoing research yields breakthroughs, we strive to make those sonic upgrades available to past products, like the X-1 (Level 5) and current speakers like the MAXX (now Series 2.)

From his listening position, Dave can make real time comparisons of crossover slope, level, and time domain settings. Despite employing a cadre of first rate engineers and skilled listeners, Dave Wilson knows that every loudspeaker that leaves the factory bears his name. That’s why the design of every loudspeaker—whether the newest model or the latest refinement of one nearly fifteen years old—isn’t done till it meets the approval of two final authorities: the ones on either side of his head.
CALENDAR

Those promoting audio-related seminars, shows, and meetings should fax (do not call) the when, where, and who to (212) 886-2809 at least eight weeks before the month of the event. The deadline for the April 2006 issue is February 1, 2006. Mark the fax “Attention Stephen Mejias, Dealer Bulletin Board.” We will fax back a confirmation. If you do not receive confirmation within 24 hours, please fax us again.

Attention All Audio Societies: We now have a page on the Stereophile website dedicated entirely to you: www.stereophile.com/audiophilesocieties. Check it out and get involved! If you’d like to have your audio-society information posted on the site, e-mail Chris Vogel at vgl@atlantic.net and request an info-pack.

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

KANSAS: LAWRENCE
Wes Phillips
ShoreView Industries, Inc. has acquired MartinLogan Ltd., the Lawrence, KS-based manufacturer best known for its line of high-end electrostatic loudspeakers. Transaction terms have not been disclosed.

SHOREVIEW IS OBVIOUSLY BULLISH ON THE HIGH-END AUDIO MARKET’S LONG-TERM PROFITABILITY.

Gayle Sanders, MartinLogan’s charismatic co-founder—and, until the acquisition, majority owner—will remain with the company as a consultant, according to The Lawrence Journal-World. The rest of MartinLogan’s senior management and employees will remain in Lawrence, the paper reports.

ShoreView Industries is a Minneapolis-based private equity limited partnership that “invests in partnerships in established middle-market companies.” ShoreView structures a variety of acquisition, recapitalization, and build-up transactions, typically in businesses with revenues ranging between $20 million and $150 million,” according to an RSM EquiCo press release announcing the deal.

RSM EquiCo Capital Markets, the broker-dealer subsidiary of RSM EquiCo, initiated the transaction, led the negotiations, and acted as the exclusive financial advisor to MartinLogan, the press release states. “MartinLogan’s cutting-edge technology will help ShoreView expand its presence in the high-performance audio market,” said Randy Krauthamer, RSM’s senior managing director.

Having recently invested in Paradigm Electronics, Inc., this acquisition marks ShoreView’s second transaction in the high-end home audio products industry [in 2005].”

Wait a minute! Did he say Paradigm? Sure enough, a little diligent research turned up a cached Commercial Finance Association report that we had completely missed last summer. Bundled among other transactions was “a $28 million credit facility to support the recapitalization of Paradigm Group [sponsored by ShoreView Industries], a manufacturer of high-end loudspeakers and audio-video components, sold under the Paradigm® and Authentic™ brand names.”

ShoreView is obviously bullish on the high-end audio market’s long-term profitability. Perhaps it sees the light at the end of a long, dark tunnel.

DENMARK: COPENHAGEN
Paul Messenger
Ten years ago, the Danish firm Jamo (pronounced YAY-me) was Europe’s biggest specialty loudspeaker company, but since then things seem to have gone awry. Jamo announced in February 2005 that they’d been taken over by US operation Klipsch Audio Inc., and has decided to cease manu-
facturing at its huge, highly automat-
ed factory at Glyngøre, in the extreme
northwest of Denmark. The full story
of this fall from grace is doubtless
complex, though Jamo's decision to
get involved in plasma displays was
probably ill-advised, and perhaps their
unusually diverse product range
placed too much emphasis on being
all things to all men.

With all that change, I could hardly
turn down an invitation to take a quick
24-hour trip, meet the current pilots of
the good ship Jamo, and try to find out
what was going on. Happily, this time
the trip was only as far as Copenhagen—my last visit to Jamo, some 20
years ago, was to Glyngøre, which nestles beside a frozen sea, miles from
anywhere. February is never the best
month to visit Denmark.

We were met by Jamo's top acous-
tician, Henrik Mortensen, and product
and marketing manager Leif Schmuck-
er. Mortensen was already head of the
design team when I'd visited before,
and had impressed me with his creativ-
ity and open-mindedness, not to men-
tion a considerable capacity for hard
work—he seemed to have little backup,
given the scale of the company and
breadth of its product line. The main
purpose of the trip was to demonstrate
a new high-end loudspeaker, Jamo's
Reference R 909 (£7500/pair,
$14,500/pair). But that was scheduled
for the following morning. First, we
faced a challenging night at the opera.

Copenhagen's brand new Royal
Opera House is a splendid edifice,
architecturally and acoustically—a defi-
nite must for any opera fan visiting the
city. However, apart from a fondness
for Wagner's orchestrations, I have
never been an operagoer, and it was
perhaps ill fortune that that evening's
performance was of a very new work
by a very young composer: Thomas
Ades' *The Tempest*, based on Shake-
peare's play. It had its moments—the
Ariel was superb, and the score and sets
were imaginative and entertaining. But
Benjamin Britten's operatic legacy has
always seemed lacking in melody for
my taste, and a combination of English
libretto and Danish subtitles proved
baffling plotwise.

The next morning, however, the Re-
ference R 909 looked very interesting.
The speaker made it clear that Jamo is
intending to reestablish some serious hi-
fi credentials. The R 909 is an imagina-
tive and original design. Mortensen's
intention was to create a speaker that
combined the punch and bass authority
that only dynamic drive-units, with their
high linear excursion, seem to give, with
the freedom from boxy sound for which
"boxless" dipole panel speakers are
renowned. The result is an intriguing
alternative to virtually anything else on
the market. Work on it began eight
years ago, but was shelved when the
home theater bandwagon began to roll.
The project was relaunched two years
ago, when it became clear there was still
healthy demand for high-quality two-
channel stereo.

The main problem with generating
dipole/panel bass is that the sounds
from the speaker's front and rear are out
of phase with each other, creating an
"acoustic short circuit" in which they try
to cancel each other out at frequencies
whose wavelengths are larger than the
width (or height) of the baffle. Even
with a speaker like the R 909, which at
19.2" is relatively wide, cancellation
begins to occur below 200Hz, creating a
6dB/octave rolloff. Achieving full out-
put down to 50Hz would require a
12dB boost in the midband (or a 12dB
total cut en route to the 200Hz
crossover point). Very high low-fre-
quency sensitivity is therefore needed.

To that end, the R 909 uses twin 15"
bass drivers, specially designed with
lightweight paper cones and a 25Hz
free-air resonance. These are fed via an
inductor to apply the 6dB/octave
rolloff up to the crossover point. The
metal-cone midband driver is also
open-backed, with a neodymium mag-
net assembly of very small diameter,
while the tweeter is a ScanSpeak Reve-
lator. The system delivers a claimed
sensitivity of 89dB/2.83V into 4 ohms.
All drive-units are mounted on a spe-
cial multi-ply baffle 1.75" thick and fin-
ished in high-gloss black, yellow, or
red. The baffle is stabilized and rein-
forced by a substantial metal spine that
extends the height of the speaker.

The significant implications of
dipole operation include a figure-8
sound-radiation pattern that delivers
sound to the speaker's front and rear
but very little to the sides, thus reduc-
ing sidewall reflections and allowing
the speaker to be placed closer to a
sidewall. The pattern of room-mode
excitations will also be very different
from that of a conventional monopole
speaker, although, as ever, the exact
pattern in any given room will be diffi-
cult to predict.

Jamo's demonstration of the R 909
wasn't entirely convincing—hotel-
room demos rarely are. The associated
equipment was a mix of the odd and
the unfamiliar, and in any case, I don't
make judgments at "away fixtures"
because they're often unreliable. Still,
I think the R 909 is a seriously interest-
ig speaker, and a highly significant
one for the future of Jamo. Whether
there will be other dipole designs from
Jamo remains to be seen, but the firm's
brand-new Concert series—the hi-fi
range immediately below the R 909—
was scheduled to be launched at the
Consumer Electronics Show in Las
Vegas in January 2006.

As for the Klipsch Audio connec-
tion, it appears that the Klipsch and
WWW.MAGNATUNE.COM OFFERS ENTIRE
ALBUMS' WORTH OF MUSIC OF HIGH QUALITY
FOR DOWNLOAD.

THE INTERNET
Jason Victor Serinus
In this age of the major record labels
maximizing music profits at all costs,
even if it involves installing spyware on
consumers' computers, www.Mag-
nature.com stands apart. The website
offers entire albums' worth of music of
high quality for download in a choice
of formats, from highest-quality MP3
files to CD-quality WAV files. It also
gives 50% of the money it collects
directly to its artists. Magnatune
founder John Buckman, 36, who
divides his time between London and
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Berkeley, chose the site’s motto: "Internet Music Without the Guilt: Magnatune, the open music record label."

“We are not evil,” Buckman proclaims. While one might presume a certain irony in those words—Buckman’s former business was Lyris, a top-rated e-mail marketing company—his decision to let downloaders pay what they want, then giving 50% of that amount to the artists, is extraordinary.

“The whole idea of Magnatune is that when you buy an album, you actually make a difference in an artist’s life,” Buckman told Stereophile. “In other purchasing situations, money goes directly to record labels, that then decide what to give artists. With us, musicians and music come first.”

Magnatune divides its music into eight genres: Classical, Electronica, Jazz & Blues, Metal & Punk, New Age, Rock, World, and Others (including ambient music). Outstanding artists and organizations signed to this virtual label include the Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra, pianist Andreas Ehren Starks (piano and cello compositions in New Age/classical style), and Proosdij, Beth Quist (whose four-Octave voice regularly graces Cirque du Soleil shows, and whose music is a hybrid of world, rock, and New Age), Ehren Starks (piano and cello compositions in New Age/classical style), and Paul Avganinos (ambient space music). Magnatune’s own compilations in various genres are also available.

The website requests $8-$15 per album download. With the average consumer paying $8.21, Magnatune is able to give artists 10–20 times more than they would receive elsewhere. Magnatune is especially inviting because one can stream an entire album before deciding to purchase it. Consumers also receive Acrobat files of liner notes and cover art that often also include lyrics, translations, facsimiles of original scores, and other features not found in conventional liner notes. A recent promotion encouraging buyers to download an album, then copy and share it free with three friends, resulted in a 40% upturn in sales.

John Buckman plays Renaissance lute and jazz guitar and is married to a harpsichordist. That he puts music quality and artists first is shown by his agreement with Avie, a UK-based, artist-owned classical label whose releases frequently appear in Gramophone’s “Editor’s Choice.” Avie receives 50% of the payment for each album sold, then gives 80% of that to the artist(s). Avie was one of the first labels to get actively involved in downloading, mainly because Magnatune shares the label’s artist-friendly stance and commitment to quality. “All artists associated with Avie and Magnatune own their recordings and the copyright in them,” explains Avie’s Melanie Meulier. More than half of Avie’s artists, all of whom perform material that’s in the public domain, are currently online at Magnatune.

Magnatune and the Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra are currently assessing the orchestra’s 30 years of concert recordings, releasing music for download in three-album series every three months. The PBO base its choices of what to release partly on sound quality—recordings must be sonically competitive with major-label offerings.

David Bowles, the PBO’s sound engineer and PBO conductor Nicholas McGegan’s partner, currently records the orchestra in multitrack, 24-bit/96kHz digital. A live recording of Beethoven’s Symphony 8, one of Magnatune’s first PBO offerings, began as a 24/96 master that was first edited and mixed using the SADiE system, then downsampled to 16/44.1 using the POW-R reddithering algorithm developed by Daniel Weiss and others.

The PBO’s much-lauded Avie SACD of Alessandro Scarlatti’s Cecilian Vespers may soon be joined on Magnatune by a live performance of Mozart’s arrangement of Handel’s Mesias, set to be taped in December 2005. Currently available exclusively on Magnatune are PBO’s live renditions of Beethoven’s Symphony 3, orchestral works by Mozart, and selected works by Rameau and Leclair.

Magnatune keeps the quality of its music high—of the 400 artists associated with Magnatune by a live performance of Mozart’s arrangement of Handel’s Mesias, set to be taped in December 2005. Currently available exclusively on Magnatune are PBO’s live renditions of Beethoven’s Symphony 3, orchestral works by Mozart, and selected works by Rameau and Leclair.

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It will leave you speechless.
can yet agree on what that DRM standard should be, and building multiple and incompatible standards into hardware would be a disaster for the long-term success of the music market.

A 2005 study from Strategy Analytics (www.strategyanalytics.net), “Connected Home Rollouts Await Direction from Content Owners,” notes that “The market’s true potential will not be fully realized until inter-device content sharing is fully supported by major content rights holders such as Disney, Fox, Sony, and Warner. While these companies are warming to the connected device concept, and concur with many of its potential benefits, they remain undecided and disunited on critical business model issues.

INTERNET RADIO HAS BUILT UP IMPRESSIVE AUDIENCE FIGURES AMONG HOMESICK EXPATRIATE COMPUTER BUFFS AND THE LIKE.

iTunes/iPod model demonstrates that proprietary and incompatible solutions can be successful, in the short term at least.”

But in the long run, multiple and incompatible DRM standards will mean that the digital media future will remain, well, in the future. “Wider adoption of media-sharing devices will be delayed as long as content owners disagree between themselves on how they wish to benefit from DRM technologies. Technology providers, in turn, cannot develop a horizontal market for connected devices until major content providers have agreed on a common framework of DRM interoperability.”

UK: CIRENCESTER
Paul Messenger
While traditional high-end loudspeakers remain the core of Acoustic Energy’s operation, its willingness to experiment with alternative strategies was seen a few years ago in the cute, miniature Aego 2 PC loudspeaker. [The Aego 2 was enthusiastically reviewed by Michael Fremer in his March 2002 "Analog Corner column.—Ed.] Two new products for 2006 show similar imagination. The new Aego M-System, a three-box package of sub/sat and amp/speaker (£99), is clearly oriented toward upgrading iPods and other personal stereos, and is a logical outgrowth of the Aego 2, with smoother main driver performance and rounded cast-alloy satellite cases.

Much more original and interesting is what AE describes as the “world’s first WiFi Internet Radio.” It might not be hi-fi as we understand it, but it could well represent the future of radio listening, and looks a much more interesting prospect than digital radio broadcasting. Radio stations have been streaming their output onto the Net for a while now—it must be seven years since my friend Norman demonstrated the delights of tuning into a station in New Zealand from his flat in Brighton using just a dial-up connection and a relatively primitive secondhand PC.

Since then, Internet radio has built up impressive audience figures among homesick expatriate computer buffs and the like. The BBC, for example, estimates that it has more than 6 million online listeners, who “consume” 10 million hours of radio programming per month. The trouble is, the user interface has hitherto remained clunky PC-based, effectively restricting access to the computer-literate.

AE’s new device seeks to address that constraint. The WiFi Internet Radio itself is compact, simple, and reasonably priced at £199, though it does need to be used in conjunction with a broadband connection and a router with built-in WiFi modem. When switched on, the radio links into an existing WiFi network and accesses an Internet radio gateway, which uploads the station listings—some 2800 Internet stations were available at the time of writing. Stations can be sorted by continent, country, or genre, and selected via the WiFi Internet Radio’s LCD display.

The WiFi Internet Radio plugs into the wall and supports the RealAudio, WMA, and MP3 formats. It incorporates twin Aego-style drivers in a ported enclosure, which means it can easily be moved and used around the house to listen to radio or PC-stored music. There is also a line output to enable connection to a hi-fi system, and an alarm clock. I’ve wanted access to FIP, an excellent French music station, for years. It looks as if AE may at last have provided a convenient means of doing so.
The Beast

Primare's A32 amplifier is designed to generate the power necessary to accurately reproduce the extraordinary dynamic transients and three-dimensional transparency that both music and film soundtracks demand. Four hundred watts per channel* of fully-balanced audio signal transmission empowers your system with epic scale, openness and a convincingly realistic presentation that simply must be heard to be believed.

The Beauty

Introducing the Primare CD110 CD Player Receiver - Beautifully compact and elegantly efficient, it’s perfect wherever full-sized audio components are not. Simply connect to a pair of speakers and enjoy full-fidelity compact disc or radio broadcasts in your living room, kitchen, office or den.

By pursuing a less-is-more design philosophy, Primare has created a new class of audio product unlike anything you've seen or heard before!
amplify your emotions

Nightingale
the sound appeal
Those Golden Oldies

I love the sounds of 1920s and '30s popular music—not the music my parents listened to, but what my grandparents and my Great Uncle Stan grooved on. Throughout the late 1940s and into the '50s, I lived with echoes of the past and Uncle Stan's dusty stacks of 78rpm records.

The '20s were the ticket. Radio was in its infancy. The Jazz Singer, the first full-length talking picture, came along in 1927. Electrical recording began in 1925. Before that, systems used direct conversion between sound and mechanical energy—no microphones, no amplifiers, no electricity. Performers had to bellow into a horn; this was not a technology made for subtlety—or crooning.

Amplification, whether at home or at the movies, was single-ended triode, until some damned fool "improved" things with push-pull. No wonder people went wild over the sound. Their radio consoles were equipped with output tubes such as the RCA 2A3 or the Philco 45, a tube that looks like a horn; this was not a technology made for subtlety—or crooning.

The program streams "live" over the Internet at www.wfuv.org, Sunday nights from 8 to midnight EST. Many past programs are archived. This is a great place to start exploring 1920s and '30s music for free. West Coast fans are in luck: the program airs—ah, streams—dinner time.

Everything I recommend below is on CDs. You might find some of them at Amazon.com or on eBay. My main source is www.worldrecords.com, a mail-order outfit in Novato, California. They offer a fabulous searchable database. Their prices may not be the lowest (they're not the highest, either; that honor goes to Collector's Choice and Yestermusic), but they fill orders in a jiffy, mostly from items actually in stock. Joe Brown, the owner, can give advice.

The Music

Ben Selvin (1898–1980) helped put Muzak on the map. A jazzy bandleader from the 1920s, Selvin started a company that was folded into Muzak in the 1930s, and became Muzak's vice president for programming. He later became a record-company executive, eventually retiring from RCA.

Don't hold those things against him—Ben Selvin was great. In the 1920s, he was out to beat the band with some of the hottest jazz of that overheated era. Hear for yourself: 24 tracks on Sounds from the Roaring Twenties: Ben Selvin and His Orchestra, 1924–1926 (Timeless [Holland] CBC 1-089). Songs include "The Original Charleston," "Red Hot Mamma," and "Yes Sir, That's My Baby" (I don't mean maybe).

Anything you see from Timeless Records is worth buying. Like Isham Jones and His Orchestra, 1922–1926 (CBC 1-067). Jones (1894–1956) heard what would later be called a "sweet band." As did Duke Ellington, Jones himself wrote much of what he and his band played. For more, turn to Isham Jones Plays His Own Compositions (Swing Time 2011), which includes "It Had to Be You," "I'll See You In My Dreams," and "I'll Never Have to Dream Again."

Vocalist Frank Sylvano is heard at his best crooning "Feeling the Way" to a girlfriend: "I've got a dog, I've got a cat, I've got the price of a cute flat." Most of Jones' discography has not yet appeared on CD, and it's long overdue.

Crooners came along in the mid-20s with the start of electronic recording. Sans microphone, Sylvano, Rudy Vallee [who originally used a megaphone—Ed] and Bing Crosby—Frank Sinatra, for that matter—didn't stand a chance. Crooning brought an intimacy to American popular song, and radio and records brought the crooners to America.

Rudy Vallee (1901–1986), one of the most popular singers of the era, may have been the first mass-media pop star. Flappers mobbed him wherever he went, including my mom's older sister. His popularity waned in the late 1930s, yet his voice darkened beautifully. No match for Bing Crosby, apparently.
Be there.

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Web: www.theehighend.com  Email: stan@theehighend.com
I own those eyes, yes, sir,
I own those lips, yes, sir,
And a whole lot more.

I recommend Frank Crumit: A Gay Caballero (Naxos Nostalgia 8.120502), which includes Crummit's arrangement of "Frankie and Johnny" as well as "I Married the Bootlegger's Daughter," "What Kind of Noise Annoys an Oyster," and—alone worth the price of the disc—"There's No One with Endurance (Like the Man Who Sells Insurance):" "I used to be as happy as a squirrel in the tree / Till a man who sold insurance made a nervous wreck of me."

1935–1939 (4 CDs, DRCD11171).

No collection of 1920s and '30s music is complete without Duke Ellington (1899–1974). JSP Records recently released Mrs. Clinkscales to the Cotton Club, Volume 1: 1926–1929 (4 CDs, JSP JSP924). Mrs. Clinkscales was Edward Kennedy Ellington's childhood piano teacher in Washington, DC. She makes no appearance here, but the set does begin with recordings Ellington made before December 1927, when he began playing at the Cotton Club in New York, and includes such standards as “East St. Louis Toodle-Oo,” “The Mooche,” “Diga Diga Doo,” “Black and Tan Fantasy,” “Bugle Call Rag,” and “St. Louis Blues.”

Continue with Early Ellington: Complete Brunsvick and Vocalion Recordings (3 CDs, Decca GRD 3-640). These recordings date from 1926 to 1931 and include an early version of “Mood Indigo.” The same music in marginally better sound can be found on Complete Original American Decca Recordings (3 CDs, Definitive DRCD11196). Decca acquired the Brunswick and Vocalion labels, hence the confusion.

Finally, from Ellington, I recommend the Complete Columbia & RCA Sessions with Ben Webster, featuring Jimmy Blanton (4 CDs, Definitive DRCD 11170). Most of the music comes from 1940 to 1942, placing it just past the era we're talking about. Ellington had added writer and arranger Billy Strayhorn, young bassist Jimmy Blanton, and tenor saxophonist Ben Webster to his band, which already included alto saxophonist Johnny Hodges, trumpeter Cootie Williams, and others. The 88 tracks include “Mood Indigo,” “Sophisticated Lady,” “In a Mellowtone,” “Take the A Train,” and many more—some of the greatest jazz ever played.

Thomas Wright “Fats” Waller was born in Harlem in 1904 and died on a train in Kansas City in December 1943. One of the great jazz pianists, composers, and vocalists of all time, Waller lived large, consuming huge quantities of alcohol daily. His ex-wife, the former Edith Hatchett, hounded him all his life and twice had him jailed for failure to pay alimony.

Waller was a stride pianist—his left hand kept the rhythm while sliding from side to side, from the lowest bass notes to chords in the octave below middle C. His vocal style was influenced by Louis Armstrong; he also enjoyed playing Bach at the organ and could give straight-ahead renditions of jazz standards. But Waller preferred to be an entertainer, adding wisecracks to his songs, which made him popular with black and white audiences alike.

Remember what I said about music from the '20s and '30s being fun? Listen to Fats Waller and lift your mood. Handful of Keys (4 CDs, Proper Box 71) comprises 95 tracks spanning Waller's performing career, including “I Will Be Your Dustbin,” “Lulu's Back in Town,” “I'm Going to Sit Right Down and Write Myself a Letter,” “I Got Rhythm,” “Your Feet's Too Big,” and “Your Socks Don't Match.” My favorite is “A Porter's Love Song to a Chambermaid”: “I will be your dustbin if you be the broom, / We can work together all around the room.” Any time you start sweating about your system—your interconnects, your cables, where you placed your speakers—put on some Fats and chill out.

Bunny Berigan’s The Key Sessions, 1931–1937 (5 CDs, JSP JSP917) comprises 124 sides featuring “a legend of the jazz trumpet who played like an angel and lived like a devil,” according to the cover of the box. Born in 1908, in Fox Lake, Wisconsin, Rowland Bernarr Berigan learned the trumpet in his grandfather's concert band. At age 21 he took his trumpet on a train for New York and was an overnight success. He played with Ben Selvin, the Paul Whiteman Band, the Dorsey brothers, and Ben Pollack's orchestra, among others.

This set is almost a survey of 1930s jazz, with such jazz greats as Artie Shaw, Ray McKinlay, Gene Krupa, Red Norvo, Eddie Condon, Joe Bushkin, Claude Thornhill, Charlie Spivak, and Cozy Cole. At JSP's bargain prices, The Key Sessions is essential for every jazz collection. (I sound like a music critic again.) Like Fats Waller, Bix Beiderbecke, and Ukulele Ike, Berigan drank...
Perfect form and sound.
The form is artistic. Beautifully crafted like the body of a musical instrument.
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himself to death; he died in 1942.

How about this all-star cast: Glenn Miller, Jack Teagarden, Joe Sullivan, Gene Krupa, Coleman Hawkins, Teddy Wilson, and Benny Carter? All perform on Benny Goodman: 1931–1935 (2 CDs, Timeless CBC1-065). In the late 1920s, Goodman (1909–1986) played with Isham Jones, Ben Selvin, Red Nichols, Ben Pollack, and others. In 1931, Goodman began to appear with his own band, and those early tracks are included here: “Love Me or Leave Me,” “Moon Glow,” “Bugle Call Rag,” “Blue Moon,” “Stars Fell on Alabama,” and something called “Ninwit Serenade,” among many others. You can hear Goodman develop the distinctive style that was to make him “the King of Swing,” but these tracks are lighter, less brash than much of what followed. After Goodman appeared at the Palomar Ballroom in Los Angeles in August 1935, he became a nationally known celebrity—phenom, as is now said.

I recommend two sets of 1930s Goodman. Benny Goodman on the Air: 1937–1938 (2 CDs, Columbia Legacy CK 48836) is 48 tracks recorded off the air before live audiences. My favorite is on disc 2: “Have You Met Miss Jones?” That's Teddy Wilson at the piano and the great Lionel Hampton on vibes. Goodman was one of the first white bandleaders to hire black musicians, a ballsy move at the time. Then there's The Birth of Swing (5 CDs, RCA 61036). The 71 tracks date from 1935 to 1937 and the sound is quite good. Goodman's soloists include Bunny Berigan, Gene Krupa, Coleman Hawkins, Joe Sullivan, and others. You can hear Goodman develop what he'd make of his collection, aged 42.

Bollew appeared with several British dance bands in the 1930s, most notably with the Ray Noble Orchestra. These sessions appear on a series of 10 discs offered by Dutton Vocalion in the UK and Rathbone Records in Canada. A good place to start is with a sampler disc, What a Perfect Combination (Rathbone 351), which really does give you the best of Bollew, including “You're Driving Me Crazy,” “Looking at the Bright Side of Life,” “Dinner at Eight,” “You Ought to See Sally on Sunday,” and “Midnight, the Stars, and You.” That last song is the one featured at the close of Stanley Kubrick's film The Shining.

The original Mills Brothers, billed as “four boys and a guitar,” were John, Jr., Herbert, Harry, and Donald. Their father owned a barbershop in Piqua, Ohio, and established a barbershop quartet. The group sang a cappella except for John, Jr.'s guitar. The brothers turned their voices into sounds that mimicked musical instruments—Harry could emulate the sound of a trumpet, while John re-created a string bass.

Enjoy the Brothers on The Mills Brothers: That's How Rhythm Was Born, part of Columbia/Legacy's Art Deco series (CK 66977). Along with “Rock and Roll,” tracks include “Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea,” “Shuffle Off to Buffalo,” “Coffee in the Morning and Kisses in the Night,” “Fraternal Street,” and “Charlie Two-Step.” Yow! Supplement this disc with Syncopating Harmonists from New Orleans (Take Two TT406CD), with a dynamite rendition of “There's a Wah-Wah Girl in Agua Caliente.” If you're really hot for the sisters, look for the five-disc series of Nostalgia Arts of Denmark, some of which are still available from www.worldrecords.com.

There are many more discs I could recommend, featuring Sophie Tucker, Eddie Cantor, Jimmy Durante, Gene Austin, Ruth Etting, and others. But this is more than enough to get you started. If you have recommendations of your own and want to continue the discussion, you can post on “Forums” at www.stereophile.com.

Uncle Stan died in the 1950s. I wonder what he'd make of my collection now: stacks and stacks of 78rpm records transferred and reduced to several hundred compact discs. Enjoy—I know he would have. At the least, this music will take your mind off the sound of your system. At most, it will transport you to the greatest era of American popular song.
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Imagine you’ve just spent a day at work. A day made somehow surprisingly more tolerable thanks to the enjoyment of your sweet music so well reproduced by your HeadRoom Micro Amp and a great pair of headphones.

Oops! It’s 4:59 (you’d hardly noticed). Lights off, computer off; you flip the kickstand down on your player; pull the power plug on the amp; drop it into the Micro Bag; and off you go, all the while beautius musicus uninterruptus.

It’s 5:01. You’re out of the office. The hustle-bustle is all around. But you are secreted away in your private space, your head exquisitely filled with the sound of music. If you do have another thought, it might be, “Man, it’s great to be an audiophile these days.”

Please give us a call if you’re interested in hooking up with some of the best portable audio gear available. We’d love to help you get it right between your ears.
Forget the two front teeth. All I want for Christmas is a plumber to install the reverse-osmosis water-purification system I bought when the weather was still warm. This is turning into a running joke—except for the water, which isn’t.

How healthy is analog sound in the 21st century? Before I could wrap up my notes on these five new phono preamps, e-mails arrived offering a few more for review. Solid-state, all-tube, hybrid, battery-powered—whatever your preference, and at whatever price you can handle, there are good choices. That’s how healthy analog sound is today.

But before I get started, I got an e-mail a few months ago from Chris Hoff of Balanced Power Technologies, offering to send me an Alesis MasterLink he’d modified. The MasterLink is a 24-bit/96kHz-capable digital recorder with a 40GB hard drive, typically available online for around $900. Mastering veteran Stan Ricker thinks it’s one of the best two-channel recorders he’s ever used, analog or digital. I use mine mostly to digitize LPs and to make CD compilations. It’s versatile, easy to use, sounds great, and measures well, according to JA (see www.stereophile.com/hirezplay ers/605), who uses one on his live recording sessions.

Hoff offers two modifications of the MasterLink: the Signature ($600 to mod your MasterLink, or he’ll sell you a modified new unit for $1399) and the Signature Plus ($1000 to mod yours, $1799 new). For the Signature mod, Hoff replaces all 22 electrolytic capacitors on the MasterLink’s A/D board with Black Gate nonpolarized caps, adds larger-value Black Gate nonpolarized caps and polystyrene-film bypass caps to the digital power supply, lines the entire interior with copper foil and ERS cloth (made of metal-coated carbon fibers and said to absorb, reflect, and diffuse RF/EMI) for RF rejection up into the gigahertz region, wraps internal wiring with ERS, adds copper foil and ERS to shield the main power supply, wraps the CD-RW and hard drives with foil and ERS, adds separate Litz ground wire from the hard drive to the mains ground, damps the hard drive with Sorbothane, replaces eight electrolytic caps in the main power supply with Black Gate Power Tank and Elna Cerfine caps, treats internal pressure contacts with Walker SST contact enhancer, and uses silver solder throughout.

The Signature Plus mod includes all of the above, as well as a separate power supply for the analog section that includes a shielded, bw-noise toroidal transformer and a low-impedance 15V regulation board, polystyrene bypass caps for the analog power supply, and replaces the generic circuit-board-mounted analog input RCA jacks and digital-out RCA jack with chassis-mounted WBT Nextgens of platinum-plated silver.

I got a Signature Plus. When it arrived, it was much heavier than my stock MasterLink. Hoff had mounted a set of sharply pointed cones on the bottom of the chassis, which I definitely didn’t like—though he’d also provided some dimpled shelf-protecting discs, the points scratched my shelf as I slid the unit into place. Most audiophiles don’t like—though he’d also provided some dimpled shelf-protecting discs, the points scratched my shelf as I slid the unit into place. Most audiophiles

...
The Bellari VP129: All for $200 and made in the USA.

The Bellari VP129: All for $200 and made in the USA.

With its curved, bright red case and top-mounted tube, the versatile VP129 looks great, and it sounded as good as it looks. It was quiet, and golden-sweet and liquid in the midrange, as you'd expect from a 12AX7-based phono preamp. I wasn't expecting its top end to be so nicely extended, fast, and clean, or its bass to be so snappy, articulate, and extended. The first record I pulled was Speakers Corner's excellent-sounding reissue of a DG Archiv classic, Dance Music of the High Renaissance (Archiv SAPM 0198 166), a longtime favorite. It features superbly recorded strings, keyboard instruments, lutes, bells, flutes, and lots of percussion. I've been playing my original copy since 1969 and still enjoy listening for both the music and the vivid sound. This was the early 17th century's version of Saturday Night Fever.

I plugged in a Roksan Radius turntable (review in the works) fitted with a Roksan Corus cartridge and was absolutely captivated by what I heard. The strings sounded rich and buoyant, the flutes airy and complex, and the percussion had plenty of transient "bite" and resolve. The stage floated pleasingly, with a nicely rendered three-dimensionality.

Every type of music I played through the surprising little Bellari sounded full-bodied and rich, yet detailed and crisply rendered. The bass was well extended and satisfyingly punchy, and vocal sibilants were clean and pure. The only things missing were the usual brightness, etchiness, and hardness I expect to hear from phono preamplifiers at this price.

The Bellari VP129 gets my highest recommendation, and is the budget phono preamp I will now enthusiastically recommend for every genre of music. Its sins are strictly of omission, and it worked well as a headphone amp, too. Well done—and a genuine bargain. With the exception of top-shelf collectibles, most used classical LPs are now dirt cheap. If you're thinking of taking the analog plunge and you listen to a lot of classical music, get a Bellari VP129 and a budget turntable, and I promise that your CDs will start to gather dust.

Jasmine Audio LP2.0 MM/MC phono preamplifier: $1500

The two-box LP2.0, from Jasmine Audio, in the People's Republic of
China, hits all the right visual cues: the power supply and main chassis come in black velvet bags, which I couldn't remove without slicing them open with a razor blade. The power supply features an IEC jack and an On/Off rocker switch, and its 24V of DC reaches the main chassis via an umbilicus fitted with locking ring connectors. The rear of the main chassis has RCA inputs and outputs, an M M / M C switch, a rotary dial for selecting the loading (30, 100, 250, or 1k ohms), and, way off to the side, a ground lug. Plug it in and the "Jasmine" logos on the fronts of these two heavy boxes light up in blue. The gain is specified at 55dB (MM) and 70dB (MC), with respective signal/noise ratios of >88dB and >82dB.

The LP2.0 appeared to be extremely well built—until I opened it and looked inside. There's not much to the power-supply and preamp sections. Given what it costs to build something like this in China, the Jasmine's $1500 price came as a shock. Ray Samuels Audio sells its superbly built, outstanding-sounding Emmeline XR-2 phono preamp for only $1050, and it's made in the US. Had the LP2.0 sounded very good, $1500 would have been a fair price, but the sound was just plain blah. The Jasmine didn't do anything particularly wrong during the first go-round in MM or MC mode, but it didn't excel at anything either—and for $1500, something about the sound should have gotten my attention. Overall, I can't say it was better or worse than a Lehmann Black Cube ($699), but to partner an MM cartridge, give me the Graham Slee Era Gold Mk.V (www.stereophile.com/phonopreamps/105graham) any day. And if you plan to invest in a more expensive MC cartridge, you'd be wasting your money here. Someone or everyone is pricing the Jasmine way past the usual retail markup and well beyond its performance capabilities. When I went back for a second listen, something had gone awry; there was audible distortion in both MM and MC modes. Perhaps something was wrong with this unit from the get-go, but what's inside the LP2.0, and what it must cost to make, do not justify its price, I feel.
Trigon Elektronik Advance battery-powered phono preamplifier: $1295

Trigon Elektronik is based in Germany, and I was impressed with both the build and sound quality of their less expensive Vanguard phono preamp, which offered an outboard battery option—my only problem was with its incomprehensible Deutsch-English instruction manual. Unfortunately, the Advance’s manual is no more comprehensible. Here’s the introductory sentence: “Even more than two decades ago, so the propagandists of the medium Compact Disc wanted it, the record had retired.”

But while Trigon has yet to invest in a competent translator, the company has produced a beautifully built, impressive-sounding, versatile phono preamp. The Advance can run off AC while its battery charges, but it sounded best run in pure battery mode, which it can do for as long as you’re likely to listen in a single sitting. The battery pack charges via an outboard power supply housed in a black plastic case and connected to the preamp via a long umbilicus.

Two sets of DIP switches on the Advance’s underside permit a seemingly infinite variety of gain and loading possibilities. With two banks of four switches each you can set the gain in 16 steps, from 35.7 to 602dB. Two other banks of eight switches each offer more than 60 loading choices and three MM capacitance settings, or you can open the case and use plug-in capacitors and resistors to select your own resistance and capacitance settings.

The Advance’s sound was precise, rich, vivid, and extremely involving. It was ever so slightly on the warm, dark side, producing seductively round, solid, delicate images that popped from deep-black backgrounds. Its most notable strength was its firm, deep, well-controlled bottom end. The Advance really dug down deep. I ran the Lyra Titan and Dynavector DRT XV-1 cartridges at a wide-open 47k ohms, which proved ideal for both. The open and ultradetailed Titan sounded ever so slightly closed-in, veiled, and lacking air at 47k, which should give you a good idea of how the Advance sounded. Don’t get me wrong—it wasn’t a burqa-like veil, just a modest, sheer overlay that resulted in a pleasingly rich, warm, grain-free sound that might be ideal for both. The open and ultradetailed Titan sounded even more closed-in, veiled, and lacking air at 47k, which should give you a good idea of how the Advance sounded. Don’t get me wrong—it wasn’t a burqa-like veil, you get one that shaves a bit off the edges rather than tries to overperform, thus revealing annoying flaws.

Overall, the Trigon Elektronik Advance was a refined, rich-sounding phono preamp that I greatly enjoyed using. Sonics, value, versatility, musical enjoyment over the long haul—it’s easy to recommend such a product.

Audio Research PH-5 hybrid phono preamplifier: $1995

I spent a few weeks listening to the Audio Research Corporation’s PH-5 before I learned its cost. I knew it wasn’t ARC’s all-out assault on the phono preamp art—that would be the Reference Phono, an all-tube design (including the power supply) I reviewed a few years back, see www.stereophile.com/phonopreamps/200ar—but I figured it had to cost at least $2500.

The PH-5 is the latest in ARC’s well-received series of “budget” phono preamps, which began with the PH-3 (1995) and continued with the PH-3SE (1998). Like those, the PH-5 is a hybrid design, and uses five new high-gain JFETs per channel in a non-phase-inverting, zero-feedback input stage. The gain and output stages use four 6922 twin-triode tubes. An unusually wide bandwidth of 0.7Hz-40kHz is claimed, with a fixed compatible gain of 57.5dB, MM or MC. Maximum input is specified at 70mV at 1kHz—more than enough overload margin for any MM cartridge I can think of.

The build quality is, as you’d expect from ARC, very high. If ARC can build this in Minnesota and sell it for $1995, Jasmine Audio should sell the LP2.0 for $495. The PH-5 is also built for comfort. There’s a single input, whether you’re just a modest, sheer overlay that resulted in a pleasingly rich, warm, grain-free sound that might be ideal for both. The open and ultradetailed Titan sounded even more closed-in, veiled, and lacking air at 47k, which should give you a good idea of how the Advance sounded. Don’t get me wrong—it wasn’t a burqa-like veil, you get one that shaves a bit off the edges rather than tries to overperform, thus revealing annoying flaws. Overall, the Trigon Elektronik Advance was a refined, rich-sounding phono preamp that I greatly enjoyed using. Sonics, value, versatility, musical enjoyment over the long haul—it’s easy to recommend such a product.

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World Radio History
using an MC or an MM cartridge. The remote control lets you switch the loading among 100, 200, 500, 1k, and 47k ohm settings, switch to Mono or Mute, and power down, without your butt once losing contact with your listening seat.

My memories of the PH-3 and PH-3SE are fond and respectful if not exactly loving. Both, as I remember, struck me as having a somewhat opaque, off-putting, slightly wiry sound. I remember thinking that musical decays and low-level information were lacking in resolve, making the sound somewhat shadowy and two-dimensional compared with far more expensive phono preamps.

That's not the case with the PH-5, which turned out to be among the best-balanced, most listenable phono preamps I've heard. Before I'd run the PH-5 in, its bass was a bit prominent and bulbous and its highs recessed (the opposite of the usual scenario). But once it got cooking on all four 6922s, the PH-5 had a light, delicate, inviting sound. I remember thinking that music and/or vocalists and you're more interested in harmonic complexity than in wringing every last detail from a recording, the PH-5 may be all you need, even if you can afford much more. If you listen mostly to amplified rock, I could make a case for the Trigon Advance or some other solid-state phono preamps. But all over the musical map, I found the PH-5 credible and satisfying, tonally and rhythmically. They say that nothing can be all things to all people, but the PH-5 almost managed to be just that. Best of all, it costs only $1995. It's one of Audio Research's best efforts at any price, and I recommend it without reservation—unless your system is out of control on the bottom.

**Art Audio Vinyl Reference hybrid phono preamplifier: $4500**

Art Audio's Vinyl Reference is the most expensive of this bunch, and a look inside this heavyweight hybrid design explains why. Inside a shielded box within the main chassis are a FET/triode input, a MOSFET/triode output, a massive Lundahl power transformer, and a large Lundahl powersupply choke. A unique solid-state/triode regulation circuit provides stable DC and low supply impedance in the audioband. The MC input sees Lundahl step-ups, while the MOSFET/triode output is itself transformer-coupled to the Vinyl's output connectors using another pair of high-quality Lundahls.

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**Contacts**

- **Art Audio**, 34 Briarwood Road, Cranston, RI 02920. Tel: (401) 826-8826. Web: www.artaudio.com.
- **Trigon Elektronik GmbH**, Korbacher Strasse 185, 54132 Kassel, Hessen, Germany. Tel: (49) 561-474462. Web: www.trigon-audio.de.
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The internal construction quality is exquisite, and the circuit board is chock full of high-quality components from Cardas, Kimber, and other suppliers of audiophile-grade electronics. Four Svetlana 6N1P tubes provide the triode output power and control the power supply's impedance.

There are separate MC and MM inputs, single-ended RCA and XLR outputs (though the circuitry is not dual-differential), and a switch on the rear for selecting the MC loading (100, 300, 1k, or 47k ohms) as well as the MM input (47k ohms, or 47k ohms in parallel with 220pF). Gain is specified at 43dB MM and 63dB MC, with other gain amounts available by special order.

The front panel has an On/Off switch and a three-position switch for Mute and positive and negative polarity. Switching loading with the volume up resulted in a bad thump; the Mute switch was a good idea.

The Vinyl Reference had a distinct and attractive sound: jet-black quiet, lightning-fast, ultradetailed, and triode-lush in the mids, with precise detail on top. I wonder, though, about its overload margin; the 0.5mV Lyra Titan cartridge definitely gave the MC input circuit trouble, producing a bright, hard, compressed, mildly distorted sound. There was not enough gain in the MM input. When I used the 0.35mV Dynavector DRT XV-1 cartridge, the brightness and compression dissipated, yielding more of what I’m sure the designer had in mind. I’d be careful about plugging any of the newer, higher-output MCs into the Vinyl Reference’s stock 63dB-gain input. If you order a Vinyl Reference, be sure to let them know your cartridge’s output. Of course, that might limit your future cartridge choices.

With the Dynavector DRT XV-1 (review in the works), the Vinyl Reference profoundly transformed the sound of my system. When I closed my eyes, I could have sworn my Wilson Audio MAXX2s had been spirited away and replaced by something like a pair of Magneplanar MG20.1s. By which I mean that the sound was faster, tighter, and seemingly more transparent than it used to be. Resolution and air were increased. On the other hand, dynamics were mildly compressed, the bass wasn’t quite as extended or as supple on bottom, and there was an ever-so-slight sensation of hardness and a touch of glare at the very top, though the mids were sweet and lush. None of this, I assure you, was caused by the Dynavector DRT XV-1, which has a sweet yet highly resolving disposition.

The anti-transformer faction will say that I’m hearing the transformers at the MC input and output stages, but I’m not ready to declare that. I would bet that the Vinyl Reference was voiced using one of Art Audio’s warm, all-tube, single-ended-triode amplifiers. That means that what I heard can be laid at the feet of my solid-state (i.e., mean-spirited, harmonically parched) kilowatt (i.e., overpowered) reference amplifiers.

But I don’t write this column as research for my own shopping sprees. I think Art Audio’s Vinyl Reference is an outstanding, even brilliant phono preamplifier in design and execution. Given its build quality—better than my Manley Steelhead, that’s for sure—it’s quite a bargain at $4500, and in the right system it should be a major event. It’s not right for my system, but that’s not important.

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**IN HEAVY ROTATION**

1) **Bonnie "Prince" Billy, Summer in the Southeast**, Sea Note LPs (2)
2) **Silver Jews, Tanglewood Numbers**, Drag City LP
3) **Otis Spann, Is the Blues**, Pure Pleasure 180gm LP
4) **Jefferson Airplane, After Bathing at Baxter’s**, Sundazed 180gm mono LP
5) **Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers, Keystone 3**, Pure Audiophile 180gm LPs (2)
6) **Taj Mahal, Taj Mahal**, Sundazed 180gm mono LP
7) **Chet Atkins, Mister Guitar**, Speakers Corner 180gm LP
8) **Memphis Slim, Memphis Slim**, U.S.A., Pure Pleasure 180gm LP
9) **Eric Clapton, Back Home, Warner Bros.**, 180gm LPs (2)
10) **Ray Brown Trio, The Red Hot Ray Brown Trio**, Groove Note 45rpm, 180gm LPs (2)

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- Michael Fremer

"...addictive."
- John Atkinson
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Reading between the lines

**kW dm25 Transport**

The dm25 transport will extract more information from a CD than ever possible before. Separate left and right balanced AES/EBU outputs clocking at 96kHz, means the DAC will see more information resulting in the highest resolution possible. The four-way adjustable suspension and six-sided aluminum casing ensure the dm25 will never go into error correction due to air born resonance. Separate choke-regulated power supplies are used in every stage to ensure no electrical interference between components.

The Magic Box

**kW dm25 DAC**

The dm25 DAC is a work of art that can be used with any transport upsampling to 24/192. There are separate switchable tube and solid-state outputs, allowing you to choose the optimum playback circuit with any disc or music style. It's the equivalent of having two high-end CD players in one system.

Together, they create the ultimate organic listening experience!
Arguably more than any other, the classic 7" full-range Lowther is a driver whose potential has yet to be fully exploited. Surely I'm not the only person who's been charmed by their uncanny presence, clarity, and sheer musical dynamism—not to mention their ability to do all that with just two or three watts of amplifier power—yet put off by their weak bass and peaky lower trebles.

Enter the Danish audio designer Tommy Horning, whose domestic speakers are among the most recent attempts at making a more perfect Lowther-based product. For two years running, his entry-level Perikles ($8500/pair) has provided some of the most convincing music at Primedia's Home Entertainment shows, as you've no doubt read in this column and elsewhere. Now I've finally had a chance to try a pair of them in my own listening room.1

The Horning Perikles isn't perfect. There's congestion here and lumpiness there, and a lack of ultimate scale overall. But for a very efficient full-range speaker—a feat that itself seems to exhaust the talents of most designers who try—the Horning Perikles does everything else at least acceptably well, and in some cases very well indeed. This may be the best off-the-shelf, high-sensitivity loudspeaker you can buy that's also of a reasonable size and price: at least as good as the Beauhorn 1


Virtuoso and the Lamhorn, and possibly even better.

This shouldn't work

The most critical aspect of virtually any Lowther-based design is its bass-loading scheme, and the Horning Perikles is no exception. In the Perikles, a 7" Lowther driver fires toward the listener, two 9" woofers fire in the opposite direction, and the rear waves of all three play into something the Horning website, www.horninghybrid.com, calls an H.D.A.Q.C.S., for Horning Double Asymmetrical Quarter Wave Cabinet/Enclosure System. At first jot, meaning no offense and noting that English is not the Horning company's first language, the phrase seems nonsensical. Then the words Quarter Wave jump out, and seldom-used wheels begin to turn: P.G. Voigt, the Lowther engineer whose genius found flower in the most basic elements of their timeless designs, once created an enclosure that some adherents dubbed the Voigt Pipe. Other people tagged it with a more descriptive term: the Tapered Quarter Wave Pipe, or TQWP.

A TQWP is sometimes described as a cross between a transmission line and a horn, and I suppose that's true, depending on one's definition of transmission line. But it's a better idea—and a safer one, in snippy waters—to begin with the even simpler concept of the science behind literally any loudspeaker enclosure wherein the rear wave of a woofer plays into a tunnel or tube of considerable length and reasonably consistent cross section (noting also that soundwaves are dumb things that always travel in a certain way, regardless of where a clever designer tells them where to go, or what name he gives to the path he's laid out for them). As a reproduced tone descends in frequency, the size of its wavelength goes up, of course, and when this progresses to where the wavelength is so long that half of it is equal to the length of the tube, then the tone coming out of that tube is perfectly out of phase with the tone that went in. But because that tone entered the tube from the rear of the driver, and because the rear wave is perfectly out of phase with the front wave, then the bass tone coming out of the tube is perfectly in phase with the tone coming out of the front of the driver. The effect is additive, and bass reinforcement occurs, which is nice.

However: As the reproduced tone continues to descend in frequency, its wavelength becomes so large that a quarter wave is the same size as the length of the tube. This is where something interesting and altogether different happens: The movement of the woofer's diaphragm is impeded. Normally, I'd say that's not at all nice, but this is a different case: If you design the tube so that its length is equal to one quarter the wavelength size at the woofer's resonant frequency, then the impedance peak associated with that resonant frequency is drastically damped, and power transfer and bass response flatten out nicely.

Let's have a closer look at the Horning Perikles and see if it fits the theory. Like so many other contemporary loudspeakers, the Perikles is a good deal deeper than it is wide, but in this

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instance the depth is chosen to accom- 
mmodate an unusual three-sectioned 
labyrinth. The rear section is formed 
by an interior MDF wall that slants 
away from the inside top of the enclo- 
sure, and which is also open to the rest 
of the interior at the top. The front sec- 
tion is formed by a similar wall, also 
open at the top but noticeably taller 
than its forward counterpart. The cen- 
ter chamber is the space between those 
two interior walls, which also happens 
to be open at the bottom—what we’d 
call the mouth of a horn, if it were such 
a thing (and it may well be).

Let’s return to the rear of the enclo- 
sure, where a pair of Spanish Beyma 
BR60 woofers, each nicely packed with 
paper cones and butyl rubber sur- 
rounds, fire their rear waves into the 
Perikles’ rearmost chamber. If you con- 
sider the rear and center chambers as a 
single, continuous tube of gradually 
widening bore, then what you have is a 
gradually tapered pipe with an effective 
length of about 74”. And the resonant 
frequency of the Beyma BR60 woofer, 
according to the company’s website, is 
45Hz—a frequency whose quarter- 
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Because the very-low-frequency 
waves will follow the path of least 
acoustical impedance, it seems they’ll 
tend not to load the front chamber, 
thanks to its taller interior wall and con- 
sequently smaller opening (although on 
that point I’m open to correction by 
more knowledgeable souls). And that 
rises the question: What, then, is the 
nature of the loading for that front-
mounted Lowther, whose rear wave 
fires into the front chamber of the 
labyrinth?

Well, the area of the chamber below 
that driver isn’t very large, and I sup- 
pose that, and the constricted opening 
at the top of the chamber, might allow 
it to function as the (high-pressure, 
high-acoustical-impedance) throat of a 
horn, again opening at the mouth at 
the bottom of the enclosure. The 
whole of the enclosure may also be 
seen by the Lowther as a tapered quar- 
ter-wave pipe of an effective length dif- 
f erent from that of the pipe driven by 
the woofers—an effect mitigated by the 
fact that the more tightly suspended 
Lowther has a very different resonant 
frequency from the loosely suspended 
Beyma woofers. Maybe not quite ka- 
ching, but at least Thank you, sir, 
and please come again.

In other words, what we have here is 
your basic Double Asymmetric Quarter 
Wave Cabinet. I think.

You’ll have to sew them back on 
first
Tommy Hornig’s Lowther driver of 
choice is the DX2, which uses a com- 
pact rare-earth magnet instead of the 
more generously sized alnico or cerami-
cic magnets of the company’s other, older 
versions. Before fitting a DX2 to a 
Perikles, Hornig treats the parchment- 
like cone with a damping compound, 
then performs an even more drastic 
modification: He removes the high-fre- 
quency whizzer cone altogether. And 
before you go complaining that a 
Lowther without the whizzer makes no 
more sense than bacon without the 
nitrates, let me remind you that some 
enthusiasts believe that the infamous 
Lowther shout—that lower-treble peak 
that keeps some music lovers away from 
the breed altogether—has its origins in 
the way that the main cone and whizzer 
react with one another; ie, unpleasantly.

The Lowther whizzer was never all 
that great a propagator of high fre- 
quencies to begin with, and its contribu- 
tion to the single-pointedness of the 
driver’s dispersion may well be more 
than compensated for by its lack of stiffness 
and its relatively high mass—and conse-
quent premature rolloff. So Hornig 
replaces it with a separate tweeter: a 1.75” 
plastic cone mounted in a three-part 
wooden subenclosure, the hardwood 
front of which is machined into a Tractrix 
horn curve (also appropriate, given that 
Mr. PG. Voigt was also Mr. Tractrix). 
Thus the Lowther driver is relieved of all 
its chores except the one it does best.

There’s a lot more going on in the 
Horning Perikles than I could possibly 
cover in 3000 words, but one other 
technical detail deserves mention: The 
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and please come again.

In other words, what we have here is 
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the listening seat than usual. And the picking had real human force, which distinguished Tony's signature cross-picking sound from what might otherwise have seemed just an arpeggiated chord. The playing leaned forward, in the best and realest way.

Moving to something a bit larger in scale, the violins in Carl Schuricht and the Vienna Philharmonic's recording of Bruckner's Symphony 9 (LP, EMI ASD 493) sounded sweet and well-textured and similarly present; more important, the playing was dramatically nuanced, with a hard-to-describe sense of touch and humanness. And the pitches and pitch relationships were dead-on. Again: Whooa.

**Darned if I know why**

Some enthusiasts think that good stereo imaging is what happens when a musical sound comes from a place in the room that doesn't seem to correlate with the position of a tweeter. I suppose there's some truth in that. Heard in that light, the Hornings imaged quite well—again, especially in the context of products that are very efficient, that exist to make music, and that don't seem to give a damn about anything else. With the Hornings toed straight in toward the listening seat—the only way to do it with these guys, I think—I heard the first-row strings in Dutoits unexpectedly lovely recording of Mendelssohn's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (CD, London 417 541-2) form an almost perfect V that was nowhere near the speakers themselves in terms of either their lateral positions or their distance from my seat. Still, the texture and richness (if not accuracy) of tone of those strings was as good as I usually hear from my Quads. And still, the system made music.

The Hornings also had a nice way with musical scale, at least within the constraints implied by their 41" height. (The Perikles is the smallest loudspeaker in Hornings' H.D.A.Q.S. line.) My Quads pretty much always sound big, but the Hornings were good at sounding small or big, as needed. For the first time in a while I revisited Paul McCartney's pleasant if inconsequential 1996 album, *Flaming Pie* (LP, Capitol CI 7243), which happens to be very well recorded and mastered. The lighter numbers in panicula4 such as "Great Day" showed off the Hornings' nice way of presenting smaller-scale music, and even on larger numbers—the upbeat jam "Really Love You," for example—the after-the-fact instrumental and vocal overdubs stood up between the speakers with a sense of both scale and clarity that any reasonable listener would consider first-rate.

Piano music was a mixed bag. The Hornings was capable of reproducing that good sense of humanness—and, of course, its musical flow was superb, and untroubled by any hint of mechanical sound. But dependably neutral piano recordings exposed the Hornings' mid- and upper-bass registers as a bit uneven in their frequency response, as on Murray Perahia's 2001 disc of Chopin's Etudes, Op.10 and 25 (CD, Sony Classical SK 61885).

In my room, the Horning Perikles sounded righter in every way with their "variators" closed all the way or open just a tiny bit: That's certainly how the Hornings did pitches the best—and rhythms, and timbres, and the lot of it, notwithstanding a beguiling increase in scale with the plugs removed altogether. If you hear them at a store or a show and you're not impressed, don't write off the Hornings without checking those adjustments first; the differences are not at all subtle.

**Final observations**

All in all, I was very impressed with the Horning Perikles, which succeeded at so many of the things I consider crucial to music playback. You can find any number of loudspeakers in the general area of their $8500/pair price that have more extended and more transparent trebles; heaven knows you can find speakers with better bass extension and much better bass clarity and neutrality. But I have yet to hear one with quite this combination of musical and sonic strengths, alloyed with the kind of efficiency that allows the use of virtually any low-power amplifier.

I've been teaching my wife how to play the mandolin, and at the end of a recent session I delayed her return to the scullery with a typically male dumb stunt: I asked her to close her eyes and listen for the differences between an acoustic guitar with a mahogany body (1962 Martin D-18) and one of identical size and shape but with a body made of Brazilian rosewood (1999 Santa Cruz Tony Rice dreadnought). I asked her to describe the differences, and she did so perfectly, observing that, as different as they are, she liked them equally well. Then she said, "They're like Quads and Lowthers: I think you really need to have both."

I've said it before and I'll say it again: I married the right girl.
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Mark Wilder, senior mastering engineer for Sony Music Studios, looked expectantly from John Atkinson to Bob Saglio to me and asked, “Are you ready?” As it had been my inquiry that had resulted in this mind-boggling, once-in-a-lifetime, peak-experience get-together, and as no one else was speaking up, I replied, “As ready as we’ll ever be.”

Weeks earlier, I had asked Sony whether I could ask a few questions of the mastering engineer who had made the DSD transfer of the master tapes of Miles Davis’ Kind of Blue, from which the SACD editions were made.1 In due course, I received a flabbergasting e-mail invitation from Wilder—as low-key, unpretentious, and generous a chap as you could ever hope to meet—to pick a convenient date to drop by to hear the master tapes.

Out of genuine affection for John Atkinson, and admittedly out of some vestigial sense of political acumen, I responded that I could not imagine accepting such an invitation without asking if my editor-in-chief could tag along. My friend Bob Saglio agreed to share the driving chores. For its part, Sony transferred the priceless master tapes from their secure remote storage facility to their Manhattan mastering labs.

When Bob and I arrived, we were greeted by Mark Wilder and a fairly agog John Atkinson, who exclaimed that he could not believe that he was looking at the original tape boxes and recording-session log sheets from 1959. I goggled myself. Carefully examining the log sheet for the first session, I told Wilder that he had to understand that for us, this was like being allowed to look around the Vatican Library after closing time. He nodded comprehension, and quietly said, “I have the best job in the world.”

The tapes from the prime three-channel deck were edited with razor blades to remove test tones, slatings, and session chatter, and to provide the spacings between tracks. All of the numbers on Kind of Blue are complete takes—there were no edits within pieces. (However, the oft-repeated claim—which appears even in the 2004 documentary Made in Heaven—that the album contained the first complete take of each number, is an overstatement. “Flamenco Sketches” had two complete takes, the second of which was chosen for the original release.) The three-channel edited master tapes were then mixed down to two-track tapes that were used to cut the stereo LP lacquers, with the fadeouts at the ends of tracks applied manually as the lacquers were cut.

1 There are single-layer nonhybrid SACDs for the US market and double-layer SACD/CD hybrids for Asia. The SACDs sounded great, so I had no qualms that they might turn out to be royal screwups on the order of Norah Jones’ Come Away With Me, which used the low-res CD master for the SACD’s 2-channel program (but not its multichannel program). However, I was curious about the equipment and techniques used.

About those tapes

According to Mark Wilder, Columbia’s practice at its 30th Street studios in 1959 was to use four tape decks simultaneously: a prime mono deck and a mono backup, for mono LP release; and a prime three-channel deck and a three-channel backup, for stereo LP release. The mono tapes have since disappeared. The backup three-channel tapes (the ones we heard) were sent to the vault, where they rested untouched from 1959 until 1992.

Above: (l-r) John Atkinson, Bob Saglio, and Mark Wilder gaze thoughtfully at the Kind of Blue master tape boxes; the first reel is already on the playback deck at the rear.

Below: Still life with sheet music, tape boxes, and session log.
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Matt Polk, Speaker Specialist

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It was not until 1992 that Wilder discovered that the prime three-channel deck had been running slightly slowly during the first session, with the result that on the LPs and CDs made from it, the numbers on side A (the first three tracks) played slightly sharp in musical pitch. By the time of the second recording session, seven weeks later, the prime three-track deck had received some maintenance, so the numbers on the LP's side B were recorded at the proper speed. To get the proper pitch without adjusting the playback deck's speed, and knowing that the backup tapes had never been played, Wilder used them for the 1992 Columbia Mastersound SBM Gold CD remastering. Those tapes have been used ever since, including for the SACD releases.

Wilder had set up for us an Ampex ATR 102 three-track tape deck to play the simultaneous-safety three-channel masters through a simple mixer, with the center track split right and left for two-channel stereo playback, then to a Spectral stereo amp and two Dun-tech Princess speakers.

His mastering room was very carefully set up. In addition to the expected acoustical treatments, the speakers themselves sat on 600-lb concrete blocks, to compensate for being on the third floor of the building. Pennies had not been pinched for his equipment; in addition to brand names from the pro audio world, he had EMM Labs (Ed Meitner) digital and Tim de Paravicini analog equipment. Along the way, Wilder answered my original question that had set things in motion: The SACDs derive directly from analog tape by way of EMM Labs DSD equipment. There was no PCM interstage, and the Kind of Blue SACDs are not repurposed "Red Book" data.

Wilder pushed Play. We heard session producer Irving Townsend say, "The machine is on ... here we go." At that point, I realized how glad I was to be in the company of friends. I had suddenly become unsure I could ever convey to someone who had not been there the frisson, the sense of rolling up a window shade and looking out a window at the early afternoon of March 2, 1959.

To say the least, it sounded extraordinarily immediate. The stereo SACD is, in contrast, two generations removed: first, a three-track to two-track analog tape intermaster (to allow for sequencing the tracks), and second, the SACD itself. You can't get closer on this earth to what happened at the Kind of Blue sessions than we did. But my making you envious about our good fortune does none of us any good. I will just make a few observations about that listening session, then move on to letting you know about resources that can help you deepen your appreciation of Kind of Blue.

Because Kind of Blue was recorded in multitrack mono, without the use of any real stereophonic microphone techniques, the instruments appear in fairly constricted left, center, and right locations. But the center image, Davis' trumpet plus Paul Chambers' bass, was solid as a rock—so shockingly solid that at first I thought the center speaker was on. It wasn't. By the way, the microphones were, according to Ashley Kahn's book, Telefunken U-49s—can't complain about that. (A trap for the unwary: Between the first recording session, which accounts for the album's first three tracks, and the second, which accounts for the last two, the sax players swap track assignments. For the first three numbers, tenor saxophonist John Coltrane is on the left and alto saxophonist Julian "Cannonball" Adderley is on the right; for the last two, Adderley is on the left and Coltrane on the right. The positions of the other musicians in the soundstage...
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Mark Wilder even let me play with the mixer's faders a bit. Pulling down the outer tracks, I swear I could hear the sonic signature of the surface of the walls of the concrete echo chamber in 30th Street's basement. Although only Davis and Chambers' track had a send and return to and from the echo chamber, there was some degree of leakage from the other instruments. Perhaps that helps account for the recording's naturally ambient sound.

While we are all conditioned to hearing the tracks in the order of the released LP, track 2, "Freddie Freeloader," was recorded first, because that was the only track on which Wynton Kelly was to play. In similar fashion, "Flamenco Sketches," the album's final track, was the first piece recorded the day of the second session (April 22, 1959). "All Blues," the next-to-last track, was recorded last. Doubtless by coincidence, the recording sessions began and ended with blues.

Bill Evans' claim in his original liner notes that all the pieces were totally unfamiliar and totally improvised is to some degree fairy dust. Drummer Jimmy Cobb later recalled having played "So What" in live performances before the recording session; "All Blues" had been evolving for at least six months, with input from Gil Evans; the introduction to "So What" was most likely written by Gil Evans rather than improvised by Bill Evans; and "Flamenco Sketches" owes much to Bill Evans' previously released "Peace Piece." Still, the most deeply impressive aspect of this listening session was that it demonstrated that, for the most part, the musicians were feeling their way, coming up with ideas only seconds before they had to play them.

To hear "Flamenco Sketches" evolve from the first complete take, through several incomplete attempts, to the final take, which is the one that was used for the original release, was enlightening and humbling. (The first take, the only complete alternate take from the two sessions, was used as the bonus track on releases from 1992 on.)

Books, etc.

As the master tapes began playing, I pulled from my briefcase the resource that has most helped me deepen my appreciation of Kind of Blue: a hardbound volume of Kind of Blue scores, with all the solos and horn-ensemble sections transcribed, note for note. I opened it to "Freddie Freeloader," and to say that John Atkinson was engrossed within seconds would be an understatement. The next day he went online and bought a copy. (Be sure to get the Deluxe Edition.)

In addition to an appendix of the complete Wynton Kelly solo from "Freddie Freeloader" (the score contains just the right-hand part), the book contains the score for the alternate take of "Flamenco Sketches" and an excellent introduction, by Bill Kirchner. Even if your music-reading skills are shaky, it's thrilling to follow along. It also shows how even the most accurate transcription can only suggest what the music really is: tone color, dynamics, inflection, fine points of phrasing. They all don't just jump off the page and play themselves.

There is only one taxing page-flipping exercise. At 8:30 into "So What," at the conclusion of Paul Chambers' bass solo, you have to flip from p.37, where it says "D.S. al Coda," back to p.21, where a short stretch of the music repeats itself. The repeated section ends at the top of p.23, at 8:54; the music picks up again on p.37 at the Coda sign.

I know that that is the real sheet-music way of doing things, and it does have the advantage of making obvious that the brief sections where the two-note "So What?" theme modulates up half a step and then back down serve as bookends around the solos. But for a mere 24 seconds of music, I would have written the music straight out as it is played, rather than requiring a flipping back and forth that seems to take almost as long as the repeated section itself.

Apart from that, the only criticism I could possibly make would be that for the interested reader who is not familiar with score-reading, adding the start times of each solo (or even a time-check every 30 seconds) to the score would make it a lot less likely to get lost. Again, that's not the way scores are usually printed, but in this case I think it would make sense.

Ashley Kahn, whose volume on John Coltrane's A Love Supreme I profiled in the August 2005 Stereophile (Vol.28 No.8, www.stereophile.com/musicrecordings/805book), gives similarly definitive treatment to Kind of Blue in Kind of Blue: The Making of the Miles Davis Masterpiece. Kahn's book is the best all-around treatment, and I highly recommend it. But I would still advise getting the scores first, and reading them over until you can see them with your eyes shut.

PULLING DOWN THE OUTER TRACKS, I SWEAR I COULD HEAR THE SONIC SIGNATURE OF THE SURFACE OF THE WALLS OF THE CONCRETE ECHO CHAMBER IN 30TH STREET'S BASEMENT.
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To quote Miles Davis, "So what?" most mornings, as soon as he got out of bed, he would cue up *Kind of Blue.* To quote Miles Davis, “So what?” Meshell Ndegeocello also assures us that *Kind of Blue* is both important and influential. Sigh.

What would have been much more valuable would have been for someone who really knows what they are talking about (Dr. Billy Taylor, perhaps?) to sit down at a piano and demonstrate the differences between major, minor, and modal scales, and perhaps even show how “Blue in Green” would have sounded with all its tonal ambiguities squared up into F major. Or have a trumpet player show how Davis’ first solo in “Flamenco Sketches” would sound with all those accidental flats turned into the naturals or sharps of its nominal key of D major.

In addition to the shortcomings in content, I found *Made in Heaven*’s production values artsy-fartsy in the extreme: intentionally bad focus, stupid close-ups of the side of someone’s nose, etc.

*Miles Davis and American Culture,* a collection of essays and interviews edited by Gerald Early, is notable for its complete coverage of Davis’ entire career, as well as his antecedents in the St. Louis jazz scene from 1926 on. An excellent chronology places each event in Davis’ life in the context not only of larger jazz history, but of African-American history as well.

The *Miles Davis Companion: Four Decades of Commentary* and *A Miles Davis Reader* are well-chosen selections of contemporary source materials and retrospective criticism, with surprisingly little overlap. Both cover the entirety of Davis’ career.

**And the fussification is?**

If I had to explain in one paragraph to a visitor from Mars why *Kind of Blue* deserves so much attention, it might go something like this:

In a few hours, on two spring afternoons in 1959, Miles Davis and his colleagues somehow managed to combine several disparate and previously tentative musical innovations, all at once and in confident full strength. They abandoned popular songs, and even song form, as the bases for jazz improvisation. They freed themselves from harmonically organizing their solos by cycling through chord changes, instead letting the internal tension of modal scales provide the driving force. They opted for implied reference rather than outright quotation. They stripped out all fanfares, flourishes, and instrumental virtuosity for its own sake. What was left was pure music, equally capable of reaching the most casual listener and transfixing the most expert.

However, as Cannonball Adderley later pointed out, modal jazz’s internal contradiction was that by getting rid of the discipline of conventional harmonic structure—and, often, making fewer demands on instrumental technique—players who had little of value to say could use modal jazz as a paint-by-numbers technique. But the fact that the coinage was later debased does not mean that it was not once pure.

**IN A FEW HOURS, ON TWO SPRING AFTERNOONS IN 1959, MILES DAVIS AND HIS COLLEAGUES SOMEHOW MANAGED TO COMBINE SEVERAL DISPARATE AND PRESUMABLY TENTATIVE MUSICAL INNOVATIONS, ALL AT ONCE AND IN CONFIDENT FULL STRENGTH.**

**KIND OF BLUE ON (MOSTLY) DEAD TREES**


*Kind of Blue: The Making of the Miles Davis Masterpiece* By Ashley Kahn; Foreword by Jimmy Cobb.


*The Making of Kind of Blue: Miles Davis and His Masterpiece* By Eric Nisenson.


*The Miles Davis Companion: Four Decades of Commentary* Gary Carner, ed.


*A Miles Davis Reader* Bill Kirchner, ed.


[Miles Davis—Kind of Blue: Deluxe Edition](http://www.Stereophile.com)

Jan 2006

5TH ELEMENT

Miles Davis was not only a supremely talented player; he fairly deserves the lion's share of the credit for bringing to the point of critical mass three of the most important developments in jazz history: cool jazz, modal jazz, and jazz fusion. But, as critic Stanley Crouch pointed out, Davis’ curse was his compulsion to change, constantly. Whether any given change was for the better was less important than the fact that it was change.

Consciously or not, Davis internalized...
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the lesson of the Orpheus myth: to look back brings only loss and sorrow. One of the most affecting vignettes in Eric Nisenson’s book is his recounting of how, toward the end of Davis’ life, Nisenson managed to get Davis to listen

DAVIS’ PRETERNATURAL ABILITY TO MOVE HEARTS THROUGH HIS HORN WAS DARKLY MIRRORED BY HIS TITANIC INSECURITIES.

...to some of his work from the Kind of Blue era. Davis listened as though hearing it for the first time, but then turned on Nisenson: “How could you do this to me, Eric? I thought we were friends.”

Davis’ preternatural ability to move hearts through his horn was darkly mirrored by his titanic insecurities, and his propensity to dominate and exploit those closest to him. Books have been filled with Davis’ manifest and fell betrayals, ranging from his early pimping (he also stole Clark Terry’s trumpet and sold it to buy drugs) to, later on, well-documented instances of beating his wives and girlfriends and stealing writing credit from Eddie Vinson and Bill Evans. (The Miles Davis Estate now concedes on its official website, www.milesdavis.com/bio.htm, that Bill Evans was the sole author of “Blue in Green.”)

In a famous photograph of Davis, taken in his home in 1971 by Anthony Barboza, he stands before a large walk-in closet. The adjacent walls are book-matched hardwoods. The closet is two steps above the bedroom floor; the risers are carpeted. Davis is dressed in period mod attire. Above him, countless plater stalactites hang from two crescent-shaped sections of the room’s arsly, with-it ceiling. From inside the closet spill onto the floor countless articles of clothing, socks, shoes, and boots. Dozens of belts and scarves hang over a valet. The expression on Davis’ face may be in earnest or it may be mocking. Whether mocking himself, the photographer, or the eventual viewer of the image, who is to say?

Davis was well-read (he hated Hermann Hesse’s novels, telling one girlfriend that either they or she had to go), so I think it unlikely that he was unaware of the eerie resonances between the scene he created (or allowed himself to be set in) and the famous scene in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby, in which Gatsby attempts to impress on Daisy Buchanan that he is no longer the penniless drifter she had known years before. Gatsby attempts this by opening the massive clothes cabinets in his bedroom and throwing dozens of luxurious tailored shirts onto a table. In his novel, Fitzgerald showed in a quintessentially American way the tragic costs of fixated love and obsessive ambition. One could argue that, but for Mark Twain’s Huck Finn, The Great Gatsby is the most American of American novels.

Miles Davis approached life as though it were a matter of surface sheen—his elegant clothes and deportment, the Mercedeses and Ferraris and all the other Hefneresque elements of conspicuous consumption. Some cultural critics have found in this echoes of Oscar Wilde’s aestheticism.

For me, however, what fits Davis more closely is Jay Gatsby’s simultaneous and self-contradictory craving for acceptance by those of more fortunate birth, while hoping to be seen as not giving a damn. In real life, Davis’ bulging clothes closets could no more fend off looming tragedy than could Gatsby’s.

Miles Davis once remarked that he considered Kind of Blue a failure, compared to his ambitions for it. He said he had wished to evoke both the haunting sound of the spirituals he heard as a child while walking at night on a back road in rural Arkansas, and the sounds of thumb pianos he heard at a recital of the Ballet Africaine of Guinea. But listening to Davis’ solos on “Flamenco Sketches,” I do hear lonely laments; and listening to Bill Evans’ solos on “Blue in Green,” I do hear gently percussive dissonances. My verdict: If Kind of Blue is a failure, it is one of the most glorious failures ever.

Some people fear that by studying a work of art too much (or even at all), they will lose the ability to appreciate it, or at least, that it will lose its freshness. If that ever is the case, perhaps there was less to the work than first met the eye. For a work of the stature of Kind of Blue, I think that there will always be an element of mystery, no matter how much we read, study, and ponder it. Yes, I clearly see the notes on the printed page. But how the players managed to come up with most of those notes on the spur of the moment remains, for me, a matter of wonder and gratitude.

Comments: jmrcds@jmrcds.com.

Did you hear that? If not, then check us out. Read how we’ve touched so many for so long, hear why tens of thousands worldwide have become so emotionally connected to their music, and most importantly...
I sat down to write the introduction to the 2006 edition of Stereophile's annual "Records To Die For" extravaganza, and what popped into my head? Why, death, of course. After that, dead rock stars. What a concept. I mean, talk about dying for music.

After a recent stroll through a book about the graves of rock stars (see "Aural Robert," January 2006), I did a little web research and found out that rock stars die at an average age of 36.9. (For the rest of us, the average is 75.8.) Of the top 300 or so best-known dead rock musicians, 18 have been murdered, 3 electrocuted, and 5 drowned. Further, and one suspects influenced by the phrase "party like a rock star," 37 more died of "misc. medical" afflictions and 21 others passed on to that great MSG in the sky for reasons best left "unknown." As these figures show, being a rock star ain't all deli trays and sexually transmitted diseases. It's a tough biz.

My definition of dead rock star is admittedly broad. Charlie Parker qualifies. So do Mozart, Fela, and Sam Cooke. Anyone brilliantly talented who lived fast, died (relatively) young, and left, as the song goes, a beautiful memory. Or, as a certain cartoon father would say, "a big, garlicky corpse." But to be a dead rock star you must, at some point—preferably the beginning—have backed up your stardom with music. It's that kind of passion, of throwing yourself into the abyss night after night, that can wear you out. And it's that sacrifice, that art that sustains and soothes us savage-breasted civilians.

Every year, we here at the leading high-end audio publication ask our writing staff—our own rock stars, if you will—to contribute short reviews of two recordings by those they deem rock stars that they couldn't live without. Anything—from unmarked white-label LPs (recordings from the, uh, so-called "gray area") to shiny new SACDs is fair game. Guilty pleasures—like, say, Pachelbel's Canon, or anything by Ted Nugent, are welcome, as is the Original London Cast soundtrack from Mary Poppins (keep reading). Besides being invaluable as a musical Rorschach test of our writing staff's mental and emotional makeups (don't get me started), "R2D4" hopefully digs out a few records you hadn't thought of in a while—or, even better, had never heard of at all. While rock stars, breathing or not,
may have all the fun (?) making the music, at least we get to listen. So welcome to our annual guide to what keeps us musically alive. Welcome to "R2D4," a 2006—Robert Baird

Note: If a recording listed here has previously been reviewed in Stereophile, whether in "Record Reviews," "Quarter Notes," or past editions of "Records To Die For," the volume and number of the pertinent issue appear in parentheses at the end of the review. For example, a listing of "(XXVII-3)" means that a review of the recording appeared in Vol.27 No.3 (March 2004).

John Atkinson

Cream: Royal Albert Hall, London May 2-3-5-6 2005


When making my final choices for this year’s listing, I was more than surprised to end up with two DVD-Videos of live concerts—no music CDs, SACDs, or DVD-As made my final cut. Yes, Cream’s Albert Hall concert is also available on a 2-CD set (Reprise 9362-49416-2), but the CDs’ sound is not significantly different from the DVDs’ LPCM soundtracks, and while the CDs have the same concert program, they offer just one alternate take (“Sleepy Time Time”) compared with the DVD’s three (“Sleepy Time Time,” “We’re Going Wrong,” “Sunshine of Your Love”). These three gezees amply demonstrate that all that is required for great music making is talent and empathy. Ginger Baker plays with mastery of time, while Eric Clapton demonstrates a consistent maturity in the construction of his solos that occasionally escaped him in the 1960s. I was fortunate enough to be at the Friday-night concert that contributes most of the material to this set, and I thought at the concert that only Jack Bruce was overshadowed by his playing of 37 years ago. That impression is reinforced by repeated playing of the DVD. Not that he doesn’t play superbly—and the sounds of his Hartke-amplified Warwick fretless and Gibson EB-1 basses are way better than the fuzzy, midrangey Marshall stacks he used to use—but compared to his younger self, he tends to leave opportunities unexplored. But still, a concert to remember for a lifetime.

The Crossroads Guitar Festival DVD was released in 2004 and has stood up to repeated playings in the year since. Clapton is joined by a galaxy of guitar talent, ranging from the obvious—Billy Gibbons, B.B. King, Eric Johnson, Joe Walsh, Steve Vai, John McLaughlin, Carlos Santana, Robert Cray, Jimmie Vaughan, Buddy Guy—to the unexpected: David Hidalgo, Vince Gill, James Taylor, John Mayer, Dan Tyminski, Larry Carlton, Honeyboy Edwards, Hubert Sumlin, Robert Randolph, JJ Cale, Doyle Bramhall II. Not one of them phones it in. However, the stars for me are the many uncredited sidemen, led by the incomparable Booker T. and the MG’s, with Steve Cropper. Recorded live at the Dallas Cotton Bowl, the sound has refreshingly wide dynamic range and some of the best live drum sound I have heard. Why can’t studio-produced rock CDs sound this natural, this unforced, this good?

Jim Austin

Beethoven: The Late String Quartets, Vol.1


Beethoven: The Late String Quartets, Vol.2

Yale String Quartet: Broadus Erle, Yoko Matsuda, violin; David Schwartz, viola; Walter Trampler, viola; Aldo Parisot, cello. Artemis/Vanguard Classics 1206 (2 CDs). 2004. No prod. or eng. listed. ADD.? TT: 108:00

Though I’ve tried, I find it nearly impossible to identify what aspects of a performance cause it to speak more clearly than another. I don’t know what makes the Yale String Quartet’s recordings of Beethoven’s late quartets so affecting. Nothing about these performances stands out, except perhaps the quality of the sound, and maybe that’s the point: the Yale performers play it relatively straight and let the music speak for itself.

On the original four-LP boxed set (Vanguard Cardinal Series VCS 10101/4) I bought for $5 at Enterprise Records in Portland, Maine, the sound is superb: plenty of wood and rosin and a hint of ambience, just the way I like it. Those LPs are long out of print, but let us all praise used-vinyl stores and the amazing independent label Artemis, home of such acts as Better Than Ezra, Al Franken, The Baha Men, Steve Earle, Yoga Chant-Master Krishna Das, the North Mississippi All-Stars, and—thanks to Artemis’s reissue of big chunks of the Vanguard catalog—the Yale String Quartet.

Robert Baird

Johnny Cash: Unchained


It may be absence making the heart grow fonder, or emotional blowback from the new film about a small part of his life in which Joaquin Phoenix uncannily echoes some of his facial expressions, but Johnny Cash seems to have been in my CD player an inordinate amount this year. And while At Folsom Prison may be his Sgt. Pepper’s and The Fabulous Johnny Cash his first coherent (and still
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great) album, it's Unchained, the second of his four albums produced by Rick Rubin, that recaptures and expands on the verve and sparkle that always made the man (in black) and his work so indispensable. With Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers as the backup band providing a loose feel that at times is almost jammy, alt-rock tunes such as Beck's "Rowboat" and Soundgarden's "Rusty Cage" mix well with spot-on versions of classics like "Sea of Heartbreak," "Memories Are Made of This," and Cash's own Sun-era rockabilly number, "Country Boy." One of the final highlights in the career of a larger-than-life icon of popular music. (XX-2)

JO JO GUNNE: Bite Down Hard

Not sure if this one's worth dying for, but then, part of being a music lover is guilty pleasures, and this nugget from the early 1970s is certainly that. Led by former Spirit members Jay Ferguson and Mark Andes, SoCal pop-rock band Jo Jo Gunne broke out in 1972 with the single "Run, Run, Run," from their self-titled debut. On Bite Down Hard, they blow away the sophomore slump with hooky, sweet-chorded, hard-rock-edged tunes like the opener, "Ready Freddy," the hit that shouldn't been, "60 Minutes to Go"; and such rave-ups as "Rock Around the Symbol" and "Take Me Down Easy." The arrangements are filled with weird breaks, keyboard effects that were then the state of the art, and lots of Matthew Andes' inventive guitar work. Does it sound dated? To a point, sure, but in a genre forever overloaded with forgettable fluff, these guys, as evidenced by this record, had a moment or two when the juices flowed. Now available on CD from Rhino Handmade and Collector's Choice.

LARRY BIRNBAUM
T-Bone Walker: T-Bone Blues

T-Bone Blues is a rare exception to the rule that artists' rerecords of their own hits don't measure up to the originals. First released in 1959, it reprises such 1940s classics as "Mean Old World," "T-Bone Shuffle," and the inevitable "Call It Stormy Monday." Blunting the raw edge and dropping the swing feel of his earlier recordings, Walker finds a mellower groove, with longer guitar solos and better sound. Chuck Berry and B.B. King both copied their styles from T-Bone, and there's no better way to learn blues guitar than to strap on your axe and play along.

Johnny Pacheco: Cañonazo

This seminal album helped launch the salsa revolution a decade before the genre acquired that saucy sobriquet. A Dominican-born New Yorker, Pacheco formed his Cuban-style conjunto and recorded Cañonazo for the newly founded Fanía label in 1964, featuring Puerto Rican—born singer Pete "El Conde" Rodríguez. Covering Cuban oldies by the likes of Sonora Matancera and Felix Chappotin, the group can't match the richness of the originals, but on such irresistibly propulsive tracks as Cheo Marquetti's "Pinareño" and Reinaldo Bolaños's "Fanía" (for which the label was named), the music has a dance-floor authenticity all its own.

PAUL BOLIN
KRUDER & DORFMEISTER: Kruder & Dorfmeister Session
Studio K7 K7073 (2 CDs). 1998. Peter Kruder, Richard Dorfmeister, prods., eng., mix. DDD. TT: 2:00:56

Viennese mixmasters and sound sculptors Peter Kruder and Richard Dorfmeister specialize in the deepest of chill, the downest of tempos, the coolest of vibes. What takes K&D's work to another level of excellence is its astonishing sound quality. These spaced-out tracks feature enormous soundstages, deep bass that will tax nearly any amplifier and speaker, and clarity that is nothing short of mind-blowing. The remix of Bomb the Bass's "Bug Powder Dust" is a perennial system-busting favorite in my house. K&D's remixes are for when the party is over and some serious relaxation is in order. This masterpiece of chill is the coolest of cool. (XXIII-2)

BANTOCK: Orchestral Music
Vernon Handley, Royal Philharmonic Orchestra

I adore English orchestral music, and if you do, too, this disc merits the highest possible recommendation. Bantock's music stands at the crossroads of dramatic High Romanticism and the chromatic adventurousness of early Schoenberg, but has the limpid loveliness typical of the pastoral school of early-20th-century English composers. The Celtic Symphony is breathtaking, and the other pieces aren't far behind it. Exquisitely recorded by Tony Faulkner, this is one of the most natural-sounding CDs I own. All that needs to be said about this disc is that, after hearing it, John Atkinson had to find a copy for himself. (XVI-2, XVII-2)

PETER BREUNINGER
ALIA MVSCICA: Bestiario de Cristo
Alia Mvsica; Miguel Sanchez, dir.
Harmonia Mundi HMI 987033 (CD). 2003. No prod. or eng. listed. DDD. TT: 67:02

Alia Mvsica is a Spanish vocal and instrumental ensemble founded in 1985, led by Miguel Sanchez, and specializing in medieval music. Bestiario de Cristo contains works drawn from
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13th-century codices depicting animals symbolic of Christ or the Catholic Church. The music, predominately two-voice polyphony, has a crystalline purity that is timeless and haunting. The singing is impeccable, the level of artistic accomplishment world-class; kudos to Sanchez for his research into and discovery of these compositions.

The recording is chock full of reverb and ambience; played over the proper system, it can transport your thoughts to another time. The reproduction of depth is vast, the vocalists positioned well behind the speakers. The sense of the walls and boundaries of the venue, whether real or manufactured, are very clear. (I was fooled by another Harmonia Mundi CD that I could have sworn had been recorded in a cathedral. It was Skywalker Ranch.)

MEL TORMÉ & GEORGE SHEARING: The Complete Concord Recordings
Mel Tormé, vocals; George Shearing, piano

I had a handful of Mel Tormé records from the 1950s and 1960s and loved them. I knew about the Concord sessions but had shied away because they were not from Tormé's "golden age." Bad move—unbeknownst to me, these are more definitive and desert-islandish than anything else he recorded, and represent the absolute best of the male jazz vocal genre. This seven-CD set contains all of the Concord releases, including the excellent live recordings from the Peacock Court in the InterContinental Mark Hopkins San Francisco Hotel, and Charlie's Georgetown Club in Washington, DC. The songs range from standards to Tormé's own favorites. If you've ever fallen in love and lost that person, "How Do You Say Auf Wiedersehen?" will melt your heart. The recordings are show-stoppers, with minimal miking and uncompressed dynamics. The brilliant interaction of Shearing's piano and the extraordinary delicacy of Tormé's inner vocal range is perfectly captured, along with the shadings of Shearing's piano. The background ambience and applause add to the 3-D effect, and there's so much detail that you can easily hear the piano's pedals before a key is struck. This set belongs in every audio—and music—lover's collection.

DANIEL BUCKLEY
RY COODER: Chávez Ravine

Even for Ry Cooder, who has made a career of bringing bygone days back to life on a pan-global scale, Chávez Ravine is a high-water mark. Part history, part fantasy, the CD tells the story of Los Angeles' Chávez Ravine—an old Mexican barrio torn down by the city, allegedly to make room for a low-income housing project but in fact to build Dodger Stadium on. One is musically transported to the days of the Pachuco (Zoot-Suiters) and hears the voices of residents, bulldozer drivers, city thugs who tried to paint caring people as commies, and folks nostalgically looking back at the place they called home. It is the last recording (and a great one at that) for both "the father of Chicano music," Lalo Guerrero, and Pachuco legend Don Tosti.

THE GUN CLUB: Fire of Love

I used to come back from hearing the umpteenth Vivaldi Four Seasons or Handel's Messiah with the overwhelming urge to shoot smack and make all that gaudy horseshit shrink to a vanishing point in the rear-view mirror. But since I can't stand needles, I turned to the Gun Club's Fire of Love as the antidote to all things tidy and trite, with dependable results. This is dangerous, naughty, lashing, slashing stuff with no regard for proper vocal intonation, let alone respectable morality. If you need to lose the use of your hair, the Gun Club is the drug! Shoot straight into your ears. Rinse. Repeat.

THOMAS CONRAD
BOB FLORENCE: Friends, Treasures, Heroes
Bob Florence, piano

I was at a party once that Bob Florence also attended. Very late, he wandered over to the piano in the living room and began to play songs—"Emily," "Laura"—quietly, to himself. People gathered around. It was all quite magical. I never expected there would be a recording exactly like that night years ago: just Florence, softly searching through the past and favorite songs that melt into one another, the mood not once broken. He doesn't play "Emily" on this disc, but two other examples of shameless Johnny Mandel romanticism intermingle here: "A Time for Love" and "The Shadow of Your Smile." It is very late but no one is leaving.

BUD POWELL: Eternity
Bud Powell, piano
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The critic J.B. Figi once said that Bud Powell's landscape was "leaden earth, thorn trees, frozen earth . . . and in the center of that blasted heath, Bud, a gnarled gnomic tree through which the wind twists song." Eternity comes from home tapes made in Paris by Powell's protector, Francis Paudras, between 1961 and 1964. It delivers the leaden earth of Powell's spiritual landscape with chilling truth. Haltingly, ponderously, Powell chips away at silence. It is not exactly music because there is not the distancing from human suffering that art is expected to provide. But what are we to call what the wind twists through him if not song?

BRIAN DAMKROGER

DELIBES: Lakmé
Mady Mesplé, Lakmé; Charles Burles, Gédal; Roger Soyer, Nilakantha; others; Orchestre & Chorus of the Opéra-Comique, Paris; Alain Lombard; Seraphim SIC-6082 (3 LPs). 1973. AAA. TT: 2:37:12

A French opera about a doomed love caught between the British and Indian cultures may seem an inherently bad idea, but Lakmé is wonderful, and this 1973 performance by a French cast, taped in Paris's Salle Wagram, is one of the most successful operatic recordings I've heard. Some prefer Joan Sutherland's spectacular 1967 version, but I believe that Mady Mesplé's lighter touch better fits the role of the virginal princess. The rest of the cast is strong, and Alain Lombard's conducting is dramatic without being overstated. The original LPs sound best, but the CD reissue is lovely as well.

AC/DC: Back in Black
Remastered 25th Anniversary Edition

For a lot of us, AC/DC's Back in Black is a cultural icon—we remember where we were the first time we heard it. The album came as a complete shock. AC/DC was stagnating, we were losing interest, then lead singer Bon Scott died, and... well, no one expected much. Instead, they unleashed a lightning bolt, coming as a complete shock. AC/DC was stag- nating, we were losing interest, then lead singer came as a complete shock. AC/DC was stag-

ROBERT DEUTSCH

THE EAST VILLAGE OPERA COMPANY
Peter Kiesewalter, keyboards, programming, backing vocals; Tyley Ross, AnnMarie Milazzo, vocals; Pauline Kim, solo violin; Ben Butler, guitars; Richard Hammond, electric acoustic bass; Nit 2, drums, percussion; Czech Philharmonic Chamber Orchestra

The East Village Opera Company features rock arrangements of such well-known arias as "Un Bel Di," "La Donna e Mobile," and "Nessun Dorma." Sounds like a candidate for the most embarrassing crossover recording of the year, right? Not so! The recording is not only a lot of fun, but may just give you a greater appreciation of rock and opera. Arranger and keyboardist Peter Kiesewalter is a highly talented musician who has the skill and the sensitivity to do justice to both genres, and he gets great playing from the entire group. With backgrounds in musical theater and rock, AnnMarie Milazzo and cofounder Tyley Ross have powerful, wide-ranging voices, and they pull out all the vocal and emotional stops when the occasion calls for it, rising to great peaks of passion and drama. Opera purists may object to the idea of "Au Fond du Temple Saint," written for tenor and baritone, being sung by a tenor and a mezzo, but only a certified curmudgeon could object to what Ross and Milazzo do with it here. Produced by Grammy-winner Neil Dorfsman, the recording sounds fresh and dynamic.

MARY POPPINS: Original London Cast
Original music & lyrics by Richard M. Sherman & Robert B. Sherman; new songs, additional music & lyrics by George Stiles & Anthony Drewe. Nick Davies, conductor

Lovers of musical theater, rejoice! Mary Poppins is set to open on Broadway in fall 2006. If this Original London Cast recording is anything to go by, it should be a runaway hit, and an exception to the rule that stage versions of movie musicals are invariably inferior to the films they're based on. But then, this is no ordinary stage adaptation: there's a complete rethinking of the approach, making it closer to the books by PL Travers, without the excessively saccharine quality that characterized the 1964 Disney film. The score combines the best songs from the movie (discarding the silly ones like "I Love to Laugh" and "Sister Suffragettes") with new songs by George Stiles and Anthony Drewe. The new songs are tuneful, have clever lyrics, and blend seamlessly with the originals (which in turn have been reworked, with some new intro and bridge sections added to great effect). Laura Michelle Kelly makes an appealing Mary Poppins, making you almost forget Julie Andrews, and it's good to have a Bert who has an authentic Cockney accent rather than Dick Van Dyke's sort-of-Cockney in the movie. The CD's sound is a bit on the bright side, but it captures the excitement of a real theatrical performance.

ART DUDLEY

JOHN HARTFORD: The Speed of the Old Long Bow

One of John Hartford's last albums was this 1997 project, crafted as a tribute to Ed Haley (1883-1951), the archetypal rural American fiddler, whose music greatly influenced Hartford. This collection of 15 old-time fiddle tunes from Haley's repertoire is as far from the slick sound of contemporary bluegrass as you're likely to get on a modern recording: The playing, like the engineering, is immediate, spontaneous, a
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bit rough, and unimpeachably honest. Hartford also embellishes the tunes by singing snippets of his own lyrics—sometimes, evidently, made up on the spot—and while that put me off at first listen, it’s grown on me since. The album is by turns funny, festive, and a little bit scary, but it’s consistently heartfelt. Hartford died four years after these sessions, almost to the day, and The Speed of the Old Long Bow stands alongside Aerial-Plain as his best work.

MOTT THE HOOPLE: Brain Capers

Mott the Hoople was formed in 1969 when singer Ian Hunter was dropped like a firecracker into an otherwise undistinguished band called Silence. Notwithstanding the prescient sopor-stomp of their first two albums, and despite a third that was so lame they almost didn’t get to make another, 1972’s Brain Capers is where Hunter’s Dylanesque shouting began to work with rather than against the thick, raucous guitar, roller-coaster organ, and thundering bass and drums of the core group. Highlights include Mott’s future concert staple “Sweet Angeline” and a version of Dion’s “You’re Gonna Need Somebody On Your Side” that teeters edgily between tribute and parody. The record sounds wonderful, too, thanks to the late Guy Stevens—who apparently named the band after a cheap paperback he'd found while a guest of Her Majesty in the English penitentiary system. A perfect record: Throw away your Guns N' Roses albums and buy this instead.

CINDY BULLENS: Somewhere Between Heaven and Earth

Never mind the records I would die for. In a sense, someone did die for this record. In 1996, singer-songwriter Cindy Bullens lost her daughter, Jessie, to Hodgkin’s disease. To get through her grief, Bullens found herself writing a song about her daughter’s death and her own attempt to deal with it. Then she wrote another and another, and eventually there was an album’s worth. Plenty of art has been created in the face of tragedy, but Somewhere Between Heaven and Earth escapes the typical pitfalls of self-pity and mawkishness. It’s raw, visceral, and profound, nearly as cathartic for the listener as it must have been for Bullens herself.

SANTANA: Lotus

Those with long memories will recall that Carlos Santana didn’t always have to recruit flavor-of-the-moment vocalists to sing on his records so he could draw a crowd. His early work was masterful, spiritual, and largely instrumental. For years, Lotus, originally a three-LP set recorded live in Japan, was available only as a pricey import (or on the cassettes of fans who taped it, as I did, from “featured midnight album" broadcasts by their local rock stations). For me, Lotus is a reminder of what we’ve lost in this Internet age in which everything is available all the time but nothing means quite as much: something that seemed exotic for its rarity as much as for its music.

BEN FINANE

SOUNDGARDEN: Superunknown

Those who missed (or eschewed) the Seattle Sound the first time around shall be forgiven following a committed listening to this album, which, unfortunately, still cries out to be remastered. Though Soundgarden is considered, along with Nirvana and Pearl Jam, as one of the grunge triumvirate, Superunknown transcends the genre through its terrible power, epic sweep, and killer riffs as it draws on rock, metal, blues, Indian ragas, and the kitchen sink. Frontman Chris Cornell imbues these songs of loss, rich in tonal and rhythmic complexity, with a simple dignity, soaring to heights of triumph—even from the depths of despondency.

VIVALDI: The Four Seasons

Vivaldi’s The Four Seasons may be the biggest warhorse of them all, but this is the only recording of it you’ll ever need. Il Giardino Armonico serves up period instruments comme il faut: gritty and raw. Summer scorches as never before, the basso continuo is cranked to hip-hop levels, and blazing tempos are enjoyably perilous throughout. Violin soloist Enrico Onofri attacks with gusto, and I daresay all the musicians are excited and having fun. Baroque purists will likely take issue, but one should generally take issue with them. Two additional concertos, RV 454 and 332, make for a crystalline bonus.

MICHAEL FREMER

THE BAND: The Band

Holed up in Sammy Davis, Jr's, Hollywood Hills pool house, the Canadian-American aggregate known as The Band produced and recorded one of the great albums of the 1960s—one that somehow managed to capture the feel of Civil War America with the authority of a Matthew Brady daguerreotype. “The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down” and “Up On Cripple Creek” may be better known, but the
album's quiet masterpieces are "Whispering Pines" and "King Harvest." The album's sound was originally considered bloated and bass-heavy, but the problem resided in the poor gear used by most listeners back in 1969. In fact, an original green-label Capitol with "RL" (for Robert Ludwig) in the lead-out groove area is a stupendous-sounding LP and the only version worthy of the music. JVC tried to issue an XRCD a few years back, but the master tape couldn't be located. Capitol's 2000 CD edition, with seven bonus tracks, may have been mastered at "24-bit resolution," but from what? The heavy tape hiss and opaque sound on some tracks say "not the master tape!" (XX-2)

JOHN LENNON: Plastic Ono Band

Too raw for wounded, abandoned Beatles fans when first released, Lennon's brutal, confessional solo masterpiece is still way too harsh for many fans, but it's the one that brought to adulthood (and quick) those capable of stomaching the awful truth that "the dream is over." Lennon abandoned far more than the Beatles and childhood here: he renounced God and religion, rejected his fawning fans and told them to get a life, and, worst of all for a hero, confessed to his acolytes that he was scared, in pain, and alienated. The worst blow of all? He revealed that though he still believes that "all you need is love," all he needed was Yoko Ono. If you get to hear "I Found Out" on an original UK Apple pressing, you'll know it's the only one to have. Yoko's misguided remix, issued on CD and 180gm vinyl by Mobile Fidelity Sound Lab, doesn't sound bad, but it betrays Lennon's memory by exposing his carefully concealed and electronically manipulated signature vocals.

THE NATIONAL: Alligator

Maybe it's foolish to spill blood for an album that's not yet 12 months old, but Alligator earns its honor the hard way. The National's third album doesn't boost huge hooks, splashy singing, or catchy choruses; rather, it's a bittersweet fruit that takes time to ripen on the vine. Applying the tense, post-punk guitar tones of fellow New Yorkers Interpol and Calla to the dour pace and baritone vocals of British acts Tindersticks and Nick Cave is only half The National's genius. Singer Matt Berninger writes himself into a metaphorical stupor with such lines as "I'm a birthday candle in a circle of black girls."

HOT SNAKES: Automatic Midnight

Any old punks can strangle their guitars and gangle with anger, but it takes real professionals—guys who are into the Wipers and the Who—to make you see all the different shades of red. Hot Snakes, a trio comprising veterans of San Diego bands Rocket from the Crypt and Drive Like Jehu, hurls the entire palette at your forehead and lets it bleed: Automatic Midnight benefits from some smart tape saturation. But you may not notice this as you pop a vein just listening to the crimson-faced shouts and furiously stabbing guitars of "If Credit's What Matters I'll Take Credit."

LARRY GREENHILL
DEADICATED: Various Artists
Los Lobos, Bruce Hornsby & the Range, the Harshed Mellows, Elvis Costello, Suzanne Vega, Dwight Yoakam, Warren Zevon, David Lindley, Dan Baird, Indigo Girls, Lyle Lovett, Cowboy Junkies, Midnight Oil, Burning Spear, Dr. John, Jane's Addiction, Estimated Prophet

No, I didn't misspell the album's title. The pun refers to the composers of this music: Robert Hunter, John Barlow, Bob Weir, J. Dawson, and Jerry Garcia, aka the Grateful Dead and friends. The artists here are donating Deadicated's proceeds to the Rainforest Action Network and Cultural Survival movement, a favorite charity of the Dead. VTTL's Luke Manley used Lyle Lovett's version of "Friend of the Devil" to demonstrate his new 6.5 preamplifier at Home Entertainment 2005, and it captivated me. Lovett's clear, undistorted voice materializes in a sonic hologram between the speakers, and has become my test of speaker imaging. The opening of the Indigo Girls' cover of "Uncle John's Band" frames their voices between two acoustic guitars, one per speaker. I could listen to Elvis Costello's wry rendition of "Ship of Fools" all day and never tire. Estimated Prophet pumps a powerful, reverber'd reggae beat into "Burning Spear" and makes my feet move. Dr. John never disappoints and he gives his all on "Deal," the best blues track here. Dan Baird, whom I nominated for another year's R2D4 for his Songs for the Hearing Impaired, rocks "U.S. Blues," and Midnight Oil's intense rendition of "Wharf Rat" has the best drama and atmospherics. But it's Suzanne Vega who best captures the spirit of the Dead, in "China Doll." If any recording meets all my criteria for a record to die for, it's this one. (XIV-12)
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Hi Fi+ Issue 35

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JEFF GBUREK: Energariums

Guitarist Jeff Gburek uses techniques traditional (field recordings) and experimental (signal processing) to create music that plays with the boundaries between musical form and pure sound/noise. I was drawn to this Experimental Sound Productions Numichtnur recording, made in Berlin, Germany, for its resemblance to the work of Harry Partch, an American composer well known for inventing bizarre orchestral instruments. Partch’s influences can be heard best here in “Oum Kas’; Mother of All Ports,” while more traditional guitar chords create layers of harmonics in “Virtrines.” The sad, haunting melody and shifting textures of “Afghanopsis” create dense atmospherics, and in “Improvisation 2,” reverberation emphasizes the acoustic guitar’s tonalities, which emerge from a mixture of flamenco and jazz riffs.

THE BEE GEES: Odessa

When the Bee Gees entered the studio in 1968, they were enjoying an early creative jag. They had already released two very good albums that year and were ready to record a third, a two-disc concept album. In a dispute with producers, the band scrapped the concept idea, but they still churned out a flood of beautifully orchestrated melodies, from the classic, pop-flavored “Edison” and “Melody Fair” to the rootsy “Marley Purt Drive” and “Give Your Best” to the supremely dramatic “Odessa” and “Seven Seas Symphony.” Many put Odessa alongside Blonde on Blonde and The Beatles as one of the three deepest double albums of the 1960s.

XTC: Skylarking

When Andy Partridge’s extreme stage fright forced XTC to abandon touring and retreat to the studio, the band turned potential career disaster to advantage by conjuring up brilliant musical form and startling regularity. Skylarking is the culmination of Partridge’s studio megalomania, a carefully constructed set of brilliant pop tunes (including a few written by songwriting partner Colin Moulding) that combines superbly offbeat wit with the pop smarts of the Beatles and the Beach Boys. The record smooths the band’s saw-toothed musicality, but Partridge and Moulding don’t skimp on their magnificently serrated wit.

KEN RUNDKE & CARGO ORKESTAR: Ruke

Great music! Excellent sound! Exotic acoustic and electric instruments and sound effects! What more could you want? At times sounding like an Eastern European Gypsy version of It’s A Beautiful Day (whose debut album from 1969 should be on everyone’s list of R2D4s), Ruke instantly grabbed my ears and my heart. Self-described as “The comédie des sens of Paris meets the European spleen of Zagreb,” the songs are primarily sung in Croatian, but they have such life in them that it doesn’t matter if you don’t understand the words. I don’t think it’s “world music,” but who knows? Who cares? “Out on a remote Venetian square, kids are playing; / the laundry is swinging on the windows in a narrow street, / someone listens to the gramophone with ‘Fa una canzona’ playing . . . ”

KRYSTLE BANKS: Peace . . . Back By Popular Demand

This 2004 release is a perfect example of familiarity breeding ennui, if not quite contempt: it was ignored. As in every other one of Keb’ Mo’s albums, the sound is delicious: rich, rolling, natural, with the kind of authentic twang that sends chills up and down spines. But this time, instead of reverential blues updates, the fiftysomething singer covered the great peace’n’love songs of the hippie era. Opening with Buffalo Springfield’s “For What It’s Worth” and ending with “Imagine,” in between touching on Nick Lowe, the Rascals, the Youngbloods, and others, it will warm you like chicken soup. Even an NRA member will get a lump in the throat with Keb’ Mo’s take on “The Times They Are A-Changin’.” A masterpiece.
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Blind Test

Mechanical Engineer Blake Schmutz is setting up a blind listening test, connecting speaker wire from a custom built switcher to three seemingly identical WATTs. Each enclosure, however, is constructed from a different combination of materials.

This is part of Wilson Audio's continuing materials research. It's preceded by some hard science—Fast Fourier Transform analysis performed on literally hundreds of uniform samples measures resonant frequencies, damping, and rigidity. FFT analysis revealed that Wilson's proprietary “X” material is essentially monotonic (it resonates at only one frequency), is as rigid as steel, and as well-damped as sorbothane. Listening tests showed it’s performance to be unsurpassed in bass enclosures. We also found it’s an ideal interface material—used wherever cabinets couple to the floor or to each other. "M" material showed different resonant and damping characteristics, and listening revealed that its true magic appears in the midrange.

Other manufacturers make choices based on cost or convenience (MDF), or perceived cachet (exotic woods). At best they will use a single “pet” material throughout, regardless of how it interacts at various frequencies. Wilson Audio remains unique in the industry for its application of not just one, but multiple, custom materials to each cabinet design.
That this is a UK-only release tells you what America felt about the post—Buddy Holly<br>Crickets: nothing. What everyone missed was a sublime country-flavored rock’n’roll album with one of the group’s coolest lineups—including former members of Blind Faith and the Shindogs—and a fabulous selection of tunes: a roiling "Rockin’ Pneumonia and Boogie Woogie Flu," a mournful "Lovesick Blues," two Sonny Curtis originals, and covers of tunes by JJ Cale, Tony Joe White, and Little Richard. Remember, this was recorded in late 1972: the Crickets had taste! Pure class, from performances to sound. And note the producer, who played with Holly before the Crickets. A lost treasure.

DAVID LANDER

David Johansen and the Harry Smiths: Shaker

After reading about blues history and seriously listening to some important black Southern artists for the first time, I recently returned to an album I’d found seductive but couldn’t put in context when it appeared. I’m now convinced that Shaker really is a legitimate descendant of 78s by such performers as Furry Lewis, Geesie Wiley, and the like, and one that showcases David Chesky’s superb sound in the bargain. On this and the Smiths’ earlier, eponymous album (Chesky JD196), David Johansen croons like a crosscut saw. Whether reaching back into musical mist for material like Son House’s eerie “Death Letter” or generating a drug-induced haze with his mesmerizing version of “My Morphine,” David Rawlings and Gillian Welch’s latter-day lament about addiction, he and his band are utterly convincing. Sure, Johansen is white and an actor, but if he’s acting here, his performance is potent enough to weave a seductive spell that lulls me into a hypnotic hill-country style. White by birth, black by osmosis, Johnston sings in a voice tinged with wood smoke and plays guitar as if he’s dwelled in that land for all his two score years.

RICHARD LEHNER

John Simon: John Simon’s Album

This is one of the great “lost” albums of American pop music. Originally released by Warner Bros. in 1970, it was the first from the producer of The Band’s first two albums, Big Brother’s Cheap Thrills, and other classics of the late 1960s and early 1970s. It sounds like all of them and none of them, while being full of the poignant, funky genius that then seemed to suffuse the rock subculture in and around Woodstock, New York. Simon is a true original. His weirdly expressive, almost nonexistent voice is alternately reminiscent of Richard Manuel’s and Mose Allison’s, and these 11 beautifully structured songs, each quite different from the rest, are a combination of Gershwin, Robbie Robertson, and the Van Morrison of Moondance, all in haunting, mellow, sepia-toned arrangements. It adds up to a sound that is uniquely and deeply American in all the most comforting and disturbing ways: the yearning for a youth and a home that never quite were. The album sounds no less brilliant now for having been out of print for most of the past 25 years. With John Hall, Garth Hudson, Richard Manuel, Carl Radle, Jim Gordon, Bobby Keys, etc. The remastering job is quite fine—this does not sound like the typical compressed, limited, candy-coated Warner Bros. pop album of 1970, but is rich and warm and crisp by turns. But the music must be heard to be believed.

ZELENKA: Trio Sonatas
Heinz Holliger, Maurice Bourgue, oboe; Klaus Thunemann, bassoon; Thomas Zehetmair, violin; Jonathan Rubin, lute; Klaus Stoll, double bass; Christiane Jaccottet, harpsichord ECM New Series 1671/72 (2 CDs). 1999. Manfred Eicher, prod.; Stephan Schellmann, eng. DDD. TT: 99:03

One of the more heartening developments in recent years is that the surviving work of Bohemian composer Jan Dismas Zelenka (1679–1745), much of which was destroyed in WWII, has finally begun to enter the standard repertoire. Zelenka was greatly respected by Telemann and J.S. Bach, and these trio sonatas will tell you why. They have the singing, melodic, headlong quality of Telemann at his best, a contrapuntal density that is at least as much of Bach’s, and an almost shocking chromaticism that Bach himself seldom essayed. The sonatas are virtually bottomless in their sophistication and complexity, while being immediately engaging and accessible on first hearing. These
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four soloists and their very beefy continuo section play the hell out of these remarkable works. I have seldom heard such audible evidence of seven musicians listening to each other with an intensity of attention that is almost physically solid. The sound is rich, warm, full-bodied, close-miked, and very vivid, as if heard from the perspective of the septet’s phantom eighth member, the listener—perfectly appropriate for music written not for audiences but for the musicians who performed it.

ROBERT LEVINE

VIVALDI: Bajazet
Ildebrando d’Arcangelo, Bajazet; David Daniels, Tamino; Patrizia Ciocfi, Idaspe; Vivieta Cencaux, Irene; Margana Mijanovic, Astera; Elina Garanca, Andronico; Europa Galante, Fabio Bondi

It doesn’t seem possible that a Vivaldi opera would be anything to die for, but this one, a pastiche but in fact all put together by Vivaldi (of his own, Hasse’s, Giocomelli’s, and Brochi’s music), is a pip. Bondi and his cast pay as much attention to the recitatives of this vicious little tale as they do to the arias: Baroque format rarely allows for such overtly emotional presentation, but Bajazet is performed here as if in real time. Just listen to Ildebrando d’Arcangelo’s Act II aria in which he thinks his daughter has betrayed him—it’s Verdiain its depth. A 30-minute DVD with each singer performing a complete aria in rehearsal is icing. A real beauty. (XXVIII-9)

MOZART: Piano Sonatas

Piano Sonatas in a & F, K.310 & K.533/494; March in C, K.408; Courante in E-flat, K.399; Gigue in G, K.574; Rondo in a, K.511
Richard Goode, piano

A glorious hour of piano playing devoid of ego or eccentricities and showcasing Mozart at his most troubled (Sonata, K.310) and sad (Rondo, K.511), as well as at his most miniature (the two-minute Courante, K.399, and the 90-second Gigue, K.574) and grand (Sonata, K.533/494). A perfect example of Richard Goode’s pianistic excellence is the gorgeous Rondo: He plays the sweet opening melody with great innocence but underlines the chromatic rises that follow, slowly turning the piece into the affecting 10-minute meditation that it is. An altogether stunning achievement, recorded with as much honesty as it is performed.

JOHN MARKS

THE COMPLETE NORMAN GRANZ JAM SESSIONS


This set is a time-capsule encyclopedia of some of the best solo and ensemble playing from the golden age of jazz. In the early 1950s, studio technology was good enough that one need apologize for no aspect of the recorded sound, but not yet so advanced as to be able to substitute postproduction manipulation for spur-of-the-moment inspiration. The ballad playing is particularly affecting, as collegial as it is heartfelt. The liner notes are superb. The best one-box introduction to the post-WWII jazz scene I know of, and a national treasure (covered in “The Fifth Element,” December 2005).

DAVID GRAY: White Ladder


Pensively poetic Welsh singer-songwriter David Gray ruefully and wistfully explores the desolate landscape of postmodern romance. Fans of Richard Thompson or Van Morrison will find much that is familiar but nothing slavishly imitative. Most of White Ladder was recorded in a London apartment with the windows open. But, as Miles Davis once said, the noise is all part of it. Standout tracks include the stripped-down, achingly forlorn “Nightblindness” and Gray’s cover of Soft Cell’s “Say Hello, Wave Goodbye” (which includes two evocative quotations from Van Morrison’s early work). Small print on the tray card warns that consuming alcoholic beverages while listening to White Ladder may result in your drunk-dialing old girlfriends. Verbum sapientiae sufragilis. A biography, some Web links, and a brief video documentary with concert footage are included.

STEPHEN MEJIAS

SUFJAN STEVENS: Illinois


I tried to ignore the hype surrounding Sufjan Stevens’ ambitious plan to record a tribute album for each of our 50 states. It sounded like some sort of hyperintellectual hipster gimmick. And really: How would he ever make it to 50? I would not make the commitment. Michigan came and went. Illinois arrived and I shrugged my shoulders.

When my stubbornness finally collapsed beneath the recommendation of a music-loving friend, I found Illinois to be an absolutely beautiful mess of UFO sightings, serial killers, architects, blue-collared poets, wars, wasp attacks, and cream of...
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wheat—all in an impossibly seamless state flag of triumphant jazz, wispy folk, silly show tunes, and playful jingles layered with whirlwinds of saxophones, sleigh bells, accordions, vibraphones, high-flying choruses, and undeniable hooks. At 74 minutes, **Illinois** requires a commitment, but with all of its pleasures, thrills, history, and soul, it's a commitment I'm now happy to make. I plan on going back and visiting **Michigan**, and I look forward to the 48 states to come.

**SILVER JEWS: Tanglewood Numbers**

Oh man, this is one heck of a sad-sack, shirtfaced, tragi-comedy of an album, and I do love it so, so much. Four simple hi-hat hits announce its wobbling entrance before it stumbles on over with tambourines, banjos, sci-fi synth, and jangly guitars. **Tanglewood Numbers** wraps a heavy arm around your waist and lets loose a beery hiccup: "Where's the paper bag that holds the liquor? / Just in case I feel the need to puke. / If we'd known what it'd take to do us part. / You pledged me your heart / Til death less skies / All heaven's glory turned in your eyes / You waltzed beneath motion-less skies / All heaven's glory turned in your eyes / You waltzed beneath motion-less skies / All heaven's glory turned in your eyes / You pledged me your heart / Til death do us part." (XIX-9, XX-2)

**PATTI SMITH: Gone Again**

Punk poetess Smith's comeback album was **Stereophile**'s September 1996 Recording of the Month for good reason. It marries primal-scream rock (thumping title track, a howling version of Dylan's "Wicked Messenger") to luminous balladry (ethereal strummer "Beneath the Southern Cross") with uncommon intuition. Recorded in the aftermath of the deaths of Smith's husband and brother, **Gone Again** is so suffused in feeling that the artist-fan transfer of emotion becomes integral to the listening process. To this day I weep every time Smith sings, against "My Madrigal"'s backdrop of piano and cello, "We waltzed beneath motion-less skies / All heaven's glory turned in your eyes / You pledged me your heart / Til death do us part." (XIX-9, XX-2)

**JOE HENRY: Scar**

On his eighth album, singer-songwriter-guitarist Joe Henry came in from left field with what was 2001's best jazz vocal performance by a male

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**FRED MILLS**

**TOM PETTY & THE HEARTBREAKERS: Damn the Torpedoes**

The backs-to-the-wall defiance of the lead track, "Refugee"—the Byrds don leather jackets and get tattoos—is but part of the story of Tom Petty's third record. The album's enduring heft owes to its embarrassment of songwriting riches: the glass-half-full verisimilitude of "Even the Losers," for example, or the twangy gospel-rock of "Louisiana Rain," prefiguring the alt-country movement by a decade. And with the plangent, shimmering "Here Comes My Girl," Petty penned the most perfect celebration of the female species since "Pretty Woman." Listen to him murmur, "Watch 'er walk—munmun!" between verses: You'll see his gal, all tight jeans 'n' swagger, coming right down the street. Mercy.

**JOE HENRY: Scar**

Joe Henry, guitar, vocals; Orenette Coleman, alto sax; Marc Ribot, guitar; Brad Mehldau, piano; David Piltch, Meshell Ndegeocello, bass; Brian Blade, drums; others

**PAUL MESSENGER**

**Laurie Anderson: Life on a String**

Intelligent songwriting that is full of wit and pathos and invariably thought-provoking, exceptional and original musicianship, and stunning recording quality—this recent release will join Anderson's **Strange Angels** (1989) in my front-line library. Led by her synthesizer-violin and supported by music director Skuli Sverrisson's bass, the music is a rich mixture of acoustic and electronic instrumentation spiced up by strong effects processing, and the songs are very varied and full of delightful surprises. Standouts include the infectiously catchy "The Island Where I Come From," the massively percussive "My Compensation," and the whimsical "One Beautiful Evening." There are few weak tracks.
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Song of America - Songs by Stephen Foster, Ned Rorem, Charles T. Griffes & Traditional American Songs
Thomas Hampson

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It's not only the best jazz album of 2005, but an instant classic. Not bad for a performance recorded live nearly half a century ago. The year was 1957, and both Thelonious Monk and John Coltrane were on the verge of miraculous comebacks. There was scant recorded documentation of Trane's six-month tenure in Monk's band and their keen collaboration until this tape was recently discovered. Having just kicked his heroin addiction, Coltrane buoyed in playful clarity—but it's Monk, his cabaret card recently reinstated, who is the hands-down star. He's elated, frollicsome, and, as usual, unpredictably quirky in his leads and comps. (XXVIII-10)

**THE PENGUIN CAFE ORCHESTRA: A History**


The Penguin Cafe Orchestra essentially existed to play the music of Simon Jeffes (1949–1997). It's hard to categorize, combining baroque elements with a pop sensibility. For a while in the 1980s, the PCO was considered “new age,” but don't hold that against the group or Jeffes—the band, above all, was fun. The PCO made Elizabethan virginalist Giles Farnaby rock, and Jeffes created a haunting song out of a telephone busy signal. Add this history's superb sound reproduction to music that always evokes a smile. Their best material of the last 30 years has been rearranged and remixed to take advantage of digital synthesis and sound manipulation, and the maturity and subtlety of these arrangements in most cases beat the originals. And the sound, considering the material is almost exclusively digitally synthesized, is breathtaking—as it was in the live show I caught in New York. What's missing are the perfectly synchronized visuals that accompanied the music in concert. You'll have to wait for the DVD for that.

**LEWIS TAYLOR: Stoned**


Acclaimed UK soul visionary Lewis Taylor, largely unknown in the US, finally hits these shores with the release of his third studio album, Stoned. This expanded, repackaged US edition offers newcomers a glimpse of Taylor's inimitable honeyed falsetto and unabashedly dynamic soundscape, which melds introspective blue-eyed soul, funk, psychedelic rock, and melodic pop, revealing influences by
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- John Potts, 6moons.com, Sept., 2004

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Marvin Gaye, Prince, the Beatles, and the Beach Boys. The album not only showcases Lewis’ jaw-dropping range, it highlights the achingly tender narratives and simmering midnight grooves that have attracted such fans as Elton John, David Bowie, the Roots, and Dori Was.

KATE BUSH: Aerial

Twelve years after the lackluster Red Shoes, Kate Bush re-emerges with the breathtaking Aerial. Once again she delivers an intimate, transcendent masterpiece on a par with the opaque, nuanced and musical beauty of Hounds of Love and Sensual World. This deeply inspired two-disc set is among the best of Bush’s work, and worth every anxious moment spent awaiting her return. Tracks such as “Nocturn,” “How to Be Invisible,” “King of the Mountain,” and the closer, “Aerial,” only hint at the collection’s subtle grandeur; intricate and panoramic scope.

KALMAN RUBIN ON
MAHLER: Symphony 1, Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen
Christoph Mahler, baritone; Benjamin Zander, Philharmonia Orchestra

Rarely have I heard the opening pages of Symphony 1 painted with such grace and charm, yet so imbued with premonition, as in this latest entry in the Zander-Philharmonia Mahler series. Zander’s pacing seems neither leisurely nor brisk, but so right that I’ve intentionally avoided comparing numerical timings. The inner movements are richly nuanced, with subtle shaping of accents and explication of scoring details. The final movement, the most angst-free in the Mahler canon, is powerful, resolute, and, ultimately, triumphant. The Songs of a Wayfarer may lack the weariness and pain of Fischer-Dieskau and Furtwängler’s classic recording, but Mahler and Zander are deeply passionate in their own right, and Mahler sounds eerily like F-D in the softer portions. The sound is outstanding, even for Telarc, with a spacious yet immediate soundstage. The epitome of good multichannel. Bravo!

LELAND RUCKER
DRIVE-BY TRUCKERS: The Dirty South

Ambitious, zealous, emotional, and fueled by Jack Daniels, The Dirty South, like its song about tornadoes, careers randomly across the cultural landscape. Three distinct songwriters tell tall tales of Carl Perkins, John Henry, Buford Pusser, bootleggers, WWII vets, and nasty rednecks who “empty out shotgun shells and fill ’em full of black-eyed peas,” set to music that ranges from hard metal to country rock. The Truckers will almost make you believe in rock’n’roll again. Their emotional tribute to The Band’s Rick Danko and Richard Manuel seals the deal.

SACRED STEEL: Traditional Sacred African-American Steel Guitar Music in Florida
Various artists

The original recordings of two Pentecostal sects who traded the organ for a steel guitar in their worship services put American gospel and church music through new filters. The music is familiar, but it’s different., shades of blues, Hawaiian and surf music, R&B, small-combo blues, and country-western join the mix of hymns and gospel tunes. Glenn Lee’s catchy “Joyful Sounds” inspired The Word, a pop group featuring Robert Randolph, this music’s only real crossover artist. The goal is to make the pedal steel sound like the human voice, and nothing does that better than Willie Eason’s “Franklin D. Roosevelt, A Poor Man’s Friend.” “It was sad about Roosevelt,” he wails. When he lets loose, the steel guitar cries real tears. (XX1-2)

This is Prokofiev’s complete score for Eisenstein’s film Alexander Nevsky (1938), as rescued and reconstructed by conductor Frank Strobel. It’s been months since I bought this disc, and my reaction to it is still “Wow!” Strobel and the Berlin RSO deliver, by turns, romance, drama, and deep tragedy as they dig into all the music cues, many of which have not been heard apart from the original film. Some of the cues are simply shahn fanfares or tolling bells, but all are deliciously vivid. This recording is a sonic blockbuster, with excellent dynamics, solid bass, and a spacious and open presentation. The stage width is tremendous, and a few surround effects from the rear speakers are hair-raising. Depth behind the speakers is only okay, but that and a few lapses in the violins are trivial. This version can’t replace Prokofiev’s cantata based on the same music, but it’s better at conjuring memories of Eisenstein’s great film. On its own, it’s one of the obligatory acquisitions for lovers of big orchestral sound in multichannel.

SCOTT SCHNIDER

Kimber GyroQuadratic Technology Goes Portable

Kimber Kable's GQ Mini cables are the new high-performance way to get tunes from your portable player to your home playback system.

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The GyroQuadratic braid keeps the grunge (not the rock and roll type) away and the music sweet and powerful.

The GQ Mini cables are available in three styles: copper, hybrid and silver. You can even get them with a variety of connector options.
Most mainstream rock histories unfairly dismiss ? and the Mysterians as a one-hit wonder for their 1966 garage-rock anthem, "96 Tears." But the Mexican-American quintet from Saginaw, Michigan, had a lot more going for it than that iconic tune, and this terrific-sounding 27-track collection finally does belated justice to the band's raw genius. Lead singer's flamboyant swagger is matched by his bandmates' no-nonsense chops and the elemental brilliance of Frank Rodriguez's two-stepping Tex-Mex organ. The 27 tunes included here encompass virtually all of the band's output, plus a pair of early demos, including an embryonic "96 Tears." The Neville Brothers have also worked their magic in the recording studio, where they've never sounded better than on Yellow Moon, with its steamy Daniel Lanois textures and production. Here they tackle songs by Sam Cooke, Bob Dylan, and A.P. Carter in an altogether saintly way, and totally outdo themselves with "Sister Rosa," an original that lovingly pays tribute to the late Rosa Parks. Like so much of this timeless set, it'll give you goose bumps. (XII - 7)

Brahms: Violin Sonatas 1-3
Szymon Goldberg, violin; Mur Balsam, piano

One of the last great LP collector's items has finally emerged on CD. Szymon Goldberg and Arthur Balsam recorded these sonatas in 1953 for the American Decca label (which brought us lots of Bing Crosby). Who knows why these performances languished so long in the vaults. Known mostly for recordings of Mozart and Schubert (often with his late-in-life collaborator, Radu Lupu), Goldberg is heard here in an infrequent outing with music of heroic emotions in a recording that is one of his best. Though a tad past his technical peak, he finds his own way into Brahms with an effortlessly focused tone that accommodates myriad details of phrasing at every volume level, though most remarkably at the pianissimo end. His phrase endings were often the most elegant ever. Most distinctively, Goldberg conveyed intense emotion with profound dignity, thanks partly to the support of one of the 20th century's most durable chamber-music pianists, Artur Balsam.
Essential Listening

Mozart Opera & Concert Arias
Elina Garanca, mezzo-soprano
Camarata Salzburg, Louis Langree

Handel: Radamisto
Patrizia Ciofi, Joyce Di Donato
Il Complesso Barocco, Alan Curtis

Mozart: Wind Concertos - Trumpet, Horn, Clarinet & Oboe
David Guerrier, Paul Meyer, François Leleux
Ensemble Orchestral de Paris, John Nelson
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Offenbach: La Grande Duchesse de Gerolstein
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This disc is easily the most convincing Chopin played on an instrument (an 1836 Pleyel) of the composer's own time in a program of dance-based music, some of it familiar waltzes and mazurkas, some of it minor works written for utilitarian dance occasions. The contrast between the two gives a rare glimpse of Chopin navigating his artistic and commercial worlds. These performances requestion every element of the music, from rubato to use of rhythm to sonority, but with great charm, style, and feeling. In 2006, watch for Schoonderwoerd's recordings of Beethoven's Piano Concertos 4 and 5. I've heard a European edition (Alpha 079), and the performances virtually reduce the sonority, but with great charm, style, and feeling.

**ZAN STEWART**

**KEITH JARRETT, GARY PEACOCK, JACK DEJOHNETTE: The Out-of-towners**

Keith Jarrett, piano; Gary Peacock, bass; Jack Dejohnette, drums

For many, pianist Keith Jarrett's "Standards" trio, with bassist Gary Peacock and drummer Jack Dejohnette, is the modern mainstream-minded acoustic jazz band of the day. Credit goes to the trio's estimable creative empathy—it's in its 22nd year, save for Jarrett's 1996–98 bout with Chronic Fatigue Syndrome—and to the pianist's capacity as an instrumental troubadour. On this live recording, the three dig into five standards and an original—a wide-open blues—with grace, vigor, and panache. Among the treats: a vibrant romp through "I Love You," with sumptuous melodies from Jarrett and a dancing solo from Dejohnette; a slow, heart-tugging "You've Changed"; and the percolating, underplayed jazz classic "Five Brothers." (XXVIII-3)

**HANK MOBLEY: Soul Station**

Hank Mobley, tenor sax; Wynton Kelly, piano; Paul Chambers, bass; Art Blakey, drums

Clearly an example of hard-bop tenorman and composer Mobley at his zenith, this killer six-track album boasts one engaging performance after another by the leader and three jazz greats, who together have remarkable aesthetic affinity. The material is 1950s-60s mainstream jazz: two standards and four Mobley originals, none too fast or too slow, all melodically easy on the ear, and all swinging like mad. On board are Mobley's lonesome jazz standard, "This I Dig of You," which moves from a vamp-like modal section to a flowing groove; the slow, deep blues "Dig Dis"; the lilting "Remember"; and the appropriately titled hipster title track. Song-like, rhythmically charged solos are the order of the day. (XX-9)

**JOHN SWENSON**

**THE RADIATORS: Law of the Fish**

This is the defining moment in the career of the greatest rock band in New Orleans history. Many a late night at Johnny White's—which got an opportunity to live up to its motto "Never closed" last September after hurricane Katrina—was stoked by the hard-rocking "This Wagon's Gonna Roll," "Spark Plug," and "Doctor Doctor," or the anthems of "fish-head music" the title track and "Suck the Head." These tunes emerged from the pen of singer-keyboardist Ed Volker, architect of the band's below-sea-level identity, were then embellished by the inspired guitar combo of Dave Malone and Camile Baudoin, and were driven home by the funky rhythm section of bassist Reggie Scanlan, drummer Frank Bua, and percussionist Glen Sears.

**THE PAUL BUTTERFIELD BLUES BAND: East West**

John Coltrane kicked the door open at the start of the 1960s, and by '66, even rock bands like the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, and Love were recording lengthy modal jams. But nobody got the message like the Paul Butterfield Blues Band, whose East West is still the coin of the realm in this style. That's because they had their own Coltrane, guitarist Mike Bloomfield, whose remarkable solo on the 13-minute title track sounds only better with age. With biting counterpoint from Elvin Bishop on guitar, the stone-cold Chicago blues drumming of Billy Davenport, bass lines from Jerome Arnold, Mark Naftalin pounding the keys, and the indefatigable Butterfield on vocals and harmonica, this was the perfect band at its moment of pure transcendence.

**DAVID VERNIER**

**POULENC: Figure humaine**
Choral Music: Sept chansons, Un soir de neige, Figure humaine, Quatre petites prières de saint François de Sales, Chanson à boire

This beautiful disc is pure pleasure from beginning to end, both for the fine a cappella singing and for this world-class choir's stunning evocation of Poulenc's particular harmonic and textural sound-world.

**MARIE-NICOLE LEMIEUX: L'heure Exquise**
Songs by Enesco, Hahn, Chausson, Debussy

Marie-Nicoie Lemieux is one of today's great young contraltos, and if she's a captivating presence on the opera stage, she's equally in command of these truly "exquisite" French songs. The fact that her renditions of this repertoire remain fresh even after repeated hearings makes her recital an ideal record to die for.
**Genesis Advanced Technologies**

John Atkinson

Genesis Technologies was formed in 1991 to manufacture loudspeakers designed by industry veteran Arnie Nudell, who was responsible, with Cary Christie, for some of high-end audio's highest-performing models when both were at Infinity Systems. The company was acquired a few years back by an Asian syndicate, but Nudell remains with the company as Chief Scientist and the company has offices and a production facility in Seattle.

The last Genesis design reviewed in *Stereophile* was the 500 (in May 1999), which then sold for $11,500/pair (see www.stereophile.com/floorloudspeakers/184/). Kalman Rubinson was very impressed by this speaker, concluding that it was "graceful and physically unobtrusive but performs superbly with all music, from the simple to the large and complex.... Its bass reproduction was the most consistently musical and integrated of any speaker I have used to date." The only aspect of the 500's sound that bothered Kal was "an infrequent quirk in treble imaging," though he was overall very enthusiastic about the speakers' soundstaging. However, when I measured the 500, I was bothered by a lack of integration in the midrange. At the time, I wondered if this was connected with Kal's finding the speaker to sound a little laid-back.

So things stood—until I saw, at the 2005 Consumer Electronics Show, that the 500 had been replaced by a new version, the 5.2. Time for the old man to take a listen, I thought.

**5.2 vs 500**

At first glance, the 5.2 looks identical to the 500: a 44"-high tower with a rectangular enclosure for the lower-frequency drivers and a truncated pyramidal section housing the front- and rear-firing 1" circular ribbon tweeters and the dipolar, titanium-cone, 5.5" midrange unit. However, whereas the earlier speaker had a single 6.5" aluminum-cone lower-midrange unit, a "midbass coupler" that covered the range between about 90Hz and 300Hz, the 5.2 adds a second midbass coupler on the rear of the cabinet, connected in opposite polarity to the one on the speaker's front baffle. Two aluminum-cone 8" woofers are mounted on the front baffle, one on the speaker's rear, this wired in the same acoustic polarity as the front drivers. Below 90Hz, therefore, the speaker's radiation pattern is omnidirectional; above that frequency, owing to the open-backed midrange subenclosure and the fact the rear tweeter and midbass coupler are wired in anti-phase to the front units, the 5.2 behaves as a dipole radiator.

The woofers are driven by a 500W switching amplifier, with servo control reducing distortion. However, the servo operates only when the woofer amp is driven from the speaker binding posts. If the line-level woofer inputs are used instead (selected with a rear-panel switch), the woofers are driven conventionally. Rotary controls are provided to shelf the tweeter and midrange up or down by 2dB or so, to adjust the low-pass filter feeding the woofers, to alter the woofer level to match the output of the upper-frequency drivers, and to adjust the level of the separate LFE input.
Sound quality

Despite the Genesis 5.2's complex radiation pattern, setup in my listening room was relatively straightforward, and it wasn't long before I had a low-frequency region that extended evenly from 200Hz down to 20Hz, judged by the smoothness of the low-frequency warble tones on my Editor's Choice CD (Stereophile STPH016-2). I set the level of the woofers by ear, this very dependent on the type of music I played. What sounded correct with classical orchestral recordings sounded overripe with rock music. As you can see from the "Measurements" sidebar, my final choice was actually 2-3dB too "hot" in absolute terms.

I drove the 5.2s' woofers using the high-level speaker inputs. I had no problems with hum with the Mark Levinson No.33H monoblocks I was using, but the Musical Fidelity kW750—quite the smoothest-sounding amplifier I have heard from the English manufacturer—required me to use the line-level woofer input if the speaker was not to hum. I began with the factory-recommended 90Hz setting for the woofers' low-pass filter. After some experimentation, this is where I ended up for my long-term listening.

With the rotary tone controls at or below their central positions, I found the
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balance a little too mellow. I did almost all my auditioning with both controls set to their maximum settings. Even then, the high frequencies were never excessive. Stereo imaging was stable and accurate. Ida Levin's solo violin on Duet (CD, Stereophile STPH012-2) was solidly presented, for example, without any tendency for central sounds to "splash" to the sides of the stage at some frequencies.

I find that the limitations of domestic playback equipment, particularly loudspeakers, in general interfere more with the necessary suspension of disbelief with orchestral music than they do with chamber music or other smaller-scale ensembles. The warm, rich balance of the Genesis encouraged me to play considerably more orchestral music than I usually do. Such favorites as Michael Tilson Thomas's reading of Mahler's Symphony 3 (SACD, San Francisco Symphony 821936-0003-2) offered such a generous sweep of sound through the Genesis 5.2s that the big climax in the final movement, as chiming brass and bass-drum rolls announce the work's resolution on the tonic, sent shivers down my spine. Even with the very different music on Rachel Podger's superb recording, with Arte dei Suonatori, of the 12 Vivaldi violin concertos known as La Stravaganza (SACD, Channel Classics CCS19503), the

**MEASUREMENTS**

I estimated the Genesis 5.2's voltage sensitivity as 89.2dB/2.83V/m, which is within experimental error of the specified 90dB figure. However, as can be seen from the plot of its impedance magnitude and phase (fig.1), the speaker demands a lot of current from the partnering amplifier. With the tone controls set to their maximum positions (bottom trace), the impedance drops below 2 ohms for most of the lower midrange and briefly in the mid-treble, where the minimum impedance is a low 1.4 ohms at 7.8kHz. More problematic, the phase angle is highly capacitive in the bass, due to the crossover to the powered woofer section, which will exacerbate the already low impedance. At 112Hz, for example, a frequency where music has considerable energy, an impedance of 3.3 ohms is combined with an electrical phase angle of −62°, which will suck an enormous amount of current from the amplifier. Similarly, a magnitude of just 2.5 ohms at 1kHz, again a frequency where music has much energy, is coupled with a phase angle of +35°. Solid-state Mark Levinsons, Krells, Classees, and the like should be used with this speaker. Tube amplifiers are best avoided unless they have a hefty 2 ohm–rated output transformer.

The 5.2's woofer enclosure was basically inert; I could find no significant resonant modes. The sidewalls of the midrange/tweeter enclosure had some modes apparent between 250Hz and 350Hz, but these were not high enough in level to introduce colorations. Fig.2 shows the nearfield response of the woofers with the crossover low-pass filter set to positions ranging from 135Hz to 71Hz. The woofers basically cover the range from 20Hz at the low end to 100–200Hz (−6dB points), depending on the low-pass filter setting. The black trace is the 90Hz response, which is the manufacturer-recommended default setting, and is repeated on the left-hand side of fig.3. The actual crossover point between the lower-midrange units and the powered woofers is approximately 120Hz, though this can be fine-tuned with the woofer level and low-pass controls.

To the right of fig.3 is shown the 5.2's farfield response on the tweeter axis, averaged across a 30° horizontal window, spliced to the sum of the front upper and lower midrange units below 500Hz. (The midrange and tweeter rotary con-
5.2's combination of tonal accuracy, sweet-sounding high frequencies, and big-proportioned bass lent the music a satisfying believability.

I dug out a CD that I hadn't played for a couple of years: Hyperion Knight's performance of George Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* (Stereophile STPH010-2), which I had recorded in Albuquerque in 1997. Joe Cea's arrangement makes imaginative use of a marimba, supporting a small string ensemble, and both sounded deliciously present via the Genesises. But it was the depth of the stage that impressed me most, the clarinet, bass clarinet, trumpet, trombone, and bass drum sounding unambiguously behind the piano, which was where they had been at the sessions. (Hyperion had directed the orchestra from the piano keyboard, with his back to the microphones; the Steinway's lid had been removed so all the musicians could get a clear view of him.) The piano itself could be heard within the dome of ambience.

Measurements, continued

trots were set to their middle positions for this measurement. The speaker's frequency balance is relatively uniform in the treble, with a slow rolloff apparent above 10kHz, mainly due to the tweeter's limited dispersion in this region. The Genesis' behavior in the midrange is complex, with a peak apparent between 500Hz and 700Hz and a lack of energy in the lower midrange. In-room, however, the speaker's rear-facing midrange coupler and the dipole behavior of the upper-midrange unit will modify this quasi-anechoic response (see later).

Fig.4 shows the effect of the tone controls on the response shown in fig.3 (just the differences are plotted in this graph). The Tweeter control (red traces) provides ±2dB of boost/cut above 5kHz. While the Midrange control (blue traces) provides approximately ±1.5dB of adjustment below 1kHz, it also has an effect on the front tweeter's output above 8kHz or so. Fig.5 shows the 5.2's vertical dispersion, referenced to the response on the tweeter-axis, which is 40° above the floor. Sitting below that axis pulls down the mid-treble a little, but otherwise the Genesis' balance is relatively uncritical of listening height except at extreme off-axis angles.

The Genesis 5.2's lateral dispersion, normalized to the tweeter-axis response with the tone controls centered, is shown in fig.6. The radiation pattern is generally wide and even in the treble, other than at extreme off-axis angle, where some dipole cancellation occurs with the open-back upper-midrange unit and the opposite-phase, rear-facing tweeter. The dispersion is complex in the lower midrange, again due to the combination of front- and rear-firing midrange units and the dipolar upper-midrange unit. However, it looks as if the lack of lower-midrange energy on the on-axis response fills in to the speaker's sides, with a notch developing at the frequency of the on-axis peak.

The proof of any design is in the listening room, of course, and fig.7 shows the Genesis 5.2's response measured in my room, averaging 120-octave responses taken for left and right speakers individually in a grid centered on the position of my ears. (The Midrange and Tweeter controls were at
"...a positively magnificent little amp. Its tunefulness and timing are beyond reproach and, among other things, it's probably one of the most transparent amplification products I've ever heard at any price... The Exposure 2010S is a terrific amp, and... a bargain on the order of the Rega tonearm and Spendor's entry-level speakers.

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– Art Dudley, Stereophile, Nov 2005
ence of the church, but with both a pleasing directness to its sound and a powerful yet controlled bass register, as presented by the 5.2.

As I said earlier, it was easy for the Genesis 5.2's low frequencies to become too much of a good thing with typical rock recordings. The drum beats that announce, then punctuate "Clarity" on John Mayer's Heavier Things (DualDisc, Aware/Columbia CN 93903) sounded just too heavy unless I backed off the woofer control a little. But then I had to readjust it when I wanted to play classical music again. Still, the speaker's natural midrange was a bonus with well-recorded rodc.

Toward the end of my auditioning, I played the half-step—spaced toneburst track on Editor's Choice. The Genesis 5.2 sounded smoothly balanced, with very few anomalies evident. However, three steps below the highest frequency of the sequence, a lower-frequency wolf tone could be heard excited by the toneburst, while the higher-frequency tonebursts sounded a little more metallic than they should. The frequency range affected by
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this misbehavior was quite narrow, 3.5kHz ±500Hz, and the onset of the tone was quite sudden, at 86dB SPL at 1m, though it took about a second of playing the tone before it started. This was for the left channel; the right-channel threshold for the onset of the tone was higher at 90dB or so, and the region affected was also slightly narrower in frequency. And once the wolf tone was excited, the signal level had to be reduced a couple of dB below threshold for it to stop.

I examine this odd behavior in the “Measurements” sidebar, but I must note that I was unaware that there was anything strange happening while listening to music. First, the region affected was relatively narrow; second, the exciting tone needed to last at least a second before the anomalous behavior started; and third, for real music to have enough energy in this region, it will already be very loud at lower frequencies. Perhaps, just perhaps, the cymbals and vibraphone on Jerome Harris’ Rendezvous (CD, Stereophile STPH013-2), and the tambourine on Rhapsody in Blue, all sounded a little more metallic than usual—but had I not known about the presence-region problem, I would have not thought anything wrong.

**Summing up**

I very much enjoyed my time with the Genesis 5.2s. Their excellent soundstaging, coupled with their generous, well-defined low frequencies, uncolored midrange, and overall rather mellow high frequencies, were boons when it came to playing back orchestral and opera recordings. Regarding the linearity problem I noted in the mid-treble, even after I identified what was happening, I couldn’t pin down any subjective problems in this region unless I was playing the speakers very loudly.

Recommended, therefore. The Genesis 5.2 seems to have preserved all that was right with the earlier 500 and has corrected the one drawback of the earlier design.
With the fabulous JM Lab 1007 Be and 1027 Be speakers! The 1007 Be ($4,000/pr) employs a pure Beryllium inverted dome Tweeter that runs flat out to 40 kHz and JM’s unique composite sandwich 6 1/2” woofer linked by their outstanding OPC crossover. The result is a nearly perfect “Bookshelf” size speaker - one which produces a sound stage and dynamics that belie its size. Fast as a rocket ship the 1007 Be presents an easy 8 ohm/89 db load that can be driven by a 25 watt per channel receiver but has all the panache to bring out the qualities of the very best electronics.

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I suppose I could find fault with the 1027 Be if I really tried, but, I am too busy listening!
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Wes Phillips

EQUIPMENT REPORT

DESCRIPTION
Three-way, floor-standing reflex loudspeaker. Drive-units: 1" (25mm) fabric-dome tweeter, 4.5" (120mm) treated-paper midrange cone with phase plug, 8.5" (215mm) aluminum woofer with phase plug. Frequency response: 30Hz-30kHz, ±3dB. Crossover frequencies: 180Hz, 4.5kHz. Crossover slopes: acoustic fourth-order. Nominal impedance: 4 ohms (3.8 ohms minimum, 15 ohms maximum). Sensitivity: 87dB/2.83V/m. Recommended power: 30W minimum.

DIMENSIONS
44.5" (1130mm) H by 6" (150mm) W by 11" (285mm) D. Weight: 66 lbs (30kg).

FINISHES
Laminated birch face, top, back; birch, cherry, or oak side panels. Optional Finnish Rowan wood (lead time required).

SERIAL NUMBERS OF UNITS REVIEWED
0052, 0053.

PRICE
$9000/pair. Approximate number of dealers: 5. Warranty: 3 years, parts & labor.

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Audiophiles sure don't have it easy. We put in a hard day sweating to hear those diminishing-return differences, and when we're finally ready to pontificate, no one at the party will obligingly ask us what we think. They've made that mistake before, you see, then spent the next 45 minutes frantically looking around the room for someone to rescue them.

The trick is to save the long version for the online audio forums or these pages, and prepare a brief but enticing sound bite just in case anyone is unwary enough to ask.

My upstairs neighbor, an audio engineer, usually doesn't know better, but one day he bit: “What speakers were you playing last night?”

Penaudio Serenades.

“I never heard of them before, but it sure sounded like somebody was playing the cello in your living room. What do you think of ’em?”

I pounced. “At $9000/pair, they’ll cost you more than a song, but they really sing.”

He wanted to hear more. Heh-heh-heh.

The usual song and dance
You may never have heard of Penaudio, either. I hadn’t when I first encountered
their diminutive Charisma two-way and Charm powered subwoofer at London's HiFi Show & AV Expo 2002. I couldn't believe how good those teensy things sounded. I wanted to review them. So I asked designer and impresario Sami Penttilä if he had Stateside distribution.

"I don't have any distribution outside Finland," he said. "That's why I came to the show."

I didn't have the heart to tell him how hard it was to break into the US and UK markets. That proved to be a wise move—Penttilä and Joe Abrams began bringing Penaudio into the States not long afterward (the speakers are now distributed by Penaudio USA). I reviewed Penaudio's Charisma two-way monitors and Charm passive subwoofer elsewhere, and they reinforced my first impression: that Penttilä knows what music is supposed to sound like.

He should. He's a musician—he plays piano, guitar, and acoustic bass guitar, and he frequently gigs with his brother, a drummer, and his wife, a violinist. He's also an engineer who relies on measurements to take him deep into the design of a loudspeaker. Then he relies on his everyday experience of music to hone his designs into real speakers.

In the case of the Serenade, Penttilä began with the custom-made midrange driver he'd employed in his Charisma two-way, a specially modified 4.5" (120mm) driver from the SEAS Excel line that he liked to run wide-range—in the Charisma, from 180Hz to around 5.5kHz. The 4.5" driver has a 26mm voice-coil, and heavy copper rings above and below the pole-piece "to reduce nonlinear and modulation distortion." You don't see any of that, but what is visible is a solid copper phase plug that also serves as a heatsink for the boost the treble a little with typical tube amplifiers.

The traces in fig.1 are free from the small wrinkles and discontinuities that would result from cabinet resonances. Investigating the enclosure's vibrational behavior with a plastic-tape accelerometer, I did find some low-level modes at 223Hz, 266Hz, and 531Hz. The first was at its...
pole-piece, something Penttilä deems "crucial" when you run a driver as wide open as he does.

He doesn’t run the midrange driver quite as wide open in the Serenade. In addition to adding a woofer to the driver complement (more anon), Penttilä found a tweeter that scratched an itch he’d developed while comparing loudspeakers to the music he and his wife were making. “It was pretty obvious to me there’s something in live music’s overtones that’s missing in most loudspeakers, so I did some research with the University of Jyväskylä and we learned more about ultra-high frequencies, especially when we measured live music and SACD reproduction.”

When Penttilä found the SEAS Excel-1, a 1” fabric-dome tweeter with silver voice-coil and magnetic-fluid cooling, he knew he’d found a mate for the midrange driver he was already enamored of. “[The tweeter] has an effective limit of 28kHz and then smoothly rolls off,” Penttilä said. He had SEAS tweak the Excel-1 to his specs, and crossed over to it from the midrange at a “mere” 4.5kHz. The side-firing bass driver is also from SEAS, an 8” long-throw aluminum cone that has also been modified to Penttilä’s specs, this time to include a four-layer, 15” voice-coil. It crosses over to the midrange at 180Hz.

The Serenade’s cabinet is striking. The speakers are narrow and tall (44.5” H by 6” W by 11” D), with birch-veneered side panels. The top, front, and back are finished in a 1.5mm veneer that shows the alternating laminations of the birch plywood. As a reformed wood butcher, I find this gorgeous. You may not, but it is impressive. Penttilä says the laminating adds to the damping, as does the 3/4” MDF it covers (the inte-

strongest on the sidewall opposite the woofer (fig.2), but these are all sufficiently low in level that they should not give rise to audible problems.

The residual saddle centered on 30Hz in the fig.1 magnitude trace suggests that this is the tuning frequency of the lower port, which reflex-loads the woofer. This port’s output, measured in the nearfield with a microphone small enough that it will not impede air flow in the 2”-diameter vent, is shown in fig.3 (magenta trace). It peaks between 30Hz and 50Hz, but is well down in level compared with the nearfield output of the woofer (red). There is almost no sign of the usual reflex notch in the woofer’s output, where the back pressure from the port resonance would hold the woofer cone still. The green trace in fig.3 is the nearfield output for the upper port, which appears to load the midrange unit. This covers quite a wide bandwidth, 35–90Hz, and the midrange unit’s output (blue trace) shows a sharp reflex notch at 50Hz. Although the midrange unit’s response slowly rolls off below 400Hz, it is still active in the upper bass, which is perhaps one reason WP found the Serenade’s dynamic range limited.

With its woofer, midrange unit, and both ports active at low frequencies, the Serenade’s bass behavior is complex. The black trace below 300Hz in fig.3 shows the sum of the four nearfield responses, taking into account acoustic phase and the distance from a nominal farfield microphone position, and with each radiator’s contribution scaled in the ratio of its diameter. The midbass peaks by 4dB, this almost entirely due to the nearfield measurement technique. The Serenade’s bass extends down to below 40Hz, which is good for a speaker with a relatively small footprint. A slight lack of energy in the lower midrange also showed up in farfield measurements. Of greater concern is the broad, deep suckout between 2kHz and 6kHz on the tweeter axis (which is 42” above the floor). All things being equal, I would expect from this response that the Serenade would sound distant and polite.

Things are rarely equal, however, and, as its plot of vertical dispersion reveals (fig.4), the Serenade’s missing presence-region energy does appear at very high or very low listening positions. In WP’s room, where he sits quite a long way from the speakers, I suspect that this off-axis contribution influenced the reverberant field so that he was not too bothered by the on-axis suckout (though I felt the nature of the Serenade’s highs, which he describes as being “smoother from the upper mids through the ultra-high frequencies” than the Thiel CS2.4’s, was due to this misbehavior). However, in a smaller room, or one with more damping of the acoustic, the Penaudio may well sound uninvolving.

In the lateral plane (fig.5), the Serenade’s radiation pattern was even and well-controlled, though with more of an off-axis rolloff above 8kHz than I would have expected. To an extent, this will also work against the audibility of the presence-region suckout, by diminishing the contribution to the perceived balance of what, by contrast, might be thought excessive energy in the top audio octave in fig.3. Again, this will have less of an effect on the sound quality in a small, dead room than in a large, reverberant one.

In the time domain, the Penaudio’s step response on the tweeter axis (fig.6) indicates that both the tweeter and the midrange unit are wired with positive acoustic polarity, though the latter comes in a little early to properly integrate with the former on this axis. Looking at the individ-
nor side of the MDF is also veneered with birch) and the asymmetrically configured interior enclosures for the midrange/tweeter and woofer.

The crossover is acoustic fourth-order. "Well," says Pentti, "I use a first-order on the midrange and a third-order on the tweeter, but add to the acoustical properties of the drivers and it's a fourth-order network. Actually, I try to use very little electric crossover and mostly rely on the acoustical properties of the drivers to cut off the band. That's also what dictated my crossover points, in addition to my belief that most instruments have their primary tones between 50Hz and about 3kHz—put a crossover point in there and it can be very audible."

He uses Alpha Core foil cores and polypropylene capacitors and WBT biwire binding posts. All in all, the Serenade comes with all the high-end audio bling you'd expect from a $9000/pair loudspeaker.

**Singing for my supper**

Setting the Serenades up in my room was simple: I threaded the cone feet into the speakers' bases—the bases give the Serenades a larger, more stable footprint—and I was done.

Well, not really. That's all I had to do to get them to sound okay (the anal-retentive in me notes that I also had to connect them to an amplifier), but I had to move the Serenades around a bit more than I'm used to to get them tuned in to my room. I ended up with the speakers closer to my front wall (about 36" did the trick) than has been my custom. The other placement parameter that proved tricky was splitting the optimum distance between each speaker and the nearest sidewall and the optimum distance between the speakers themselves. I never got this one quite right; placing the speakers closer to the sidewalls gave me deeper-sounding bass but put the speakers a tad too far apart than was ideal for soundstage solidity. (My listening room is 12.5' wide and I listen from about 15' in front of the speakers.) I opted for soundstage over extension, but this is one you'll have to figure out for yourself in your own room. It occurred to me that I was spending a lot of time getting the speakers in just the right spots, but the payoff was pretty spectacular.

**Without a song, the bush knife is dull**

But I hadn't even begun playing the measurements, continued

Fig.6 Penaudio Serenade, step response on tweeter axis at 50" (5ms time window, 30kHz bandwidth).

is connected in inverted polarity. However, the time delay due to the woofer's being placed on the speaker's side results in its output being in phase with the overhang of the midrange unit's step. All things being equal, this should correlate with good frequency-domain integration of the two units' outputs. I am at a loss, therefore, as to why there is a lack of lower-midrange energy in the Serenade's on-axis response. Finally, the Serenade's cumulative spectral-decay plot (fig.8) is exceptionally clean, though what appears to be a resonance at 16.375kHz might be RF pickup from my PC monitor.

I found it interesting that Wes wrote, "I tend to listen at low levels a lot, and that's where the Serenade was magic," as the speaker's on-axis response does resemble a loudness-compensation curve at higher frequencies. But overall, I think Penaudio's Serenade too compromised, at least as far its measured performance is concerned, to merit an unconditional recommendation. It appears to be a paradox: a small speaker with somewhat limited dynamic range that will sound its best at low levels in large rooms.

—John Atkinson

Fig.7 Penaudio Serenade, step response of HF/midrange section (red) and of woofer section (blue) on tweeter axis at 50" (5ms time window, 30kHz bandwidth).

Fig.8 Penaudio Serenade, cumulative spectral-decay plot at 50" (0.15ms risetime).
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speaker-placement game when the Penaudio Serenades gave me notice that something special was in the house. I grabbed *Might as Well...* The Persuasions Sing Grateful Dead (CD, Arista GCDD 4070) and cued "Ripple." Time stopped. Well, that can’t be right—music has to happen in time—but everything outside the music faded into insignificance.

There is a road, no simple highway
Between the dawn and the dark of night
And if you go no one may follow
That path is for your steps alone.

Three minutes later, everything started back up again.

Jimmy Hayes’ deep bass voice was solid enough to build a bridge on, and Jerry Lawson’s sanctified tenor added just the right amount of raspy texture to tether all those silken harmonies to exactly between the dawn and the dark of night. I love that album, and I’ve heard that song hundreds of times—and because I do this for a living, I’ve heard tons of really great loudspeakers—but I knew from the git-go that the Serenades were something special. And that, my friends, is why I was willing to move ‘em again and again to extract the last drop of performance from ‘em.

Having said that, I discovered that the Penaudio Serenade does have its little ways. It isn’t a speaker for folks who like to listen at stupid-loud volumes. Nor is it kind to borderline performers that seem bigger than life—anyway. The Serenade didn’t make that impossible, but it sure didn’t turn rabbit droppings into raisins.

When I fed the Serenade well, however, it didn’t disappoint. David Russell’s performance of Albéniz’s Asturias, from Reflections of Spain (CD, Telarc CD-90576), simply leaped out of the enclosures with such realistic string overtones that I’m stunned my upstairs neighbor didn’t ask me who was playing that Dammann guitar in my living room. That Du Pré lady sounded good, but Russell was right there.

Here’s where I get in trouble: I speculate that Penttilä’s on to something with his theorizing about ultra-high frequencies. I have never heard better string harmonics than I heard through the Serenade—and that was from CDs. When I pulled out some SACDs, there was obviously something pretty special going on up there.

I’d just been sent a copy of Christopher Theofanidis’ *The Here and Now* (Telarc SACD-60638), a work for orchestra and chorus here performed by Robert Spano and the Atlanta Symphony, and it sounded present to an extent that was almost scary. We’re talking big, big orchestral sound, with a nice, soft, absorbent chorus behind it (that always adds extra depth). Theofanidis writes tuneful, consonant music that begs for second and third hearings—and with sound as good as Telarc’s always-superb triumvirate of Elaine Martone, Jack Renner, and Michael Bishop has obtained on this SACD, it’s sure going to get them at my house. Especially through the Serenades, which seemed to reveal every whisper and breath.

Donald Runnicles’ recording of the Mozart Requiem with the Atlanta Symphony and Chamber Chorus (Telarc SACD-60636) was another home run. The intertwined voices in the *Tuba mirum* had physical heft informed by a solid close of hall acoustic that was distinctly bigger than that of the Theofanidis disc. Both were recorded at the Woodruff Arts Center in Atlanta, but *The Here and Now* lists the locale as Symphony Hall, which may or may not be a different space. The two recordings sound distinctly different from one another, however: the Mozart is up close and personal, with performers that seem bigger than life (in a good way); the Theofanidis constructs a smaller version of its reality between the loudspeakers.

Which did I like better? That’s the great thing about recordings—you can buy a bunch of different ones. The great thing about really good loudspeakers is that they can re-create many different but equally convincing realities. The Serenades did not force me to choose one reality over another. I dug both of ‘em.

**Writing songs...is like breathing—you don’t stop**

I still had on hand Thiel Audio’s CS2.4 speakers, which I reviewed in the November 2005 issue, and it seemed natural to compare the Penaudio Serenades with them. Granted, at $4400/pair, the Thiels are just a hair under half the price of the Serenades, with them. Granted, at $4400/pair, the Thiels are just a hair under half the price of the Serenades, but they’d impressed me so much that I’d put ‘em up against almost any ambitious loudspeaker. Besides, like the Ser-
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enades, the Thiel's had captured my imagination with their uncanny re-creation of "Ripple."

So I cue'd up the song again and discovered how different hearing the same thing can be. With the Thiel's, the sound was focused and big. The 'Surasions weren't so much between the speakers as they were in the room. I don't mean they were amorphous and without body—boy, was Jimmy Hayes' body ever evident—but that the Thiel's didn't confine the sound to a particular pinpoint of real estate.

Eric Thomson's mandolin surfed over the deep male voices—as opposed to peeking through them, as it had with the Serenades. The Serenades gave the group more precise locations within the room. The band was slightly smaller than life and believably placed between the speakers, though the resonant character of the studio was distinctly different from that of my room.

You could say that the Thiel's put the Persusions in my room, while the Serenades reconstructed in my room the space in which the Persusions had made the recording. Which was more accurate? Looked at one way, the Serenades were telling it more like it was—after all, the group wasn't in my room. But it didn't work out that easily—I liked both presentations. What the Thiel's did was more exciting. What the Serenades did seemed more right.

With the Heartless Bastards' "Stairs and Elevators," the difference was greater. The Thiel's can really push some air, but I felt a bit embarrassed at asking to hear its "rodenioll speaker." It could play loud when I want it to. I like it a lot. But the Serenade is a very special loudspeaker that delivered the midrange and highs with a delicacy that never palled. My room may be a tad big for a pair of them, but they played to my susceptibilities very nicely.

I tend to listen at low levels a lot, and that's where the Serenade was magic. It didn't need a kick in the butt. I'd love to hear it with the First Watt F2 amplifier. Art Dudley reviewed it in his December 2005 "Listening." I also listen to acoustic, vocal, and choral music that's where the Serenade was magic. It could give up a little bit of slam for what makes this speaker so special.

Then again, when I want to kick it, I love the Thiel CS2.4. I wish I could have everything.

A song makes you feel a thought

That's the problem, of course—no speaker is perfect for everything. You can't buy a speaker that doesn't reproduce the music you like and then get mad at it. You need to choose what sounds good to you. You need to decide for yourself, using the music you most love.

That's a bit of a problem with the Serenade. Penaudio doesn't have a huge dealer network, though they're working on it. Try to hear this loudspeaker, however. If you don't have a huge room and don't listen at extreme volume levels, it's really quite revelatory, especially with well-recorded material.

At $9000/pair, the Serenade is pricey, but its fit'n'finish are superb, as you'd expect from a hand-built luxury. Would I buy a pair of 'em, knowing everything that's out there? Yes. Definitely. And as soon as I clone myself, so I can work twice as hard, I'm going to see if I can.

28Hz, while the Thiel is claimed to go to 36Hz—but in every comparison in my room, the Thiel seemed to have more bass heft.

That, of course, could have been a factor of my room. And I was aware, as I said earlier, that I never did get the room/speaker equation exactly right for the Serenade. The speaker may sound its best in a room smaller than mine.

Did I feel bass-deprived? No, the Serenade gave me good, deep bass and persuaded me that orchestras and choruses were full-range ensembles. But it never flapped my trousers the way the Aerial 20T did when I auditioned it in the same room. For that matter, neither did the Thiel CS2.4.

It's a good thing that The Here and Now stands up repeated hearings—I listened to it many times while comparing the CS2.4 and Serenade. The two were so different, and each in its own way seemed quite right. The Thiel continued to sound bigger and brawner than the Penaudio, which was quite appealing. The Thiel wasn't sensational, but it was exciting, and conveyed the thrill of a big orchestra and a big chorus digging deep into themselves to deliver the music. You could say the Thiel had physicality—if that means it delivered the physical excitement of music making.

The Serenade was more restrained. Part of this was that it didn't easily deliver the same big, room-filling mass that the CS2.4 achieved so effortlessly, but it also had to do with the Serenade's tonal balance—which, as I've said, was less weighted toward the bottom end, but was also smoother from the upper mids through the ultra-high frequencies.

Part of the excitement of the Thiel, I realized while listening to the Serenade, was its slight brightness in the upper octaves. I'm less sensitive to this than some, partially because I do listen at a fair distance from the speakers, which mitigates it to some extent. But I couldn't ignore it when comparing the Thiel with the Serenade, which was simply magic throughout the mid to high frequencies. You listen to voices? The Penaudio Serenade will enchant you.

No, the Penaudio wasn't perfect, but I ended my comparison without a knockout winner. The Thiel is exciting, seems to play deeper (in my room), and can play loud when I want it to. I like it a lot. But the Serenade is a very special loudspeaker that delivered the midrange and highs with a delicacy that never palled. My room may be a tad big for a pair of them, but they played to my susceptibilities very nicely.

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The penultimate stop on Bob Reina’s British Invasion Tour of Affordable Loudspeakers brings us to the doors of KEF. Although KEF is a large and well-established British firm, I’ve noticed that their product lines have not been as visible in the US as those of, say, B&W, Wharfedale, or Mission. In fact, the last time I heard a KEF speaker, it was the company’s then-flagship design, at a Consumer Electronics Show nearly 20 years ago! Before that, when I lived in London, KEFs were ubiquitous, down to the older, entry-level designs tacked to the walls of the ethnic restaurants I frequented. My strongest KEF memory is a cumulative one: Every KEF speaker I’ve ever heard, regardless of price, venue, or setup, has always produced good, convincing sound.

Design

KEF's least expensive line, the iQ series, includes five two-channel models starting at $300/pair. (There are also iQ center and surround models.) I chose the top...
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of the line, the iQ9, a floorstander retailing for $1200/pair. All Q speakers feature KEF’s unusual Uni-Q coincident-driver array: a $\frac{3}{4}$" aluminum-dome tweeter placed at the center of a midrange cone. KEF claims that this array—derived from their more expensive Reference 203 and 205 models—results in broad dispersion of the mid- and high frequencies and eliminates narrowed dispersion, or “lobing,” at the crossover frequencies.

The magnetically shielded, bi-wirable iQ9 uses a 6.5" titanium coated copolymer-cone midrange unit to cover the 280Hz–2.8kHz range. It also has two 6.5" low-frequency drivers, each in its own housing with its own front-loaded port, to minimize crosstalk. This use of two voice-coils and smaller drivers is intended to increase the iQ9’s speed, articulation, and power handling, and the smaller woofers permit a narrower baffle, which in turn permits a smaller footprint—which, per KEF, improves the imaging. Finally, the vertical driver-port-driver-port array is intended to spread the bass-radiating area, thus minimizing the excitation of vertical room modes, according to KEF’s chief of design, Dr. Andrew Watson.

I preferred listening to the iQ9s with their grilles off. This provided slightly

**MEASUREMENTS**

The KEF iQ9 offered a higher-than-average voltage sensitivity at an estimated 89.7dB(B)/2.83V/m, close to the specified 91dB. Though its impedance drops to 4 ohms throughout the lower midrange (fig.1), and there is a quite demanding combination of 5 ohms magnitude and -35° electrical phase angle at 78Hz, the speaker overall is not too hard for an amplifier to drive. However, the large impedance peak in the low treble, due to the upper-frequency crossover filters, might make the speaker sound a little bright with tube amplifiers having a high source impedance.

The traces in fig.1 are free from the small wrinkles that would indicate the presence of cabinet resonances. Investigating the enclosure wall’s vibrational behavior with a simple accelerometer revealed that some high-level modes were present on the sides (fig.2), but these are probably high enough in frequency to have no audible consequences.

The saddle at 35Hz in the impedance magnitude trace indicates that this is the tuning frequency of the twin ports. In fact, each of the woofers is reflex-loaded by its own port, with the lower woofer tuned very slightly lower in frequency than the upper woofer. The red trace in fig.3 shows the sum of the two woofer outputs; they cover quite a narrow bandpass, rolling out above 125Hz. The green trace in fig.3 is the sum of the port outputs, scaled in proportion to the square root of the total radiating area. Normally, the port output would be a bandpass centered on the tuning frequency. However, the response of the iQ9’s ports extends more than an octave higher than this frequency. This, coupled with the fact that there are two woofers but only one midrange unit (blue trace), results in an apparent midbass boost when the outputs of all five radiators are summed.
What does *ne plus ultra* mean?

*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.

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**Sound**

I was immediately taken by the KEF iQ9’s detailed, transparent, and colorless midrange, which had a natural, organic presentation of low-level dynamic inflections. All vocal recordings I listened to were impressive through the iQ9. The closely miked and extended range of Joni Mitchell’s voice on “Urq for Going,” from *Hits* (CD, Reprise 46326-2), is ruthless in uncovering a speaker’s colorations, resonances, and midrange quirks. But through the KEF she sounded gorgeous, silky, and uncolored. I had a similar reaction to the voice of Madeleine Peyroux on “Hey Sweet Man,” from *Dreamland* (CD, Atlantic 82946-2), though I found myself focusing more on dobro player Marc Ribot’s delicate fingerpicking.

The iQ9’s lower midrange was particularly breathtaking, and most noticeable in lower-register woodwind passages in well-recorded classical works, such as the bassoon passages in David Chesky’s Violin Concerto (Area 31, SACD/CD, Chesky SACD288). Solo-piano recordings elicited similar reactions from me—Keith Jarrett’s improvisations in *Radiance* (CD, ECM 1960/61) coaxed a warm, rich, woody tone from his Steinway; the piano’s middle register sounded organic with linear dynamics. *Radiance* also highlighted the iQ9’s impressive high frequencies, which, with all recordings, were extended, detailed, delicate, and uncolored.

I realized that to put the iQ9’s tweeter through its paces, I needed to mine my orchestral vinyl. The violins on Pinchas Zukerman Plays and Conducts Vivaldi Concertos (LP, Columbia M32230) were open and airy. I was even more impressed with Charles Munch’s reading, with the...
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Boston Symphony, of Ravel's *Daphnis et Chloé* (LP, RCA Living Stereo LSC 1893). The massed violins and cellos were naturally scaring but sweet, and the upper partials of all flutes and piccolo...
The NHT SB-3 had a rich, warm midrange, but was less detailed than the KEF iQ9, and its highs were less detailed and extended. The NHT's midbass was a bit more extended and was rather warm, but didn't have the KEF's midbass emphasis. Both speakers were dynamically impressive, the KEF more revealing of low-level dynamics, the NHT with more impressive high-level dynamic slam.

**THE KEF iQ9 IS, OVERALL, AN IMPRESSIVE PERFORMER FOR ITS SIZE AND PRICE, WITH A WEALTH OF STRENGTHS.**

The Epos M5 had a detailed, neutral midrange that was as impressive as the KEF iQ9's. The iQ9 had a slightly more convincing and liquid lower midrange; the Epos was slightly drier in this region. The Epos's midbass was tighter and more natural, but the KEF's bass extension was better. The two speakers were equally impressive in terms of transient articulation, high-frequency extension, and detail.

The Amphion Helium's natural midrange was even more detailed than the KEF iQ9's; the high frequencies were equally delicate, detailed, and extended through both speakers. The KEF's midbass was more natural, but the KEF also had more extended deep bass. Though I felt the Amphion's overall dynamic performance was even better than the KEF's, the iQ9's greater ease with loud, bombastic recordings was likely a result of its larger cabinet size and number of drivers.

**Punch line**
The KEF iQ9 is, overall, an impressive performer for its size and price, with a wealth of strengths over a broad range of program material that suggests a much more expensive speaker. Whether or not its single shortcoming—that midbass emphasis—is a problem will depend on your associated equipment and taste in music.

I'm sorry I waited so long to listen to another KEF speaker—the iQ9 gave me many hours of musical pleasure. Well done.
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EQUIPMENT RACK & COMPONENT ISOLATION FEET

Above (left) the Finite-Elemente Pagode Master Reference HD07 equipment rack, and the "Cera family": audio jewelry or killer system upgrade?

About once a week, I hear about some new audio accessory heralded by breathless claims of stunning performance gains that "you've got to hear for yourself." Most of these I ignore, and of those I do consider, nearly all wither when subjected to logical engineering analysis. Every so often, however the planets align just so, and one of these wonder widgets finds its way into my system.

That's what happened with Finite-Elemente's Pagode equipment racks and component feet. The first time I heard the claims of sonic improvements, I didn't give them much thought, even when they were validated by the generally sane Allen Perkins of Immedia, Finite-Elemente's US distributor. And I was intrigued when a Master Reference rack began to appear in the "Associated Equipment" lists of Stereophile's own maybe not so sane but usually reliable Michael Fremer—but again, I quickly forgot about it.

What I didn't know was that a number of unrelated events and factors were lining up: Trish's ideas about décor, the size and weight of my audio components, architectural issues, an upcoming dinner party, and the immediate availability of a loaner sample, to name a few. One thing led to another, and before I knew it, my components were perched atop a nice assortment of Finite-Elemente Ceraball,
Love with sound of Super Audio discs? Hate the selection? Eureka! How about an SACD player that plays CDs using the same Direct Stream Digital converters as it uses for Super Audio discs.

Old news: for many years dCS has used this technology in their mind-boggling stack of separate digital components. New news: now available in a single-box player at about a quarter the price. For added coolness, the P8i has a digital input. Now your music server can sound great too. Hear your CD’s as never before in our acoustically-designed reference-quality sound rooms.

From: tracy@email.com
Subject: dCS P8i
Date: June 8, 2005 4:54:56 PM EDT
To: dan@goodwinshighend.com
Dear Goodwin’s High End folks,
I may have made a big mistake today when I took the dCS P8i home to audition it. Truthfully, I was expecting (hoping?) that my relatively modest system would hold the dCS back and that I would not hear an appreciable difference between this player and the other player’s that I've tried. This, I thought, would show me that any incremental improvement in sound provided by the dCS could not justify the higher price. When I asked you the question – "Will I really hear what the dCS can do in my system?" – you politely deflected the question and simply said there was only one way to find out: "Take it home and see what you think." Man, was I in for a surprise!
I have NEVER heard sound like this before in my system. Redbook CD? Spectacular! SACD? Unbelievable! The sound stage and imaging of this player are three-dimensional and lifelike, and like nothing I have experienced in my home before. From top to bottom, the dCS hits every note spot-on: tight, authoritative bass: smooth, liquid treble. There are REAL instruments in my room. And I don't mean the easy ones like a guitar or piano. I am talking about the high-hats, cymbals, 4-string bass, oboes, trumpets, and did I mention cymbals. My toes are tapping, my jaw is agape. and I am just shaking my head. It is far out of my budget, but there is just no turning back now... I will call on Tuesday and put in my order. Thanks to Paul for his good humor and for working with me through this process, and thanks to Dan for taking time with me today and letting me borrow this player. What a night I am having!

Cheers,
Tracy S.
Cerapuc, and Cerabase equipment feet, all arrayed within a Pagode Master Reference HD07 equipment rack.

**Pagode Master Reference HD07**

The Finite-Elemente Pagode Master Reference HD07 is a stylish, airy, four-shelf equipment rack with T-section aluminum uprights and shelves of Canadian maple. Its appearance inevitably drew positive comments from guests—even Trish thought it looked nice “for an audio rack.” The ones who really flipped for it, though, were some of my mechanical-engineer coworkers, who were mightily impressed by its clever approach to vibration control.

The Master Reference covers all the basics: the structural elements have the right geometry, appropriate materials are used, and there are even three layers of “mechanical diode” spikes. But what really intrigued my friends were the tuning-fork-like “resonators” embedded in each of the shelf supports. They immediately recognized their purpose: “Sure—you do a modal [vibrational] analysis, then use these to suck up energy at the resonant frequencies.”

Which is what Finite-Elemente does. Each rack is characterized and loaded up with typical gear, and the spectrum of the rack’s resonances is then noted. Based on these data, the combination of resonators that best damps the worst resonances is mounted in the frame for each shelf. FE’s tool chest is evolving, but at press time, they were mixing and matching six different types of resonator, tuned to absorb energy at different frequencies between 220Hz and 882Hz. FE references test data showing that 90% of self-generated kinetic energy and 70% of imposed kinetic energy can be converted to heat by the proper combination of resonators.

**Ceraball, Cerapuc, and Cerabase**

Finite-Elemente also addresses vibrations within the components themselves, but by draining them off rather than absorbing or damping them. Here again, they decided on the spectrum of resonant frequencies to be addressed, then engineered the most effective conduit possible. A structure will respond to vibrations with some mix of transmitted, reflection, and absorption, and the details of that response will be determined by the materials and geometries chosen, and by the characteristics of any interfaces. FE chose a mix of simple shapes and materials that allow them to predict and tailor the overall response—sort of like a mechanical transmission line.

The three models of Cera footers—the Ceraball ($135/4), Cerapuc ($450/4), and Cerabase ($795/4)—all share a basic structure of radially symmetrical metal end pieces separated by a super-hard ceramic element. The specifics differ somewhat, with the smallest model using aluminum end pieces and a single ceramic ball, the larger one stainless-steel ends and either a ceramic puck or three of the balls. All have some sort of elastomer damping to prevent wobble and chatter; the larger models come with different attachments that allow them to replace existing component or rack feet.

**Do they actually work?**

The Pagode Master Reference HD07 rack really did work—at least with components that had an onboard power supply. Each such component I tried, from the lightest line stage to massive, two-chassis CD players, sounded better sitting on the FE rack than on my Bright Star or Merrill stand. Their focus, resolution, and dynamic precision were all slightly but consistently improved; my listening comments were peppered with such phrases as “faster, cleaner dynamics” and “sharper, more dimensional images.”

Alain Lombard and the Paris Opéra-Comique’s recording of Delibes’ Lakmé (LPs, Seraphim SIC-6082) was a good example. As I moved each component in turn onto the HD07 rack—the VTL TL-75 line stage, the Sutherland PhD phono stage, and finally the VPI HR-X turntable and tonearm—the image of soprano Mady Mesplé became clearer and more solid. Her vocal nuances were more apparent, and I was able to better hear the trailing edges of her phrases. The rear and sides of the soundstage opened up a bit as well, and the space surrounding the performers seemed more transparent.

Repeating the exercise with two different digital systems and Dire Straits’ “Private Investigations,” from Love Over Gold (CD, Warner Bros. 23728-2), produced a similar result, but what I really noticed was the improvement in detail resolution. As each component moved onto the HD07, a bit more low-level detail emerged from the background. Distinguishing the multiple echoes around the scuffing shoes traversing the stage was one great example; another was the emerging presence of several different, distinct effects around Mark Knopfler’s speaking voice.

None of these was a huge, jaw-dropping change, but they were consistent and repeatable. In terms of magnitude, putting a component on the HD07 rack was roughly comparable to what I get from demagnetizing a cartridge or cleaning all of my connectors, but more than what I hear after carefully redressing my cables or orienting my power cords’ polarity by ear.

On the other hand, installing a set of Ceraball or Cerapuc feet under a component was a huge, jaw-dropping change. The differences were the same—improved focus, transparency, resolution, and dynamic precision—but their magnitude was much larger. Slipping a trio of Ceraballs under the VTL TL-75 didn’t like demagnetizing a cartridge; it was like upgrading to a really good moving-coil. And dressing
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cables? Forget it—this improvement was like replacing all of my freebie and Home Depot wire with a good set of high-end cables.

Like a kid in a candy store, I kept adding more and more Cera feet. The effects were similar with each step, and similarly dramatic. The biggest improvements came when I slipped Cerapucs under my VTL Ichiban power amplifiers and between my turntable stand’s steel frame and marble top plate. The soundstage became significantly cleaner and the picture snapped into focus. Images inflated from two dimensions to three. The performers on Lakmé felt more like real performers in a real space than like a portrait. And when I played the Oscar Peterson Trio’s Return Engagement (LP, Verve V3HB-8842) I noticed several dramatic improvements. Dynamic transients sounded 10-20% bigger, and the piano had much more inner detail and complexity and a richer, more distinct tonal balance. The bass was more powerful and much tighter.

Other installations produced results that weren’t quite as spectacular but were still impressive. I tried the Cerapucs under Halcro’s dm10 preamp and dm58 power amps, the digital rigs, the Sutherland PhD, a couple of other line and phono stages awaiting reviews—even under my Thiel CS6 loudspeakers. With the exception of the Thiefs, where the Cerapucs didn’t seem to make much difference, the results were similar, clearly audible, and uniformly positive. I also found that replacing the Ceraball feet with the larger Cerapucs did result in an improvement, but the increment wasn’t nearly as large as that associated with the initial installation of Ceraballs.

Adding another set of Cera feet, or moving another component onto the HD07 rack, always improved the system’s sound. The same was true for mixing the rack and the feet. The improvement due to the Cera feet was as large when I installed them between the component and the FE rack as when I put them between the component and a different rack. Moving a component onto the FE rack improved its sound even if it was already sitting on a trio of Ceraballs or Cerapucs. And for the coup de gras, replacing the HD07 rack’s spike feet with heavy-duty Cerabases moved the system’s performance up yet another notch.

**Final analysis**

Finite-Elemente’s Pagode Master Reference HD07 rack is stylish, well-built, and improved the sound of components placed on it—even reference gear such as the Halcro and VTL electronics. Their performance wasn’t a lot better, but noticeably and undeniably so. The downside is that, at $6195, the HD07 costs about three times as much as other nice, similarly configured racks. Considering its appearance or its sonic improvements alone (and Trish’s approval not withstanding), I might find it hard to justify the cost—but for me, the combination is worth it. Whether or not someone else will think so is another matter, but if its $6195 price doesn’t automatically rule out the Pagode HD07, it’s definitely worth checking out.

The Ceraball, Cerapuc, and Cerabase equipment feet are another story. They made components sound a lot better. They, too, are expensive relative to their competitors, but excellent values in terms of improvement per dollar. Fully equipping my reference system represented a retail cost of about $2200, but the improvement—to about $100,000 worth of gear—was huge. And after I heard my system with the FE feet in place, there was no going back.

At the other end of the scale, $135 for a set of four Ceraballs is reasonable for even a modest system, and again—the improvement should be profound. Regardless of how much your system cost, I wholeheartedly, enthusiastically, and absolutely recommend that you try a set.

Finite-Elemente’s Pagode Master Reference HD07 equipment rack works, and their Cera component feet work very well. And yes, you’ve got to hear the difference for yourself. This is one outlandish claim you don’t want to ignore.
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Remember all those full-function (line-plus-phonos) preamps we used to be able to buy from manufacturers like Audible Illusions, Audio Research, Conrad-Johnson, Convergent Audio Technology, Counterpoint, Dennesen, EAR, Electrocompaniet, Klyne, Mark Levinson, Mort, Naim, New York Audio Labs, Nova, Precision Fidelity, Robertson, Spectral, Theta, and Threshold? Today, most of those companies have stopped making full-function models—that, or vanished from the scene altogether.

But never mind them: Remember all those high-end CD players we used to be able to buy...?

Consumers aren't to be blamed for deciding they don't want a certain something anymore, but whenever that happens, it's not unusual for some demand to remain—for the best or the catchiest companies to cement their following and keep what's left of the market to themselves. (I'm thinking Victor Mouse-traps Inc. here.) Not only have some of the aforementioned audio-electronics manufacturers survived, but a few have made names for themselves as enduring sources of good full-function preamplifiers—positions from which they're unlikely to be toppled.

I daresay the high-end CD player shakeout is upon us now, and when the leaves have all settled, some variation of the Ayre CX-7 ($2950) will be among the survivors.¹

I was more or less indifferent to the CX-7 when it was introduced in late 2002—dizzied, I suppose, by the torrent of players that still seemed to be coming from everydamwhere back then—but I came to know the Ayre well a little less than a year later. That was when I reviewed the company's AX-7 integrated amplifier, and the folks at Ayre eventually suggested that I try their balanced-output player with their balanced-input amp. I did, and the rest is history—or at least what passes for history in a hobby this small. The CX-7 stood apart from the crowd as a fine all-rounder that got the notes and the beats right and offered the sound that most devotees of high-end audio expect.

In the January 2006 Stereophile I described how that AX-7 amp has been refined and rechristened the AX-7e (for evolution, no jokes, swear to God); now the CX-7 has come in for the same treatment. And while I don't have a sample of the older version on hand, nor was my time with the earlier sample long enough that I can lay out one of those comparisons from memory that we audio writers love to sling, this is a good opportunity to bring you up to date on Ayre Acoustics' bread-and-butter digital source, and to share a few of my responses to a product that I think is a bit more enduring than most.

As with their revivified integrated amplifier, Ayre's e-series changes to the CX-7 amount to two areas of power-supply refinement: additional filtering and enhanced current availability on the AC side, and a much more sophisticated—yet enduringly purist—approach to voltage regulation on the DC side.

Yet the CX-7 has evolved in an additional way: Its already sophisticated digital filter, based on multiple Burr-Brown chips, has been replaced with a Xilinx Field Programmable Gate Array, or FPGA. This was, if you'll pardon my use of an expression so liberal it embarrasses even me, an empowering move. Using support software supplied by the Xilinx company, Ayre can not only program the FPGA for use as a digital filter, but can further customize it to do virtually anything within a PCM context: upsampling, downsampling, conforming to various different filter algorithms, you name it. In the CX-7e, Ayre used this capability to implement slightly different coefficients than in the earlier CX-7's filter, which they say results in a more open and transparent sound.

Again, I can't give you a hand-on-heart comparison, but I can say that my sample of the CX-7e sounded superb—as when I listened to the Lonesome River Band's "Swing That Hammer," from their Talkin' to Myself (CD, Sugar Hill SUG CD 3913). First, here's how that album usually sounds: It's obviously a digital recording, probably made on somebody's backwoods hard drive, and it sounds more than a little bit canned: kinda flat, kinda plastic, overly compressed, not a lot of drama. What the Ayre CX-7 did was to extract the minimal humaneness seemingly left in those pits, and in a way that no other player I've used quite has. During Don Rigby's nice mandolin solo—especially the second half of it, where he digs into the chords with a forceful syncopated strum—the CX-7e made all the left-hand slurs and right-hand attacks leap out of the mix in a wonderful way. It also revealed guitarist Kenny Smith's G-runs as the explosive and downright manly all-downstroke things that they are (no wimpy down-up-down stuff for Kenny), all while maintaining an excellent sense of timing and momentum.

Compared with other players in more or less the same price category, the Ayre CX-7e distinguished itself as an almost aggressively (in a good way) rhythmic player, yet one with a wide open and transparent view of the sound, with excellent instrumental colors and textures. For its part, the obvious competitor on that field, the Naim CD5X ($2950 stock, $4000 with FlatCap 2X power supply), had an even more relentless way with the string bass on "Swing That Hammer," and just as good a sense of touch in the picking—but it didn't sound as open or as present as the Ayre. In fact, by comparison, the Naim sounded rolled-off on top.

Stretching the comparison in a slightly different direction to accom-

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modate a multiformat player such as the Linn Unidisk SC ($4995) also proved interesting: On Mobile Fidelity's excellent hybrid SACD/CD reissue of Béla Fleck's Drive (MFSL UDSACD 7003), I still preferred the DSD layer through the Linn over the "Red Book" layer through the Ayre—but barely. The Linn had the better sense of musical flow, but sonically it was also just a bit too smooth compared with the Ayre's more vivid and tactile sound.

On single-layer discs, the Ayre maintained a slight advantage—as on an early European CD issue of Procol Harum's Live with the Edmonton Symphony Orchestra (1972, Chrysalis/Eurodisc 252675). In those first Rodrigo-inspired bars that introduce "Conquistador," the Ayre had more color, and more of a sense of digging in, than either of the aforementioned British players. Even before the music began, the CX-7 distinguished itself as having superior detail retrieval and intelligibility (as when singer Gary Brooker tells the orchestra "This is a hot number" just before they start playing), with clearer separation between the electric bass and the string basses, and even better spatial layering, front to back.

All that, and still just $2950: an impressive value.

The CD Player directory in the 2007 Stereophile Buyer's Guide really needs room for an additional spec: Next to the columns for "Maximum Output Level" and "Special Features" should be one that reads "Honestly Now, Do You Really Believe This Product Will Still Be Offered For Sale In Five Years?" For the majority of them, the answer would be a resounding no; for this one, I think it would be yes. Forgive me for thinking that's at least half the battle.

—Art Dudley

Halcro dm58 monoblock power amplifier

When Paul Bolin reviewed Halcro's dm58 amplifier in the October 2002 Stereophile, he pronounced it that rarest of the rare: a truly revolutionary audio product. Its technology was unusual; Philip O'Hanlon of importer On a Higher Note speculated that, "were

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FOLLOW-UP

most electrical engineers to examine a schematic...few would even recognize it as being an audio amplifier.” John Atkinson found it to have “astonishing measured performance for an amplifier,” and often felt that he was measuring the limits of his test equipment instead of the amplifier. Sonically, the $29,990/pair dm58 was far beyond anything PB had ever heard—an embodiment of futurist Arthur C. Clarke’s maxim that “any sufficiently advanced technology will be indistinguishable from magic.”

Wow—where do you go from there? Halcro followed the dm58 with the dm10 preamplifier and dm38 stereo amplifier, both praised in these pages: the dm10 by PB in April 2004, the dm38 by JA in October 2004. Other products—a line stage, more powerful stereo amplifiers, multichannel gear, an SACD player—have been introduced or promised. Rumor has it that some of these may be heading my way, so JA suggested that I spend some time with the dm58, both as a warmup and to see how PB’s words held up to three years of 20-20 hindsight.

The last four years of the evolution of high-end electronics confirm that the dm58s were indeed revolutionary. Their performance—what PB described as their “pristine and wholly continuous clarity,” “unlimited dynamics,” “impossibly low noise floor,” and the “remarkable...directness and completeness of their musical communication”—was paradigm-shifting not only for PB, but for other designers as well. More than one of Halcro’s competitors has confided to me that the dm58’s effortless, clear, completely neutral sound established a new performance standard that ultra-high-end customers now expected.

My six months with the dm58s have confirmed that PB’s assessment was right on the money. Everything he said remains true: their uncanny silence, effortless dynamics, and, perhaps most of all, their incredible clarity, transparency, and neutrality—all were there in spades. Like Paul, I was left scratching my head and searching for some sort of sonic signature, or any evidence that the dm58s were in the system at all. I often think of gear as either “projecting” the images and soundstage, or “dropping away” to leave the performance behind. The dm58s were definitely in the latter camp, but they didn’t just drop away—they vanished. As had PB, I found that I could easily hear other colorations and changes in my system in a way that simply wasn’t possible before. It was fascinating to compare Analogue Productions’ SACD and LP versions of Cannonball Adderley’s Know What I Mean (Riverside/Analogue Productions RLP 9433). On the
analogue side, I scrubbed the record, levelled up the VPI TNT HR-X turntable, tweaked the stylus pressure and VTA, and worked through three different sets of cables. Each change made a clear difference that was often dramatic as well. There were fewer variables to tweak with the SACD, but changes of cables and various models of Finite Elemente feet produced similarly dramatic changes. My review of the TNT HR-X is in the works, so I'll not tip my hand, but this exercise—and the dm58s—allowed me to isolate and characterize my analog rig's sonic signature to a degree I'd never been able to before.

I suspect that another reason JA sent the dm58s my way was for me to hear them beside the VTL S-400, a tube amplifier that I pronounced revolutionary when I reviewed it for the December 2005 *Stereophile*, and described in much the same way as Paul had the dm58s. In fact, the two sound—or don't sound—more alike than they do different, and more like each other than either sounds like anything else I've heard. There are differences, but their dynamics, neutrality, and clarity, and the way they "vanish" to leave behind only the musicians and the soundstage, are really quite similar. It's astonishing that such different technological paths can converge. It supports the truism that, at the limit of quality and technology, all amplifiers will sound alike, and what they will sound like is nothing at all. Short of that, all we're doing is comparing different sets of distortions.

The VTL is slightly more dynamic at the softer end of the spectrum, and its soundstage is a bit more forward. The Halcro had a slightly deeper, wider soundstage and smaller images, which accentuated the spaces between individual musicians. I'd describe both as tonal—neutral, or maybe just a shade cool, but the Halcro always seemed a bit more neutral. This might have been due to the dm58's performance. The Halcro dm58 is an incredible amplifier; designer Bruce Candy's achievement, under Paul Bolin's direction, is of course, a no-brainer for an audiophile." — John Atkinson, Chief Editor, *Stereophile*, January 1996

Sonic Euphoria PLC passive line stage

The first time I heard the word *autoformer* was more than 30 years ago, when a friend bought a brand-new McIntosh 6100 amplifier, the output section of which had them in abundance. I learned then that an autoformer was a sort of a vestigial output transformer that McIntosh still used when they began making transistor amplifiers, in much the same sense that a coccyx is a vestigial tail that God still uses when he makes us—the attitude being, I suppose, it can't hurt.

Today my understanding has deepened enough to accommodate a few complexities: An autoformer is just like any other transformer, in the sense that current applied to its primary coil induces a complementary current in its secondary—but here, the primary and the secondary are actually different portions of the same winding. As with a normal tranformer, an autoformer can be used to invert the relationship between voltage and current in a circuit; but
because its function depends on a series of multiple taps—thus creating a secondary coil of varying length—an autoformer can also function as the inductive equivalent of a potentiometer in which each tap represents one of a series of attenuation steps, like the discrete resistors in a ladder of a different sort. And whereas resistive attenuation works by throwing away a portion of the input power, an autoformer circuit can actually be configured to provide a modest degree of gain.

Sonic Euphoria PLC passive line stage

So it goes with the remarkable Sonic Euphoria PLC passive line stage, which Brian Damkroger wrote about in the January 2006 Stereophile.3 As BD observed, the PLC provides fine control of signal attenuation and source selection for a reasonable number of inputs, yet still can provide up to 10dB of gain—without a single battery or AC cord in sight. And unlike passive line stages based on resistive attenuation devices—which is to say, most of them—the autoformer-based PLC keeps the output impedance so low that cable length is a nonissue. (But as John Atkinson confirmed in his measurements of the PLC, care should be taken that the output impedance of the source component isn’t too high.) Ohm’s law is more than merely poetic: It is just.

Some folks will balk at the tradeoff, suggesting that the real price of the PLC’s ostensibly free gain and impedance matching is in forcing the fragile signal to travel through all that wire. But on a theoretical level, at least, I don’t share that concern. Ever since Herb Reichert turned me on to the writings of the late Norman Crowhurst, I’ve been a bit prejudiced toward the use of transformers in audio circuits, while noting that prevailing late-20th-century attitudes seem prejudiced against them—and I suppose I can respect that.

**Listening impressions:** Knowing my taste for that sort of thing, BD gave me the heads-up toward the end of his time with the Sonic Euphoria PLC; after JA made his measurements, the review sample was diverted to my place for a few weeks. I plopped it into my regular system and sat down to listen—casually, at first, just to get a handle on whether the PLC had a decent enough way with notes and beats.

I needn’t have worried. The PLC ($1295 single-ended, $1995 balanced) was every bit as good as my Fi Preamp ($5000) in its steadfast refusal to distort pitch relationships and the subtleties of musical timing. Musical flow and momentum were seriously good. And it did all that with absolutely no dynamic compression, and no bass attenuation that I could detect—two things that make the PLC so much better than every other passive pre I’ve tried in my own system. Not long after JA sent the PLC my way, I used it to play some of the Japanese Victor XRCD versions of those great recordings of Fritz Reiner and the Chicago Symphony from RCA’s golden age. I was surprised at how the very wide dynamic contrasts in the Beethoven Symphony 7 (JMCXR-0006) were preserved.

The Sonic Euphoria PLC won’t suit every installation, and even at its best, it wasn’t perfect. With the best active preamps I’ve heard, such as the Lamm LL2, it’s somewhat easier to mentally “follow” the sounds of notes—by which I mean their shapes, from attack through decay. With the PLC, that degree of insight wasn’t quite there. But what I heard instead was the same degree of musical immediacy, of drama and presence, that the best active units I’m familiar with can provide. Some folks might even get more of that sort of thing from their PLCs, depending on their installations. I wouldn’t doubt it a bit.

I put the PLC’s theoretical level of impedance matching to the test by using it to drive my Lamm ML2.1 monoblocks through the 6m Nordost Valhalla interconnect pair I usually use,
then shuffling the components around to accommodate a 1m pair of the same cable. There was no difference at all—not even an imagined one.

I undid the PLC’s cover, and on a slow day in November counted 370 individual solder joints in my balanced sample of the PLC—and there were still a few I couldn’t quite see. Considering the balanced version’s $1995 price, that works out to a little less than $5.40 per joint—assuming, of course, that the chassis, Cardas connecting wire, autoformers (wound with Cardas magnet wire), high-precision Elma selector switches, jacks, front panel, knobs, and shipping materials are free, which is unlikely. Hell, I wouldn’t even do that kind of work for the $5.40/joint, and I don’t know anyone else who would, either.

I like Jeff Hagler, who designs and builds the Sonic Euphoria PLCs, but I’m beginning to suspect there’s something wrong with his calculator. Until he gets it cleared up, consider the PLC’s $1295 price (single-ended version) to be the audio equivalent of the “Bank Error in Your Favor” card in Monopoly—and jump on it. —Art Dudley

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**PS Audio P500 Power Plant**

The product responsible for the return of PS Audio to the audiophile market was the P300 Power Plant. Produced in 1999, the Power Plant is essentially a power amplifier designed to serve as the AC power source for audio and video equipment, producing clean, low-distortion 115V/60Hz AC (or whatever voltage/frequency is standard in a particular country). While some people thought that this power-regeneration approach represented overkill and an inefficient way of dealing with noise and voltage variations in the AC power supply, the Power Plant was enormously successful (it was named Accessory of the Year in Stereophile’s 2000 Product of the Year awards), and I think it’s fair to say that it gave increased legitimacy to power-line conditioners as an audio/video product category.

Never a company to rest on its laurels—or to refrain from improving products that others think are fine as they are—PS Audio later came out with various other products to improve AC, including the Ultimate Outlet, a balun-transformer–based passive device, Power Port high-quality receptacles, and upgraded versions of the Power Plant with more power,
alternative power-line frequency patterns, and other refinements.

The P500 ($2195) represents PS Audio's latest thinking on regenerator-type power supplies. It includes up to 500W of power delivery (as the original P300's 300W), and 1800W of filtered AC, isolated power zones for analog, digital, and high-current equipment, and front-panel display of a wide range of monitoring functions. Like the P300, the P500 allows control over output frequency, but whereas the P300's output was sinewave-only, the P500's includes a host of other waveforms, including MultiWave mixtures of specific waveforms, and AutoWave, which selects the waveform in response to the equipment's dynamic needs.

The current version of the P500 (and the P1000) includes MultiWave II+, which has two additional features: an ultraprecise turntable speed control and something called Clean Wave, the latter said to demagnetize or depolarize all equipment connected to it. Clean Wave consists of a special waveform with small "bubbles" in the amplitude of the waveform. Clean Wave is engaged by pressing the appropriate button on the front panel, and selecting the 60-second "cleaning" at the beginning of a serious listening session, or a five-second burst before listening to a CD or LP. (See www.ps audio.com/newsletters/3-05.asp for a more extensive description of Clean Wave and what it does.)

My Linn LP12 has its own electronic speed control, so I was not able to use the MultiWave II+, but I did try the Clean Wave function, mostly in its more extended 60-second mode. (I couldn't be bothered using it before each CD/LP. This really needs a remote control to be convenient.) Based on comparisons of CDs played at the beginning of a listening session without having activated Clean Wave and the same CDs played again after Clean Wave, I'm convinced that Clean Wave works. Following Clean Wave activation, the sound was simply more open, with smoother, more liquid higher frequencies. For owners of earlier versions of MultiWave, Clean Wave makes MultiWave II+ an essential upgrade (it's in the form of a chip that can be installed by the user), and it keeps PS Audio's latest Power Plant products at the forefront of power-line conditioning devices. —Robert Deutsch

**Exposure 2010S integrated amplifier**

The UPS man delivered the $1250 Exposure 2010S integrated amplifier to my house about a week before Art Dudley's full review appeared in the November 2005 Stereophile. I stuck it straight into my system and was immediately struck by how much it changed the system's sound. Reviewing amplifiers, I thought, isn't supposed to be this easy.

Along with digital front-ends, amplifiers are among the hardest components to characterize, and the Exposure was replacing a similarly priced, similarly powered, similarly British integrated amp, the very good but discontinued Arcam A75 Plus. Yet the difference in sound of the two components was starkly obvious from the outset.

So I was gratified, when the November Stereophile arrived, to read that AD, too, had found the Exposure a very different-sounding component. "Was this thing broken," he asked, "or was it actually better than everything else?" He went on to call the Exposure "a positively magnificent little amp."

What set the Exposure 2010S apart was a richness of tone from the lower treble down that isn't often found in a $1000 British solid-state integrated amps, which tend to sound rather alike. Mezzo-soprano Lorraine Hunt Lieberson sounded even better than usual through the 2010S singing Bach cantatas, and violins—especially in middle and lower parts of their range—sounded very good. The Exposure was rich and full on the low end; things sounded a bit more

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**FOLLOW-UP**

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**The Exposure 2010S: Crunchy on the outside, sweet and juicy on the inside.**

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ordinary in the upper octaves, but I heard nothing to complain about.

I did notice one characteristic that AD didn’t mention—or I thought I did. To my ear, the 2010S caused a slight de-emphasis—my listening notes say “rounding off”—of transients in, say, the attacks of piano notes. I noticed this first on Sir Roland Hanna’s *Swing Me No Waltzes* (Storyville 8309). On this CD’s first nine tracks Hanna plays a Bosendorfer grand piano, a sound you seldom hear in jazz: full and rich in the lower and mid octaves, with a metallic quality, the notes having an increasingly percussive, almost harpsichord-like transient character as Hanna ascends the keyboard. I can hear that same transition on any good piano, if I listen for it, but when Hanna plays the Bosendorfer, it’s hard to miss.

The subjective character of Hanna’s recording had shifted through the Exposure 2010S. There was noticeably more ambience than I was used to hearing and, in relative terms, less emphasis on the percussive attack. Where I usually noticed transients first and richness of tone second, it was now the tonal richness that stood out. The transient information was there if I listened for it, but it was no longer the defining quality of Hanna’s piano sound, as I’ve found it to be through other amps.

Complaints? About the sound, none at all, but I’ve got some logistical quibbles. The supplied remote is mediocre, with about a million buttons of exactly the same size, laid out in a regular grid; forget about hitting the right button without looking. Then there are the speaker connectors: there are two sets so you can biwire, but the Deltron connectors mean that, though banana plugs work just fine, those with spades on the amplifier end will need to reterminate to use the 2010S.

The Exposure 2010S made the music I’m used to hearing sound richer and fuller, especially in the midrange and lower treble, with perhaps a slight de-emphasis of transients. I don’t know whether the Exposure is more true or less true to recordings than the other amplifiers I’m used to hearing, and I’m not sure it matters. I do know that it’s rare to find a $1250 solid-state integrated amplifier with a sound so distinctive and so easy on the ear.

—Jim Austin

**ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT**

**ANALOG SOURCES** Rega P7 turntable, Rega RB700 tonearm, Rega Bias 2, Elys 2, Exact (old and new versions) cartridges.

**DIGITAL SOURCES** Marantz SA-8260 SACD player, Benchmark DAC-1 D/A processor.

**PREAMPLIFICATION** Whist PS.20, Rega Fono (MM) phono stages.

**INTEGRATED AMPLIFIERS** Rega Mira, Arcam A75 Plus.

**LOUDSPEAKERS** Vandersteen 2Ce Signature.

**CABLES** Interconnect: Chord Chameleon Silver Plus & Chorus, Monster Cable M550i. Speaker: Chord Odyssey 2 & Odyssey 4, Monster Cable M1.2.

**ACCESSORIES** Rigid hardwood equipment rack (homemade), foam and bamboo vibration isolation (homemade), PS Audio High-Current Ultimate Outlet.

—Jim Austin
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When we left Neko Case, in 2004, the alt-country/alt-something singer had just released The Tigers Have Spoken. Loaded up with covers, albeit cool ones such as Loretta Lynn’s “Rated X,” this live album lacked something. It was hard to connect to, and didn’t dig as deep as or possess the sparks of promise that Blacklisted, Case’s songwriting cleared out, written down, and onto a hard drive. The trick remains getting a handful of killer records lurking somewhere in this woman’s psyche. The trick remains getting them out, written down, and onto a hard drive.

On her last studio album, 2002’s Blacklisted, Case’s songwriting clearly revealed that she was searching for a new vehicle for her voice. Blacklisted also showed that, lyrically, Case was beginning to tap into unknown worlds of her own emotions and of harrowing storytelling.

On Fox Confessor Brings the Flood, her fourth full-length release, Case has concocted a striking collection of original music that, if not a fully formed opus, has inched closer to one than any of her earlier discs.

Born in Virginia and raised in Tacoma, Washington, Case went to art school in Canada. She maintained her connections to the music scene in Vancouver, performing both as one half of the Corn Sisters (with Carolyn Mark) and as a sometime part of the New Pornographers. The Canadian connection brings up an association that Case has often heard in the past and that now, with Fox Confessor, she’ll be hearing even more. Rather than the usual verse-chorus-verse structure, the musical settings Case has written for her voice here are reminiscent of those created a decade ago by Ben Mink and k.d. lang for that Canadian singer’s equally impressive instrument. More tone poems than songs, Case’s compositions exist in some netherworld of alt rock, cracked gospel, and torch songs. In recent interviews she’s made noises about giving up on “typical song structure” altogether, but what’s happening here is a singer becoming her own best songwriting partner.

Melodically, the star track is “John Saw That Number,” with a soaring a cappella introduction by Case and fellow alt-country/torch songstress Kelly Hogan, recorded in correct indie fashion in the back stairwell of Toronto’s Horseshoe Tavern. Guess inspiration struck, and the ol’ laptop happened to be nearby. From there, with the help of bassist Joey Burns, drummer John Convertino of Calexico, and the Band’s Garth Hudson on keyboards, the tune settles into a mid-tempo, gospel-flavored rave-up complete with Case banging on a tambourine. This arrangement, like those on the rest of the album, is detailed and busy, though not in an annoying way.

While “John Saw That Number” and the rest of the album’s melodies are pleasant while not being particularly hooky—like the songs on k.d. lang’s Ingénue, these exist, much to their credit, in their own musical universe—it may be in its lyrics that Fox Confessor breaks the most new ground. As is Case’s custom, they’re twisted in almost scary ways. In the opener, “Margaret vs Pauline” she sings in a conspiratorial tone, “Margaret is the fragments of a name / Her love pours like a fountain / Her love steams like rage / Her jaw aches from wanting and she’s sick of chlorine.” In a paean to madness, “Dirty Knife”—based, Case says, on a house near where she grew up in Washington State, in which an entire family simultaneously went mad—she sings, “He sang nursery rhymes to paralyze / The wolves that eddy out of the corner of his eyes.” If you listen closely, the lyrics of Fox Confessor have the power to send chills running through you.

At the center of it all is Case’s glorious alto voice, a very large instrument—and, now, a trained one—crammed into her slight, red-headed frame. Her singing has never been more expressive or affecting—a perfect match of material and voice, songwriter and singer.

Voted the “Sexiest Babe of Indie Rock” by Playboy magazine several years back, Neko Case has seemed on the edge of some variety of greatness for some time now. While Fox Confessor Brings the Flood may not quite be her masterwork—for that to happen, the tunes will have to be more winning—the many intriguing talents of this singular artist are now firmly in orbit around great things to come. Make no mistake, though—in this album, Case explores new artistic lands and seems committed to the journey.

—Robert Baird
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Viola Labs Cadenza
Editor:
We would like to thank Wes Phillips and John Atkinson for a very fair and thorough review of the Viola Cadenza preamplifier [December 2005]. A lot of work went into the design of the Cadenza, and it gives us great pleasure to see this recognized in such a favorable review.

The rise in output impedance at low frequencies is something we are aware of. However, as John states, provided that the associated power amplifier’s (balanced) input impedance is greater than 20k ohms, or greater than 10k ohms for an unbalanced input, it has no effect on the frequency response. The vast majority of power amplifiers on the market more than satisfy these conditions, so this will very rarely be an issue. To bring the power amplifiers on the market more in focus, we would like to thank Wes Phillips and Viola Labs Cadenza.

It is this purist approach that is responsible for the hi level of transparency, and agility that he heard. We aimed to design a preamplifier that would reproduce the essential emotion of a musical performance. We think it is fair to conclude from Wes’s comments that we have succeeded.

We have an expanding stable of amplifiers and speaker designs and we look forward to submitting these for review in the future.

Paul Japko
Tom Colangelo
Viola Audio Laboratories

Cyrus CD 8x
Editor:
Thank you for taking the time to investigate the CD 8x and for exploring some of its virtues in such depth. Art Dudley’s entertaining report on our CD 8x (January 2006) was very interesting, despite some nerves, as it highlighted a perennial concern for us.

Whilst I was confident that the player’s electrical performance would be very close to our reference due to our sophisticated production methodology, I am always nervous about the associated equipment reviewers have available to evaluate the all-important sonic performance. Associated components obviously influence any system’s balance. So, when developing a component, we have been known to extend the development/tuning timeline by as much as six months to ensure we have pushed the design as far as the Bill of Materials will allow.

This allows us to develop two things:
1) We want to maximize the musical ability of a given component, its timing or rhythmic abilities, acoustic color palette, and resolution within our chosen imaging frame.
2) We want to ensure we have crafted a component that works both as a family member as well as an individual.

It is the second aim that we often fret about when handing over a component for review.

Thankfully, most enthusiasts see the virtue of this approach, and although our extended-upgrade philosophy may be new to our American cousins, I am obviously delighted that Art appreciates the many benefits. We have worked hard to develop upgradeable systems to maximize long-term value and system synergy, as most of
Continuum Audio Labs
Caliburn, Cobra, Castellon
Editor: Continuum Audio Labs wishes to thank Stereophile and Michael Fremer for the comprehensive review of the Caliburn-Cobra-Castellon system [January 2006]. Our feelings about the review are that the report is accurate and describes the sonic capabilities as we hear them. The Caliburn system is indeed magical.

Our goal when we set out to design this system was to extract the maximum amount of data from the analog medium and present it unaltered to the rest of the audio chain, allowing quality components the opportunity to really shine. Harnessing the power of advanced computing, finite-element analysis and reshaping programs, and the considerable experience and knowledge of our core team, we aimed to approach the challenge from a nontraditional perspective in the hope that we would glean new and useful information. We did. The experience has been extremely rewarding, from both technical and emotional points of view. Our customers are rediscovering record collections and the joy of listening to music. In this digital age, as it becomes increasingly difficult to "touch the music," we are encouraged by the renaissance of analog.

Indeed, it would seem that the resurgence of interest in analog is being ushered in just as CD fast approaches "legacy" status, displaced by virtual online digital media formats. With so many millions of records already existing in the world, so many fine recordings being reissued, and so much new vinyl being produced, we felt that music lovers needed to hear analog as never before.

Mark Doehmann
Continuum Audio Labs

PS. Our apologies to Michael. We suggest you play records when Mrs. Fremer is out.

Editor: I am writing to thank Stereophile and Michael Fremer for devoting the time to review the Continuum Audio Labs Caliburn Analog System. Continuum Audio Labs is a partnership between David Payes, Mark Doehmann, and Dr. Murali Munigusa. Extending from that core is a team of engineers and scientists from varied disciplines. The roll call of those involved in the development of this project reads like a Who's Who of Australia's finest technical minds, brought together for the pedestrian purpose of playing a simple record. The 2005 Consumer Electronics Show was Continuum's debut in my Alexis Park demonstration room, and my introduction to the company and its products. I was completely enraptured with the story they had to tell. The passion that David, Mark, and Murali have for music, and specifically for analog, is completely addictive. The trouble they had gone through to bring this product to market was no small task. Equally astonishing was the fairly levithan capitalization required to make their dream a reality. In today's fast-paced, digital-driven world, most venture capitalists would consider it nothing more than an opportunity to lose a fortune.

As they assembled the system in our demonstration room, head engineer Mark Doehmann narrated: "The platter is partially levitated for strain relief, but must always be in physical contact with the bearing. The special magnesium alloy was developed for specific mechanical damping properties. The armboard was...with our eyes fixed on the future.

Firmly grounded in the classics...
At Audio Nexus, demonstrating the finest audio and video equipment from the world's most renowned manufacturers isn't a job. It's a passion! When helping you choose a component or system, we'll use all the expertise we've developed in the last quarter century. We'll listen carefully to your needs and use our knowledge to make sure your purchase fulfills your exact expectations. And remember the most important thing. A fine A-V system is about fun, pleasure, and pride. The fun starts when you discover the extraordinary sound that flows from well-designed components. The pleasure grows as you hear new nuances in your favorite music. And the pride of ownership of an exceptional system will be with you every day.

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engineered to be completely isolated but always in-plane in any dimension with the platter. Supercomputers and an enormously expensive suite of software were used to identify, shape, and reshape every part of the system, to locate critical points of resonance, and to provide proper sinks. The arm was designed with finite-element analysis in 3-D vs the traditional 2-D approach, allowing us not only visually identify problems, but also to design them out of the arm entirely.

Once the stylus hit the groove, the abstractions of our conversations unfolded into beautiful, blossoming evidence—a deliciously unrelenting proof of Continuum's postulate. Never before had I heard so much from these antique discs that so many seem to dismiss as yesterday's news.

After some revisions, the Caliburn arrived once again at my threshold, this time at Primedia's Home Entertainment 2005, in New York City. This time Continuum had with them the final piece of the system: the Castellon stand with levitating top shelf. This was nothing short of humbling. More life flowed through the system, illuminating the recordings from within and projecting them with ease and natural perfection: depth for ages, images living beyond the restraint of the speakers, dynamic snap that could scare you out of a coma, and an organic tone that tells the heart it's completely real.

Late at night, when the show was closed for the day, we would sit in the darkened demo room of the Hilton swimming in beautiful music, until the hotel guards asked us to shut down and quiet the floor.

That was the very system that Michael Fremer was supposed to get for review, but damage to the bearing had occurred during transport to the show, and we were not keen on providing MF with a sub-spec unit. We deferred delivery until we could provide a proper unit for review. I had pursued MF in particular to reveal the Caliburn to the world because of his analog expertise and his reputation for integrity. Since our first meeting, MF has revealed himself to be unimpeachably genuine, irrefutably sincere, an insatiable music lover, and a man unafraid to stare down a $90,000 record player as a serious product.

With reference to Michael's review, I will say only that he gets it exactly. The feelings that I had when listening to this combination—he's nailed them down. Listening to the Caliburn system can be extraordinarily humbling—if you think you know your records, think again. When the old recordists and mastering engineers were making these records, they likely had no idea how much information they were actually capturing!

Although the Caliburn system redefines what is possible and reasserts the excellence of analog music reproduction, it is dearly not a product for everyone. For the few who

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-Galen Carol

Alesis/Balanced Power Technologies MasterLink

Editor:

A quick note of thanks to Michael Fremer and Stereophile for checking out our modified Alesis MasterLink. The MasterLink is a convenient way to copy whole CDs, make compilations, and archive your favorite analog tunes. One performance aspect that Michael didn't explore was listening to his music stored on the MasterLink's hard drive via the digital out. Connecting the 24-bit/96kHz-capable RCA or XLR digital out to a top-quality DAC and development that were required to create them, it was a great benefit to work with BD, whose expertise and understanding more than qualified him for the task. BD's observations are well explained, and the final effect is in agreement with our own experiences. However, I would like to clarify the roles of the Cera products and the Master Reference racks.

Reading BD's review, one might conclude that the rack is ineffective compared to the Cera products. We have experienced situations where the effect of the rack alone has been profound, and that of the Cera products by themselves less profound. Each product and the Master Reference racks.

With that in mind, you will not have to shop around to find the best rack. BD's observations are well explained, and the final effect is in agreement with our own experiences. However, I would like to clarify the roles of the Cera products and the Master Reference racks.

To thank Brian Darnkroger and Stereophile for reviewing the Pagode Master Reference rack system and the Cera products. We feel that the Pagode Signature Series E14, a four-shelf standard-width rack, costs $2095 and is compatible with all Signature Series racks, which have very similar styling but do not incorporate the resonator technology. For example, the Signature Series HD07 rack, which costs $7500, is wider and heavier than the Cera products. We have experienced situations where the effect of the rack alone has been profound, and that of the Cera products by themselves less profound. Each room and system presents a different set of conditions. The goal of Finite-Elemente was to make racks and accessories that allow the user to create a system to address almost any room and system.

As Brian explains, the Cera products are designed to act as coupling devices to allow resonant energy to travel out of components. When they are used alone, how that energy is distributed is a matter of chance and circumstance. When that energy is guided into a Finite-Elemente Pagode Master Reference HD07

Editor:

Finite-Elemente and Immedia would like to thank Brian Darnkroger and Stereophile for reviewing the Pagode Master Reference HD07 rack system and the Cera accessories. Considering the technical nature of these products and the research and development that were required to create them, it was a great benefit to work with BD, whose expertise and understanding more than qualified him for the task. BD's observations are well explained, and the final effect is in agreement with our own experiences. However, I would like to clarify the roles of the Cera products and the Master Reference racks.

Reading BD's review, one might conclude that the rack is ineffective compared to the Cera products. We have experienced situations where the effect of the rack alone has been profound, and that of the Cera products by themselves less profound. Each room and system presents a different set of conditions. The goal of Finite-Elemente was to make racks and accessories that allow the user to create a system to address almost any room and system.

As Brian explains, the Cera products are designed to act as coupling devices to allow resonant energy to travel out of components. When they are used alone, how that energy is distributed is a matter of chance and circumstance. When that energy is guided into a Finite-Elemente Pagode Master Reference HD07, it is converted to heat by the rack's internal resonators. It is true that Cera products can be used with great success on other manufacturers' racks and shelves—even on the floor—and Finite-Elemente makes a wide range of products that benefit from adding appropriate Cera products. However, the Master Reference rack is designed to be the ultimate link in the system. Therefore, we find it much harder to place a relative value-performance ratio on the rack compared to the Cera accessories.

We feel the same way Brian does about the price of the rack—it's a lot of money. With that in mind, you will not have to shop far to discover that it is priced at or below racks from other manufacturers that offer top-level performance. Also, Brian's wider than-standard turntable made it necessary to use the Master Reference HD07, with its 750mm-wide shelves. The Master Reference HD03, which is the same configuration in standard width, is $1150 less expensive.

Finite-Elemente also offers the Pagode Signature Series racks, which have very similar styling but do not incorporate the resonator technology. For example, the Signature Series HD14, a four-shelf standard-width rack, costs $2095 and is compatible with all Cera products. We feel that the Pagode Signature and Master Reference racks offer performance and cosmetic solutions for most audiophiles.
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All the Little Pretties Raise Their Hands

About 2005...there are a few more records I'd like to mention.

Springsteen haters come in one variety: vehement. Dedicated fans—those who assiduously avoid "Glory Days" and the rest of the unfortunate singles that made him a superstar—come, strangely enough, in two forms: those who worship the early stuff (before Born in the USA) and those who respect Nebraska's stripped-down, indie cred.

While I acknowledge the nasty chasm that is the "Bruce is God"—"Bruce is a Fraud" argument, and have no desire to convert anyone one way or the other, I will say this: If you've ever wondered what all the fuss was about in the early days, and never saw the band in its mid-to-late-70s heyday, then Sony/BMG's new 30th anniversary edition of Born to Run will show you the money.

To understand what a Springsteen-immune ex-girlfriend called "the whole Bruce thing," you almost had to have resided on the East Coast and reached concertgoing age by 1974. You had to have seen the band in the New York City area, or when their touring circles first began to spread: Boston, Philly, Pittsburgh, and Ohio. My first glimpse, in 1974, twirled my musical standards in one variety: vehement.

While the original Born to Run tracks have been remastered (back to that in a moment), the real fire here comes in the form of a DVD, of pro shot film from the band's very first performance in the UK, at London's Hammersmith Odeon, in 1975. As the 16-chapter DVD shows, via murky filming that actually enhances the experience, the E Street Band in those days was an R&B/rock muscle that knew how to flex. And dress. The curly-mopped Steve Van Zandt's Jersey pimp rig, Max Weinberg's 70s-porno-star hair and beard, and skinny, wiry Bruce dressed in a hip mashup of Bob-Marley-meets-alt-rock shammy, all give the proceedings a hilarious visual patina. But one time through a speeded-up, beautifully sung "Born to Run" and fans will forget the disco threads and find themselves exclaiming "Whew!" as they search for something absorbent.

The effect this film has on the uninitiated and the "Springsteen Sucks" crowd is also fun to watch: mouths flopping open, incredulous smiles erupting, chunky booty beginning to sway. A second DVD, "Wings for Wheels: The Making of Born to Run," is a dissection of the album and its songs that deep fans will love, despite a gag-inducing overload of ridiculously laudatory blather.

Born to Run itself, that mad, multicolored mythology of clockgivers, sax solos, and Bruce in Wonderland/Jungleland lyrical confectionery— "Outside the street's on fire / In a real death waltz / between what's flesh and what's fantasy"—here sounds better than ever. That's not really saying much, considering that the original is one of the muddiest, most muffled- and distorted-sounding landmark records in rock history. Even the old half-speed-mastering trick couldn't improve it much. But while the source material remains what it is (ie, shit), the sound is brighter and fuller and begins to approach something more than the one-dimensional. A/B'd against the original LP, the half-speed-mastered LP, and several different CD reissues, this new version is the best-sounding yet.

Overall, though—and say what you want about major labels—this thing's a honey. For me, it brings up yet again a key question that looms over the record business: why not dig deeper into the many live tours from scads of artists that have been recorded and filmed over the years? If it's guitar picking that you seek, then bow down to the folks at Sundazed Music, who made 2005 a banner year with a raft of essential, country-oriented guitar records. Heading the list for me are a pair of long-out-of-print Speedy West reissues, Steel Guitar and Guitar Spectacular. One of the greatest pedal steel players of them all, West, who died in 2003, cut a number of solo discs, all of which sparkle with fast, inventive, virtuoso playing whose improvisational qualities border on jazz.

Less awe-inspiring but still many cuts above most instrumental guitar records (yawn) is 1968's Corn Pickin' and Slick Slidin', one of two previously out-of-print solo records by the great James Burton (Elvis Presley, Gram Parsons, Emmylou Harris) and, in this case, pedal steel player Ralph Mooney (Merle Haggard, Waylon Jennings). As always with Sundazed, the sound and the packaging are first class.

Tired to coordinate—excuse me, cross-promote—with Pete Guralnick's excellent new book, Dream Boogie: The Triumph of Sam Cooke (Little, Brown), Sony/BMG have decided to reissue some of the best Cooke titles they own, including the 1963 quarter date, Night Beat (cited as evidence that he was better without strings), and the famous One Night Stand! live album, taped the same year at Miami's Harlem Square Club. This is the third time this live set, recorded in three tracks, has been issued on CD and the second time it's been remastered; to my ears, this pass is the richest and dearest so far.

Two masters redux: On Neil Diamond's 12 Songs, Rick Rubin tries to work the magic he worked with Johnny Cash but this time falls short, mostly because Diamond's material gave him little to work with. Great sidemen—guitarists Mike Campbell and Smokey Horsley, keyboardist Billy Preston—help, but ultimately, this quiet Neil-as-Folksinger anti-shtick never quite takes flight. It's not bad, just not compelling enough for repeated listenings.

Diamond, however, fares better than Burt Bacharach, whose At This Time will play well with the smooth-jazz crowd but few others. Despite flourishes of greatness, the album is cluttered with too much computer-generated underbrush. It's sweet, sentimental Bacharach past it. In his heyday, he was anything but.
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